



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



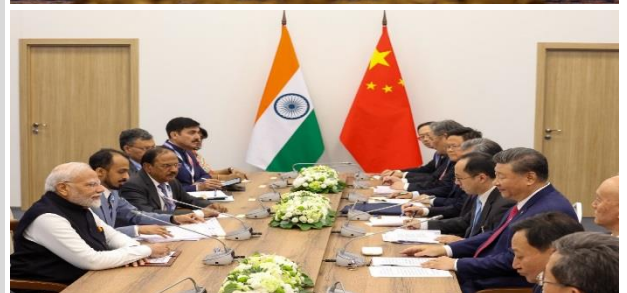
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INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

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:

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif welcomes Dr S Jaishankar, Minister of External Affairs of India at the venue of 23rd meeting of SCO Council of Heads of Government held in Islamabad, on October 16, 2024. Source: X/DrSJaihanakar
Prime Minister Narendra Modi held discussions with Dr. Mohamed Muizzu, President of Maldives in New Delhi on October 7, 2024. Source: Flickr/MEA

On October 23, 2024 Prime Minister Narendra Modi held Bilateral meeting with President Xi Jinping in Kazan, Russia on the side-lines of 16th BRICS Summit. Source: Flickr/MEA

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India's Strategic Neighbourhood

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

AFGHANISTAN

Human Rights and Humanitarian Situation

Afghanistan's Taliban morality ministry pledged on October 14 to implement a law banning news media from publishing images of all living things. It comes after the Taliban government recently announced legislation formalising their strict interpretations of Islamic law that have been imposed since they swept to power in 2021.¹ This law prohibits journalists and citizens from filming, and visual media outlets are barred from showing images of living beings.

In their latest edict against women, a Taliban government minister announced that it is "prohibited for a grown woman to recite Quranic verses or perform recitations in front of another grown woman. Even chants of takbir (Allahu Akbar) are not permitted."² Meanwhile, according to the Ministry of Vice and Virtue of the Taliban, more than 4,500 enforcers were appointed across the country to prevent so-called immoral acts.³

Even as the Taliban appear focused on implementing its harsh ideology, the country reels under a humanitarian crisis. Afghan Red Crescent Society is recording alarming cases of acute malnutrition in children, especially in areas where communities are concurrently facing household economic instability, in addition to bearing the brunt of climate-related disasters and the effects of a decades-long conflict.⁴ The situation has deteriorated significantly between May and September 2024, with 3.2 million children under five years and 840,000 pregnant and lactating women suffering from acute malnutrition in Afghanistan.⁵

In the 2024 Global Hunger Index (GHI) report, Afghanistan ranks 116 out of 127 countries with a score of 30.8. According to the report, 30.4% of Afghanistan's population is undernourished, and 5.8% of children die before their fifth birthday.⁶ The humanitarian situation is exacerbated by inadequate international funding support. With only two months left, the Afghanistan Humanitarian Response plan has only received 37 per cent of the total requirement of funds.⁷

Regional Engagements

Although no country has officially recognised the Taliban government, the isolation of Afghanistan is steadily reducing. On October 4, Moscow hosted the 6th meeting of the Moscow Format of Consultations on Afghanistan with the participation of special representatives and senior officials from Russia, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Acting Foreign Minister of the Taliban, Amir Khan Muttaqi, participated in the event.

In the Joint Statement, the participants expressed deep concern over the security situation related to terrorism in Afghanistan, noting that all terrorist and separatist groups based in Afghanistan continue to pose a serious threat to global and regional security. However, they also reaffirmed their support for Afghanistan's development as an independent state and showed interest in developing regional infrastructure projects involving Afghanistan.⁸

On October 9, Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that Foreign Minister Bakhtiyor Saidov received Abdul Ghafar Terawi, an envoy appointed by the Taliban as the new head of Afghanistan's diplomatic mission to Uzbekistan, in Tashkent.⁹ Russia has announced that a "principal decision" had already been made to remove Afghanistan's ruling Taliban from Moscow's list of terrorist organisations and that the foreign ministry and national security agencies "are putting finishing legal touches" on the Taliban's delisting in line with federal laws.¹⁰

PAKISTAN

Controversial Judicial Reforms

On October 20, the Pakistan Senate passed the Constitution (Twenty-sixth Amendment) Act, 2024. The next day, it was passed by the National Assembly and officially approved by the President. The bill consists of 27 amendment clauses that include provisions to limit the Supreme Court's suo motu powers, creation of constitutional benches, establish a three-year term for the Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP), and grant the prime minister the authority to select the next CJP from the three most senior judges of the Supreme Court.¹¹

The government's stated intent behind the amendment is to enhance transparency, accountability, and efficiency within the judiciary. However, critics argue that these changes undermine judicial independence by giving the executive and legislature greater control over judicial appointments and court structures. The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) has described

the bill as bringing an extraordinary level of political influence over the process of judicial appointments and eroding the judiciary's capacity to independently and effectively function as a check against excesses by other branches of the State and protect human rights.¹²

Following the successful passage of the bill, the special parliamentary committee officially approved Justice Yahya Afridi as the next CJP, who was sworn on October 26.¹³ Afridi was the only judge who marked a dissenting note on the larger bench, which ruled in favour of the PTI in the case of reserved seats earlier in June 2024.¹⁴

The government and the judiciary have been repeatedly clashing in recent times, particularly on election-related issues. On July 12, a 13-judge full bench of the apex court had declared that the opposition PTI was eligible to receive reserved seats for women and non-Muslims in the national and provincial assemblies, potentially making the PTI the single largest party in both houses of Parliament.¹⁵

In response, in August, the government rushed through the Election (Second Amendment) Bill 2024, seeking to bar the PTI-backed "independent" legislators from joining the party, thereby denying them the reserved seats. On 18 October, the Supreme Court ruled that "the effect of the amendment made in the Elections Act cannot undo our judgment with retrospective effect."¹⁶ The case is yet to be settled.

Meanwhile, Bushra Bibi, the wife of incarcerated ex-premier Imran Khan, was released from Adiala Jail on October 24, a day after being granted bail in the Toshakhana case, ending nearly nine months of her detention. Bushra Bibi was taken into custody on January 31 after an Islamabad accountability court sentenced her and Imran to 14 years in jail.¹⁷

Internal Security

There was a spate of terrorist attacks across Pakistan in October, which claimed the lives of 72 security forces personnel, the highest monthly toll in 2024.¹⁸ Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) continues to target security agencies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Between October 4 and 6, seven Frontier Corps (FC) soldiers were killed and two injured in a terrorist attack in the central Kurram¹⁹ and one army officer and five soldiers were martyred in two separate engagements in North Waziristan and Swat.²⁰ Ten police officers were killed and seven injured when terrorists stormed a Frontier Constabulary post near Pakistan's Afghan border on October 25.²¹

Baloch militants continue to target infrastructure projects. On October 11, at least 21 coal miners, including three Afghan nationals, were killed and six others injured in a deadly terrorist attack at a mines area of a private company, some 10km from Duki district in Baluchistan.²² On October 29, five private security guards deployed on the construction site of a dam in the Panjgur district of Makran division were killed by members of the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA).²³

The most serious incident occurred on October 7 when two Chinese nationals were killed in a suicide attack near the Karachi airport. In a statement released by the BLA, it claimed responsibility for the attack, stating that it had "targeted a high-level convoy of Chinese engineers and investors."²⁴

The Chinese embassy urged Pakistan to "thoroughly investigate the attack, severely punish the perpetrators, and take all necessary measures to protect the safety of Chinese citizens, institutions and projects in Pakistan."²⁵ During a visit to Pakistan, Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang urged stronger measures to ensure the safety of Chinese nationals living in Pakistan.²⁶

The strongest statement came from China's ambassador, Jiang Zaidong, who publicly stated, "it is unacceptable for us to be attacked twice in only six months." He added that "security is the biggest concern" for Beijing and "a constraint on CPEC [China-Pakistan Economic Corridor]" projects.²⁷

The attacks on Chinese nationals have had a multifaceted impact on CPEC, causing project delays, financial burdens, and diplomatic tensions. How these security challenges are addressed will determine the future of CPEC and the broader economic partnership between China and Pakistan.

Dr Jaishankar's Visit to Pakistan

Indian External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar's visit to Pakistan for the SCO summit in October marked the first high-level Indian visit to Pakistan in nearly a decade. Prior to the visit, Dr Jaishankar clarified that the visit was for a multilateral event and that there would be no bilateral exchange with Pakistan.²⁸

Unlike the verbal sparring seen during Pakistan Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto's visit to Goa in 2023, the summit in Islamabad was characterised by professionalism and diplomatic restraint. Jaishankar's interactions, including a brief handshake and exchange of pleasantries with Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, showcased a willingness to maintain decorum despite ongoing tensions.

During the summit, Dr Jaishankar reminded the members about the charter of the SCO and the need to remain firm in countering the "three evils" of terrorism, extremism, and separatism that hinder regional cooperation. He stated, "If activities across borders are characterised by terrorism, extremism and separatism, they are hardly likely to encourage trade, energy flows, connectivity and people-to-people exchanges in parallel." In a message aimed at China, Dr Jaishankar underscored the importance of respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity.²⁹

Nawaz Sharif, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, expressed optimism following Dr Jaishankar's presence at the summit. He expressed enthusiasm for the India-Pakistan dialogue, saying, "We should not waste 75 more years like we have wasted the past 75. Both sides should sit and talk seriously." He also blamed Imran Khan for destroying relations with India.³⁰

Dr Jaishankar's visit, while diplomatically significant, does not signal a breakthrough in India-Pakistan ties. For India, this visit was an opportunity to reassert its position within the SCO while maintaining its strategic red lines, particularly in the context of terrorism.

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

Breakthrough at the LAC

In a significant development, India and China have reached an agreement to resume patrolling along the LAC in eastern Ladakh, aiming to resolve the four-year military standoff that began in 2020. On October 21, India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri announced that talks at diplomatic and military have resulted in an agreement on "patrolling arrangements along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China border areas leading to disengagement and a resolution of the issues that had risen in these areas in 2020."³¹

Misri subsequently clarified that the patrolling agreement essentially pertains to the Depsang and Demchok areas where the standoff was continuing.³² Although no official details were forthcoming, media reports suggest that Indian troops can access patrolling points (PP) 10 to 13 in the Depsang Plains, while in Demchok, patrolling will extend to Charding Nullah.³³ PLA soldiers had been blocking Indian patrols in these areas.

On October 22, without explicitly mentioning the patrolling agreement, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian stated in a regular press briefing, "Over a recent period of time, China and India have reached

resolutions on issues concerning the border area following close communication through diplomatic and military channels. China commends the progress made and will continue working with India for the sound implementation of these resolutions."³⁴

Soon after the agreement was announced, PLA began dismantling shelters that had been erected in these two areas after the standoff began in 2020. Indian Army sources stated that the disengagement process at Depsang and Demchok had been completed by October 31, setting the stage for patrolling to commence.³⁵

Modi-Xi Meeting

The agreement at the LAC laid the foundation for the first bilateral meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping in five years. The two leaders met on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia, on October 23.

The official statement of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs said, "Welcoming the recent agreement for complete disengagement and resolution of issues that arose in 2020 in the India-China border areas, Prime Minister Modi underscored the importance of properly handling differences and disputes and not allowing them to disturb peace and tranquillity. The two leaders agreed that the Special Representatives on the India-China boundary question would meet at an early date to oversee the management of peace & tranquillity in border areas and to explore a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solution to the boundary question."³⁶

Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs readout of the meeting said, "The two leaders commended the important progress the two sides had recently made through intensive communication on resolving the relevant issues in the border areas. Prime Minister Modi made suggestions on improving and developing the relationship, which President Xi agreed to in principle. The two sides agreed to make good use of the Special Representatives mechanism on the China-India boundary question, ensure peace and tranquility in the border areas, and find a fair and reasonable settlement."³⁷

In addition, both sides affirmed the importance of bilateral relations in contributing to advancing multipolarity in the world.

Looking Ahead

The patrolling agreement and the subsequent high-level meeting in Kazan are anticipated to pave the way for moving towards a normalisation of relations.

However, this would be a long-drawn process. In the short term, both nations are expected to focus on implementing the agreed-upon patrolling protocols to ensure peace along the LAC. Discussions would also need to be held on the future of the buffer zones that have been set up along the LAC in the areas of Pangong Tso, Gogra, Hot Springs, and Galwan.

Commenting on the agreement over the restoration of patrolling rights along the LAC, Indian Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi has underscored the need to restore trust and go back to the status quo of April 2020. Thereafter, issues of disengagement, de-escalation, and normal management of the LAC can be addressed.³⁸

PLA actions of 2020 in Eastern Ladakh led to the complete breakdown of confidence-building measures that had kept peace along the LAC and severely impacted bilateral ties. Mistrust still lingers, and the risk of misinterpretation or unintended escalation remains. While the recent developments are a positive step, they should be treated with cautious optimism.

BANGLADESH

Politics of Retribution

With the interim government in Bangladesh focused on undermining the Awami League, the party's political future appears grim. On October 12, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus reconstituted the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) to address alleged crimes against humanity and genocide during the July-August 2024 student-led uprising that resulted in the ousting of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.³⁹

On October 17, the tribunal issued arrest warrants for Hasina and 44 other people, including senior members of her cabinet. Mohammad Tajul Islam, the tribunal's chief prosecutor, said that Hasina presided over "massacres, killings and crimes against humanity" during mass protests against her government.⁴⁰

On October 23, the interim government issued a notification banning the Chhatra League, the student wing of the Awami League, declaring it a terrorist organisation.⁴¹ Hours after the ban, the police arrested Iyaz Al Riad, vice president of the central committee of Chhatra League. Thousands of students of the Chhatra League are now facing discrimination across the country.⁴²

Questions are also being raised on whether the interim government will now ban the Awami League party. In an interview with the Financial Times, Muhammad Yunus said the Awami League exhibited "all the characteristics of fascism" and it has "no place" in the country's politics in the short run. He noted

that Awami League's participation in future elections would depend on a "consensus" among political parties.⁴³

On October 22, several hundred protestors in Bangladesh attempted to breach the presidential palace, demanding the resignation of President Mohammed Shahabuddin. The trigger for this fresh wave of demonstrations was the President's remark that he did not have any documentary evidence of Sheikh Hasina resigning as prime minister before she left the country.⁴⁴

Hasnat Abdullah, a prominent leader of the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement, has presented a set of five demands through an ultimatum. These include the immediate resignation of President Mohammed Shahabuddin, the revision of the constitution, the prohibition of Chhatra League, the official recognition of the July uprising as the Proclamation of the Republic and declaring the last three general elections as illegal.⁴⁵

The interim government has also cancelled eight national days that were recognised by the Awami League government. These include the birth and death anniversaries of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman. Information Adviser Nahid Islam stated that the interim government does not recognise Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the father of the nation.⁴⁶

India-Bangladesh Relations

The Durga Puja celebrations by the Hindu community in Bangladesh were marred by vandalism and desecration. On October 12, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs issued a statement that read, "We have noted with serious concern the attack on a Puja mandap in Tantibazar, Dhaka, and the theft at the revered Jeshoreshwari Kali temple at Satkhira. These are deplorable events. They follow a systematic pattern of desecration and damage to temples and deities that we have witnessed over several days now." The statement also called upon the government of Bangladesh "to ensure the safety and security of Hindus and all minorities and their places of worship, especially during the auspicious festival time."⁴⁷

About 30,000 Hindus demonstrated in the southeastern city of Chattogram, demanding protection from harassment and attacks on their community. The protest was organised after sedition charges were filed against 19 Hindu leaders, including prominent priest Chandan Kumar Dhar, over an October 25 rally in that city.⁴⁸

In August 2024, following political unrest in Bangladesh that led to the ousting of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, India imposed temporary visa restrictions on Bangladeshi citizens. After a meeting with Bangladesh foreign secretary

Jashim Uddin on October 20, Indian Ambassador Verma clarified to the media that Indian tourist visas for the people of Bangladesh will not open anytime soon and that visas are only being given in emergency cases.⁴⁹

Bangladesh has substantial dependencies on India in the import of essential commodities and electricity. If ties between India and Bangladesh continue to remain strained, Dhaka may face challenges in maintaining economic stability and energy security.

SRI LANKA

Dr Jaishankar's Visit to Sri Lanka

On October 4, India's External Affairs Minister, Dr S Jaishankar, visited Sri Lanka, where he called on President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, met with Prime Minister Dr Harini Amarasuriya and held discussions with Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath. Dr Jaishankar became the first high-level foreign dignitary to meet President Dissanayake following his inauguration on September 23, 2024.

During his discussions, Dr Jaishankar reaffirmed India's commitment to supporting Sri Lanka's economic recovery, emphasising collaboration in sectors such as tourism, investment, energy, and dairy development. Recognising Sri Lanka's financial challenges, he reiterated India's support for the country's debt restructuring efforts.⁵⁰

Discussions underscored the intertwined security interests of both nations, emphasising that their collaboration contributes to regional stability. The importance of continuous dialogue to promote trust, transparency, and mutual sensitivity was recognised. The President reiterated that Sri Lankan territory would never be allowed to be used in a manner inimical to India's security interests.

Addressing the ongoing fisheries conflict, Dr Jaishankar advocated for the early release of detained Indian fishermen and their boats, urging a humanitarian approach focused on livelihood issues. He appreciated the release of 50 Indian fishermen during his visit.

Dr Jaishankar reiterated India's support for the aspirations of all communities in Sri Lanka, including Tamils, for equality, justice, dignity, and peace while maintaining the country's unity and territorial integrity. He emphasised the full and effective implementation of the 13th Amendment of Sri Lanka's Constitution and the early holding of Provincial Council elections to facilitate these objectives.

MALDIVES

President Muizzu's Visit to India

From October 6 to 10, Dr. Mohamed Muizzu, the President of Maldives, visited India and engaged in bilateral talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The two leaders adopted a vision document titled "India-Maldives: A Vision for Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership." This framework aims to bolster cooperation in areas such as trade and economy, energy, defence and security, development, and cooperation at regional and multilateral fora.⁵¹

India extended substantial financial support to the Maldives to address its economic challenges. This assistance includes \$400 million and a 30 billion Indian rupee swap arrangement, facilitating financial stability and economic resilience for the Maldives.

The introduction of India's RuPay card in the Maldives was a significant step toward enhancing financial collaboration between the two countries. This initiative is expected to facilitate digital payments and promote financial inclusion within the Maldives.

Prime Minister Modi and President Muizzu jointly inaugurated the new runway at Hanimaadhoo International Airport. This development is anticipated to improve connectivity and support the Maldives' tourism sector. India also handed over 700 social housing units to the Maldives, constructed under the Export-Import Bank of India's Buyers' Credit Facilities.⁵²

After some recent strains, President Muizzu's visit to India was aimed at repairing and reinforcing the Maldives-India relationship. The visit also underscored the limitations of the "India Out" campaign and acknowledged the importance of India as a key strategic and development partner.

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