



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 Images:

UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed held meeting with Taliban's Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, on June 4, 2024.

Source: Emirates News Agency

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif held bilateral meeting with President Xi Jinping in Beijing on June 7, 2024.

Source: X/@XisMoments

Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in New Delhi on June 22, 2024.

Source: X/@albd1971

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India's Strategic Neighbourhood

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

AFGHANISTAN

On Humanitarian Crisis

Afghanistan continues to reel under a severe humanitarian crisis. In the past two months, the combination of three years of successive drought-like conditions and spring rainfall led to flash flooding across large parts of the country, affecting 120,000 people and resulting in widespread human, agricultural and livestock losses. At the same time, some 25,000 families affected by three earthquakes in Herat Province last October remain in makeshift shelters. Since September 2023, more than 610,000 Afghan returnees from Pakistan have arrived in the country.¹ Afghanistan currently hosts over six million internally displaced people, and those deported from Pakistan have added to the strain on accommodation and healthcare.

On June 12, senior officials from various countries met in Brussels and pledged nearly USD 842 million to address the humanitarian emergency in Afghanistan. At this meeting, hosted by the European Union to discuss engagement with Afghanistan, officials stated that addressing Afghanistan's situation is one of their priorities.² The Ministry of Economy of the Islamic Emirate praised the countries' commitment to helping the people of Afghanistan.

While some assistance is being made available, donor fatigue and the Taliban's scant respect for human rights pose a challenge for international contributors and relief agencies. By mid-June, the 2024 Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan received USD 615.7 million, just 20.1 per cent of the initial request. The restrictions on female employment and freedom of movement have adversely impacted humanitarian operations and raised the cost of their delivery.

The Taliban agreed to participate in the third UN conference on Afghanistan held in Doha on June 30 but laid a pre-condition that no Afghan women would be invited to the meeting. Taliban chief spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said that while the authorities acknowledge the issues about women, "they are internal Afghan matters and need to be addressed locally within the framework

of Islamic Sharia."³ Facing criticism over agreeing to the Taliban's conditions, UN Undersecretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo insisted that "the issue of inclusive governance, women's rights, human rights writ large, will be a part of every single session."⁴

The international community appears to be walking a tightrope, balancing the need to engage with the Taliban for humanitarian reasons while attempting not to compromise on fundamental human rights principles. So far, this approach has had very limited success.

Growing Regional Acceptance of Taliban

There is a growing regional acceptance of the Taliban government because of their consolidation of power in Afghanistan and the need to engage with them to prevent the spread of terrorism. The second round of the Regional Contact Group meeting on Afghanistan was held in Tehran on June 8 with the participation of special representatives from Iran, Russia, Pakistan, and China.⁵ The Taliban declined to participate in the meeting, stating that established mechanisms should be used for discussions on Afghanistan, not new ones.

At a press conference following the meeting, Hassan Kazemi Qomi, Tehran's ambassador to Kabul and the Iranian President's special envoy on Afghanistan affairs, stressed the importance of resolving Afghanistan's problems through regional dialogue and cooperation. Qomi emphasised that combating terrorism and improving humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan required collaboration among neighbouring countries.⁶

Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Interior Minister of the Taliban, visited Abu Dhabi on June 4 and met with Mohammed bin Zayed, the President of the United Arab Emirates. Accompanying Haqqani was the chief of the Taliban's intelligence agency. The state-run WAM news agency reported, "The two sides discussed strengthening the bonds of cooperation between the two countries and ways to enhance ties to serve mutual interests and contribute to regional stability." It added that the discussions "focused on economic and development fields, as well as support for reconstruction and development in Afghanistan."⁷

Many senior Taliban officials, including Haqqani, are subject to U.N. Security Council sanctions that include foreign travel bans. The sanctions have been reportedly eased to enable Taliban leaders to travel abroad for Afghan peace talks and related issues.

On June 5, the United Nations Security Council lifted the travel ban on four officials of the Islamic Emirate. The UN Security Council's Sanctions

Committee said that the exemption for these officials is for travel to Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj.⁸

Meanwhile, Russia is increasingly seeking dialogue with the Taliban government. A Taliban delegation participated in the 27th St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, held from June 5 to 8.⁹ On the sidelines of the Forum, Abdul Manan Omari, the Taliban's Acting Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, who led the delegation, discussed the expansion of commercial and economic relations with the Russian Minister of Labor and Social Security.¹⁰

On June 21, Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, told reporters after the meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Collective Security Treaty Organization in Kazakhstan that the member countries of this organisation are seeking meaningful dialogue with the interim Afghan government. He said, "In general, we support establishing a more stable, continuous, and fundamental dialogue aimed at implementing real projects with the Taliban government, which in fact holds the reins of the country...The Taliban government is fighting terrorist groups, and we consider assisting this fight essential."¹¹

PAKISTAN

Shehbaz Sharif's Visit to China

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif embarked on a five-day visit to China from June 4 to 8. The high-powered delegation included Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb, and Army Chief General Asim Munir. There was some criticism over the timing of the visit as it resulted in the postponement of the budget, an essential requirement for the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which is in discussions with Pakistan for another loan.

The two sides signed 23 agreements and MOUs covering cooperation on the USD 60 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), agriculture, infrastructure, industrial cooperation, intergovernmental development assistance, market regulation, surveying and mapping, media, and film.¹² They committed to forging an "upgraded version" of the CPEC and speeding up the development of Gwadar port. However, no new big-ticket items were announced. One reason for this is China's concerns about the security of its nationals working in Pakistan on CPEC projects.

No public announcements were made on restructuring Pakistan's debt to China. Chinese officials say around 13 per cent of Pakistan's external debt is

owed to China, but the International Monetary Fund put the figure at almost 30 per cent in a 2022 report.¹³ Pakistan's foreign debt is close to USD 130 billion.

The joint statement also referred to Jammu and Kashmir and “underscored the importance of maintaining peace and stability in South Asia, the need for resolution of all outstanding disputes, and their opposition to any unilateral action.” Reacting to this, Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said, “We have noted unwarranted references to the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir in the joint statement between China and Pakistan of 7 June 2024. We categorically reject such references.”¹⁴

Although Shebaz Sharif termed the visit “very successful,” there was very little by way of economic support. According to experts quoted by Nikkei Asia, Beijing's lukewarm response could become the new normal as it cools on investing in Pakistan and the much-hyped CPEC project.¹⁵

Operation Azm-i-Istehkam

On June 22, the Pakistan government approved Operation Azm-i-Istehkam, a reinvigorated and re-energised national counterterrorism campaign. In a press release, the Prime Minister's Office said, “Azm-i-Istehkam will integrate and synergise multiple lines of effort to combat the menaces of extremism and terrorism in a comprehensive and decisive manner.”¹⁶ The aim of the campaign would be to “decisively root out the remnants of terrorist elements, the criminal-terrorist nexus, and violent extremism from the country.”

The move comes even as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Bloch insurgent groups have intensified their attacks across Pakistan, with a 67 per cent surge in terror attacks between 2022 and 2023.¹⁷ In the first six months of 2024, 237 civilians and 258 security force personnel have been killed in terror-related incidents.¹⁸

There are reasons to believe that the operation was launched due to pressure from China. During a meeting of the Pakistan-China Joint Consultative Mechanism held in Islamabad on June 21, Liu Jianchao, the Minister of Central Committee of the International Department of the Communist Party of China, stated, “Security threats are the main hazards to CPEC cooperation. As people often say, confidence is more precious than gold. In the case of Pakistan, the primary factor shaking the confidence of Chinese investors is the security situation.”¹⁹

The announcement of the operation was strongly criticised by the opposition parties, including the PTI, JUI-Fazl and ANP, who stated that the parliament

had not been consulted. They also expressed the fear that the operation would further deteriorate the situation in the border regions and lead to large-scale displacement of the population.²⁰ In response, the government clarified that Azm-i-Istehkam would not be a kinetic large-scale military operation, nor would it entail the mass displacement of the local population. Whatever form the operation takes, its success will ultimately hinge on the Afghan Taliban's willingness to take decisive action against the TTP.

Ties with India

India invited leaders of neighbouring countries and those from the Indian Ocean region to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's swearing-in ceremony on June 9. Pakistan was an exception.²¹ Nawaz Sharif congratulated Prime Minister Modi on X, "Your party's success in recent elections reflects the confidence of the people in your leadership. Let us replace hate with hope and seize the opportunity to shape the destiny of the two billion people of South Asia." Prime Minister Modi responded, "The people of India have always stood for peace, security and progressive ideas. Advancing the well-being and security of our people shall always remain our priority."²²

In a policy statement delivered at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar said, "Pakistan does not believe in perpetual hostility. We seek good-neighbourly relations with India on the basis of mutual respect, sovereign equality, and a just and peaceful resolution of the long-standing Jammu and Kashmir dispute."²³ Meanwhile, on June 11, India's External Affairs Minister, Dr S Jaishankar, outlined the approaches to handling India's relations with Pakistan, asserting that the country's foreign policy under the third term of Prime Minister Narendra Modi will prioritise finding solutions to the "years-old cross-border terrorism" emanating from Islamabad.²⁴

Any improvement in bilateral relations will depend on Pakistan clamping down on infiltration from its territory into India. Since April 2024, 43 terrorist-related incidents have been reported in Jammu and Kashmir. Most of them are either cross-border infiltration or have links with Pakistan-based terrorist organisations.²⁵ On June 9, nine civilians were killed, and 43 non-local civilians were injured when terrorists opened fire on a bus returning from the holy cave shrine of Shiv Khori in the Reasi District of Jammu. With such incidents continuing, there is little incentive for India to engage with Pakistan.

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

Situation at the LAC

Four years after the deadly Galwan clash between the Chinese and Indian Armies on June 15, 2020, the border standoff continues. The situation has drifted into a stalemate, and both sides have strengthened their deployment and are engaged in rapid infrastructure development. While diplomatic and military talks continue, substantive progress is lacking.

On June 12, the Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in India wrote on X, "China and India are important neighbouring countries. Relevant border issues should be handled properly. A sound and stable #ChinaIndia relationship is in the interest of both countries, and conducive to the peace and development in this region and beyond. China is willing to work with India to push forward bilateral relations in the right direction."²⁶

A similar message was conveyed by Chinese Premier Li Qiang, who congratulated Prime Minister Narendra Modi on his re-election for a third term. Li said, "China is willing to work with India to push forward bilateral relations in the right direction."²⁷ These may appear to be positive signals, but tensions persist.

On June 5, Taiwanese leader William Lai Ching-te posted a message on X, congratulating Prime Minister Modi on his election victory. In thanking Lai, Modi replied that he looked forward to "closer ties as we work towards mutually beneficial economic and technological partnership". This exchange prompted a response from China's foreign ministry spokeswoman, Mao Ning, who said that Beijing firmly opposed any form of official exchange between the authorities in Taiwan and countries with diplomatic relations with Beijing.²⁸

A seven-member US congressional delegation visited Dharamshala on June 18 and 19 and met the Dalai Lama. In her address at Dharamshala, Pelosi criticised Xi Jinping, stating, "His Holiness Dalai Lama, with his message of knowledge, tradition, compassion, purity of soul and love, will live a long time, and his legacy will live forever. But you, the President of China, you'll be gone, and nobody will give you credit for anything."²⁹

As expected, there was a strong response from the Chinese government, which claimed that the visit interfered with China's internal affairs and violated China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Lin Jian, stated in Beijing, "The 14th Dalai Lama is not a pure

religious figure, but a political exile engaged in anti-China separatist activities under the cloak of religion."³⁰

Questioned about the visit, Randhir Jaiswal, Spokesperson for the Ministry of External Affairs, stated, "I would like to reiterate India's position on His Holiness Dalai Lama. He is a revered religious leader and is deeply respected by the people of India. His Holiness is accorded due courtesies and freedom to conduct his religious and spiritual activities."³¹

BANGLADESH

Sheikh Hasina's Visits to India

In June, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited India twice. The first visit was on June 9 to attend Prime Minister Narendra Modi's swearing-in ceremony. The second was a state visit to India, during which she met Prime Minister Modi on June 22. The two leaders jointly articulated a shared vision for peace, prosperity, and development of the two neighbours and the entire region, driven by connectivity, commerce, and collaboration.³²

A notable outcome of the visit was the signing of ten Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs). These agreements spanned a range of sectors, including space, railways, health and medicine, disaster management, and military education.³³ The breadth of these agreements highlights the comprehensive approach both nations are taking to strengthen their cooperation.

A significant highlight of the visit was the endorsement of a vision for a "Digital Partnership" and a "Green Partnership." These initiatives aim to foster sustainable development and leverage digital technologies to boost economic growth and connectivity. The digital partnership focuses on enhancing technological collaboration, which is crucial in the modern era of rapid technological advancement. The green partnership underscores the commitment of both nations to address environmental challenges and promote sustainable practices, reflecting a forward-looking approach to development.

Connectivity was a major focus of the visit, with both countries agreeing to start new transportation services to enhance trade and people-to-people links. A train service between Rajshahi in Bangladesh and Kolkata in India, a bus service between Chittagong and Kolkata, and the commencement of a goods train service were announced. Negotiations on a Comprehensive Economic

Partnership Agreement (CEPA) were initiated, aiming to elevate the economic relations between the two countries.

Water-sharing has been a contentious issue between India and Bangladesh, particularly concerning the Teesta River. During the visit, it was announced that India would send a technical team to Bangladesh for the Teesta River conservation and management project.

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, 2019.³⁴

India's offer to assist with the project stems from concerns about China being granted the Teesta River Project. However, Sheikh Hasina remains noncommittal. On her return from India, commenting on the Teesta project, she said, "China has proposed, and so has India. We will evaluate both proposals and accept the one that is most beneficial and acceptable in terms of the interests of our people."³⁵

SRI LANKA

India-Sri Lanka Relations

Dr Jaishankar visited Sri Lanka on June 20. During the visit, he met Sri Lanka's President Ranil Wickremesinghe, Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena, and Foreign Minister M.U.M Ali Sabry.³⁶ Discussions focused on various bilateral initiatives, including cooperation in power, energy, connectivity, port infrastructure, aviation, digital technology, health, food security, education, and tourism.

The visit saw the joint commissioning of the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Sri Lanka. The MRCC, built with a USD 6 million grant from India and established by Bharat Electronics Limited, will serve as a central hub for search and rescue operations at sea. The centre includes facilities at the Navy Headquarters in Colombo and several unmanned installations along the Sri Lankan coast.³⁷

Dr Jaishankar and President Wickremesinghe jointly inaugurated the handover of 106 houses under Phase III of the Indian Housing Project in various districts, including Kandy, Matale, and Nuwara Eliya, and 48 homes under the Model Village Housing Project in Colombo and Trincomalee.

Debt Resettlement

On June 26, Sri Lanka signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Official Creditors Committee (OCC) on debt restructuring. Following the approval by the IMF for the Extended Fund Facility (EFF Programme) for Sri Lanka on March 20, 2023, OCC was launched on April 13, 2023, to hold talks among Sri Lanka's bilateral creditors to finalise a plan for restructuring Sri Lanka's debt.³⁸

China opted to engage in separate bilateral negotiations with Sri Lanka rather than join the multilateral approach taken by the OCC. Therefore, a separate agreement was signed between Sri Lanka and China's Exim Bank.

According to the government's statistics, bilateral creditors account for 28.5 per cent of outstanding foreign debt of USD 37 billion. China is the largest single bilateral creditor, accounting for USD 4.66 billion. Japan is second, with USD 2.35 billion, and India third with USD 1.36 billion. Sri Lanka's commercial borrowings include USD 12.55 billion raised through International Sovereign Bonds (ISB) and another USD 2.18 billion from the China Development Bank.³⁹

The agreement allows Sri Lanka to defer bilateral loan repayments until 2028 and repay the loans on concessional terms with an extended period until 2043. While Sri Lanka spent 9.2 per cent of its GDP on foreign debt payments in 2022, the two agreements will allow it to maintain debt payments at less than 4.5 per cent of GDP between 2027 and 2032.⁴⁰

The debt restructuring comes as a great relief to the island nation and would allow the resumption of stalled foreign-funded projects, including highways, light railways, and airport development, essential for infrastructure development and economic revival.

CHINA'S OUTREACH TO SOUTH ASIA

In June, several Chinese officials visited South Asia. The vice chairman of the 14th Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Bateer, visited Maldives from June 12 to 14 and held meetings with Maldivian officials, including President Mohamed Muizzu. During the meeting with Bateer on June 13, Muizzu mentioned the key developmental initiatives, such as the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge and said he looked forward to strengthening the friendly relations between the two countries. A statement from Muizzu's office also said that the "Chinese government respects and supports the Maldives' sovereignty and promotes mutual respect while advancing cooperation between the two nations."⁴¹

Minister of the International Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee Liu Jianchao visited Bangladesh from June 22 to 25. During a meeting with him, Sheikh Hasina sought China's support in resolving the Rohingya crisis quickly.⁴² In a dialogue organised by China's embassy, Jinchao said that Dhaka-Beijing relations are "entering a new development stage" following the elections in Bangladesh, and China is ready to align its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Vision 2041 of becoming a developed country.⁴³

Chinese Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Sun Weidong visited Kathmandu from June 24 to 26 to participate 16th meeting of the Nepal-China Diplomatic Consultation Mechanism. According to the foreign ministry, during the meeting, the two sides expressed their commitment to further promoting cooperation in mutually agreed-upon areas and realising economic opportunities for mutual benefits.⁴⁴ The two parties had planned to finalise the BRI implementation plan but could not agree on the modality for financing projects.⁴⁵

Earlier on June 19 Nepal and China held a meeting of the Joint Expert Group in Beijing. The meeting took place after almost 18 years. In the meeting, both sides discussed the status of the Nepal-China boundary, the date for commencing a joint boundary inspection, disputes in the Nepal-China border, and the signing of the Border Management System, whose initial agreement was signed during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit in 2019. There was no substantive progress besides the agreement to hold the next meeting in Kathmandu.⁴⁶

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