

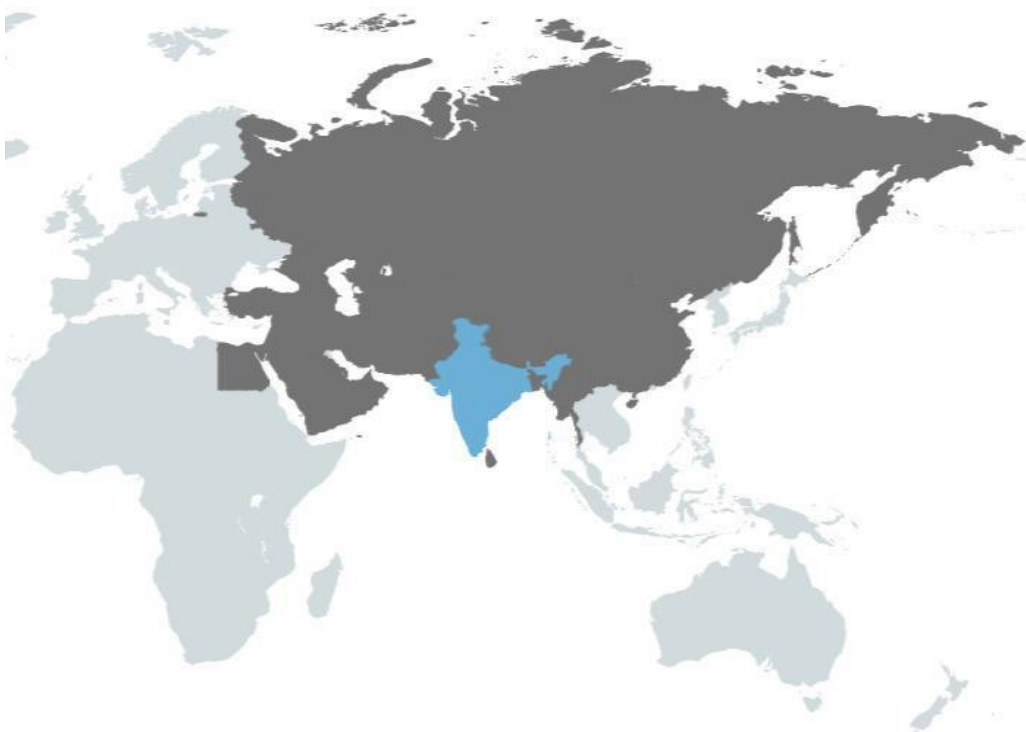


Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW



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DPG INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

The DPG India Strategic Review (ISR) is a monthly survey of key developments, trends and policies pertaining to India's immediate and continental neighbourhood. It is compiled by a research team which is led by Sanjay Pulipaka, Senior Fellow, and includes Research Associates Mohit Musaddi, Antara Ghosal Singh, Sanket Joshi, Shreyas Deshmukh, Libni Garg and Anushka Nair. The ISR is based on open source official statements, reports and publications. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to Mohit Musaddi at mohit@dpg.org.in. To subscribe, please, please [click here](#).

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World map

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DPG India Strategic Review

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Overview: Mapping Contestations, Challenges and Opportunities

Sanjay Pulipaka and Mohit Musaddi

The events along the India-China border in June 2020 reflect a period of larger contestation that will define the nature of the Asian order in years to come. Will it be a unipolar Asia, dominated by China? Or will it be an Asia where power lies distributed among multiple state actors across the region? In a broader context, as [Brig. Arun Sahgal and Amb. H.K. Singh](#) explain, the Chinese aggression may be “part of China’s strategic messaging to American allies and partners on the inevitability of a Sino-centric Asia, and for Asia’s middle powers to stop ganging up against China or face the consequences from a predatory great power.”¹

Chinese incursions continued in the Union Territory of Ladakh (Galwan Valley, Hot Springs and Pangong Tso) were backed by a large deployment of Chinese forces across the Line of Actual Control. While both sides held talks at military and diplomatic levels, the prospects for an early easing of the stand-off, de-escalation and restoration of the status quo ante remained bleak, particularly after a bloody clash was triggered in Galwan by a pre-meditated assault on Indian troops by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) on June 15/16. While Chinese spokespersons aggressively articulated nationalistic positions, the Chinese media issued reminders of India’s humiliation in the 1962 war. Beijing adopted a three-pronged strategy of creeping territorial assertions, diplomatic hectoring and social media disinformation. India was measured in its response, warning that the continuing stand-off is bound to have a negative impact on the bilateral relationship. In a related development, at the virtual meeting of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) in the first week of June, “Beijing objected to the grant for Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary (SWS) in eastern Bhutan’s Trashigang district bordering India and China, claiming that the location was disputed”.²

There was a tectonic shift in South Asian geopolitics with the intensification of discord in India-Nepal relations. While there has been some articulation of differences on the western India-Nepal boundary by Kathmandu in the recent past, the matter was formally raised by the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) in May after India’s Defence Minister Rajnath Singh [inaugurated a road link](#) from Dharchula (Uttarakhand) to Lipulekh (China border).³ Subsequent developments may have also been [propelled by](#) the growing Chinese influence in Nepal’s decision-making processes.⁴ On May 31, a constitutional

amendment bill was tabled by the NCP in a bid to update the map of Nepal to include Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura as part of Nepalese territory. The President of Nepal, Bidhya Devi Bhandari, ratified the bill on June 18 after it was unanimously passed by both Houses of Parliament.

Nepal's decision was reflective of a new trend in South Asian politics. India's bilateral relations with immediate neighbours are increasingly impacted by China's economic interactions and growing influence. However, the Maldives' experience attests to the fact that anti-India trends can be addressed through robust policies and engagement of neighbouring countries. After a hiatus from 2013-18, there is a significant shift in the Maldives' attitude towards India, which has provided significant medical assistance to Male during the COVID-19 crisis. In April, the Indian High Commission delivered [6.2 tonnes](#) of essential medicines and donated [50,000](#) Hydroxychloroquine tablet.⁵ On May 22, Maldives expressed unequivocal [support for India](#) against charges of Islamophobia by Pakistan at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).⁶ Following India-China border clashes, on June 19 the Maldives' [Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid](#) extended "condolences to the people of India for the lives lost".⁷

In past weeks, developments in the Gulf region have been a cause of worry for India. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated economic challenges for West Asian countries, particularly the oil-producing states in the Gulf. Average oil prices remain low at around USD40 per barrel. During May, India took advantage of these low prices and [increased its strategic oil reserves](#) by 39 million barrels, but there were other dire consequences for Delhi.⁸ With economic opportunities in the Gulf bound to be subdued in short to medium term, a larger number of Indians working there are being compelled to return home. On June 3, Kuwait's Prime Minister [expressed his desire](#) to reduce its migrant population from 70 per cent to 30 per cent.⁹ If such a decision is indicative of a shift in the Gulf towards reducing the number of migrant workers, India must be prepared to generate employment for them at home. In this context, growing investments by Gulf countries in India are a welcome development. During June, it was [reported](#) that Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) had invested USD1.5 billion in Reliance Jio.¹⁰ Securing further investments from Gulf states in the manufacturing sector will help boost employment in India, which must also fully utilise the skillsets of returnees.

New Delhi's efforts to expand trade relations with Central Asian countries continue to be stymied by Pakistan's refusal to provide land access for transit. Afghan traders have [not been allowed](#) to "export goods to the Pakistani ports

and the Attari border since the last three months".¹¹ Nonetheless, in June 2020 India [scaled-up](#) its efforts to boost trade and economic relations with Central Asian countries by operationalising a preferential trade agreement and bilateral investment treaty with Uzbekistan.¹² India also offered a concessional line of [credit to Uzbekistan](#) of USD1 billion "to support social and economic infrastructure development".¹³ So far, the two sides have identified four projects worth USD450 million for implementation. However, given the continuing downward spiral in India's relations with Pakistan following tit-for-tat expulsions of diplomats and the decision of the Ministry of External Affairs on June 23 to [significantly reduce](#) the number of diplomatic personnel of the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi by 50%, the prospect of making progress on improving connectivity to Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics will continue to be bleak in the near future.¹⁴

In addition to connectivity challenges, India's security challenges will also increase with the deterioration in relations with Pakistan and Nepal. Articles in the Chinese media are [alluding](#) to the possibility of India facing "military pressure from two or even three fronts, which is far beyond India's military capability".¹⁵

The Russian response to the India-China border stand-off also somewhat limits India's strategic space. On June 10, the Chair of Russia's Federation Council Committee on Foreign Relations [stated that](#) "these bilateral disputes should be dealt with bilaterally. We respect the sovereignty of India and the sovereignty of China...We would encourage dialogue and non-use of military force."¹⁶ Nonetheless, Indian [news reports](#) highlighted fast-tracking the purchase of 21 MiG-29 fighter jets as well as 12 Sukhoi Su-30 MKI aircraft from Russia.¹⁷ India has also pressed Russia to [expedite](#) the delivery of Russian S-400 Triumf anti-missile systems.¹⁸

In the midst of India-China border tensions, India participated in the Russia-India-China (RIC) Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Video Conference convened on June 23, 2020, to mark the 75th anniversary of the Allied victory in World War II. The RIC Trilateral framework took shape in the late 1990s when India felt an inexplicable need to counter-balance the U.S. instead of contesting the rise of China. Even in recent times, the meeting has only assumed importance for India when Washington has threatened trade and tariff wars against Delhi. However, the RIC forum has thus far failed to find strategic traction in India, primarily because India gains little from what is becoming a joint Russia-China front of opposing the West.

In his remarks at the RIC meeting, External Affairs Minister [Dr. S. Jaishankar](#) referred to India's contributions during World War II to keep supply lines open to both Russia (through the Persian Corridor) and China (over the Himalayan hump).¹⁹ He added that in the post-War institutional framework, India's war effort did not get due recognition and that it was time to rectify the past. He pressed India's agenda of "reformed multilateralism" in international affairs to ensure that multilateral organisations are in sync with "contemporary reality".²⁰ In calling upon leading nations to walk the talk by observing the fundamental principles of world order, EAM Dr. Jaishankar also made a veiled reference to China's ongoing aggression on India's borders.



The IAF station in Leh, Ladakh, December 2018 (file photo). Source: Financial Express

With an overwhelming majority of 184 votes out of 192, India was [elected](#) as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on June 18.²¹ Earlier, on June 5, the Ministry of External Affairs had launched a brochure outlining [India's priorities](#) for the two-year term at the UNSC, which include "new opportunities for progress; effective response to international terrorism; reforming the multilateral system; a comprehensive approach to international peace and security; and promoting technology as a driver of solutions."²² While seeking reform, India is also scaling-up its contributions to the U.N. system. On June 23, India [announced](#) that it would contribute USD10 million to the U.N. Relief and Works Agency over the next two years.²³ During the course of its UN membership, India will have to be alert to attempts to undermine the spirit of the international body. For instance, the draft

declaration of the United Nations to commemorate the 75th anniversary concluded with a phrase "to realise our shared vision for a common future", which was similar to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) foreign policy articulations.²⁴ India along with the UK, US, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada raised objections on the phrasing of the text, which was later altered to "for the common future of present and coming generations."²⁵

In past weeks, India has once again demonstrated its capability as a first responder by assisting countries in its neighbourhood with critical medical supplies. It has also undertaken major repatriation missions to bring back stranded Indians from across the world. Under the [Vande Bharat Mission](#) launched on May 5, 2020, the [Indian Navy](#) along with [Air India](#) and [Indigo](#) have brought back around 2,407 Indian nationals stranded in the Maldives, while from Sri Lanka, approximately [1,842 Indians](#) have been evacuated.²⁶ Across three phases, [41 flights](#) have been scheduled to the Central Asian Republics for evacuation, including 12 to Kazakhstan, 26 to Kyrgyzstan and three to Tajikistan.²⁷ On June 11, [INS Shardul](#) evacuated 233 Indian citizens from the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas.²⁸

Conclusion

The developments in the past few weeks indicate that India is in for a prolonged military and political stand-off with China. At the same time, difficulties in India's relations with immediate neighbours are growing and geopolitical uncertainty and tensions persist in South East Asia. India needs to scale up its engagement in South Asia rapidly to address the deteriorating situation, which is propelled in part by China's growing economic inroads and political influence. In the Gulf region, India needs to ensure that the rights of migrant workers are protected, and sufficient job opportunities are created for those returning home. India's election as a non-permanent member of the UNSC for 2021-23 provides an opportunity for Delhi to represent the Indo-Pacific region and enhance contributions to the regional and global public good. In the midst of a raging COVID-19 pandemic, an economic downturn, two massive cyclones, and China's territorial assertions in Ladakh, India has shown considerable political resilience and institutional capacity to meet multiple challenges, which augurs well for the future.

India-China Relations: Discord a New Normal?

Antara Ghosal Singh

India-China relations deteriorated considerably this month, “due to the [multidimensional nature](#) of Chinese transgressions across the LAC”.²⁹ To resolve the stand-off, a meeting of the Army Commanders was held on June 6, 2020. The MEA statement hinted at a possible de-escalation when it [noted that](#) “both sides agreed to peacefully resolve the situation in the border areas in accordance with various bilateral agreements and keeping in view the agreement between the leaders that peace and tranquillity in the India-China border region is essential for the overall development of bilateral relations”.³⁰ However, subsequent developments were contrary to the spirit of the statements that followed the Army Commanders’ meeting,

In a massive escalation, a violent face-off broke out in the Galwan Valley on June 15, 2020. On June 16, India [announced](#) that 20 Indian soldiers, including a Colonel, were killed during the incident.³¹ While there was no official confirmation from Chinese government sources, there were reports which [claimed that](#) 43 Chinese soldiers were killed or injured during the clash.³² This incident, being the first fatal clash since 1975 between India and China, instantly attracted the attention of the international community.



The Chief of Army Staff visited forward areas in Eastern Ladakh on June 24, 2020 and reviewed the operational situation on the ground. Source: Twitter/@adgpi

The Chinese government and its media's response to the skirmishes were quick and aggressive. While the Chinese spokesperson criticised Indian troops for crossing the border and attacking Chinese personnel, the Ministry of External Affairs of India [said](#) that the clashes happened "as a result of an attempt by the Chinese side to unilaterally change the status quo there".³³ Addressing the nation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on June 17 [noted](#), "the sacrifice made by our soldiers will not go in vain. India's integrity and sovereignty are supreme for us, and no one can stop us from defending it...India wants peace. But on provocation, India will give a befitting reply".³⁴ Further on June 17, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh expressed his condolences [stating](#), "The loss of soldiers in Galwan is deeply disturbing and painful. Our soldiers displayed exemplary courage and valour in the line of duty and sacrificed their lives in the highest traditions of the Indian Army."³⁵

On the same day, the External Affairs Minister (EAM), Dr. S. Jaishankar and the State Councillor and Foreign Minister of China Wang Yi had a [telephone conversation](#) on the Galwan clash.³⁶ EAM Jaishankar [pointed out](#) that the Chinese side "took pre-meditated and planned action with an intent to change the facts on ground in violation of all our agreements to not change the status quo and was directly responsible for the resulting violence and casualties."³⁷ The EAM further underlined that "this unprecedented development will have a serious impact on the bilateral relationship".³⁸ China, on the other hand, [demanded](#) that "India carry out a thorough investigation into the incident, severely punish those who should be held accountable, strictly discipline Indian frontline troops, and immediately stop all provocative actions so as to ensure that such incidents do not happen again."³⁹ A close examination of the readout of the telephonic conversation shows that the Chinese Foreign Ministry deployed shrill rhetoric. Despite differences, both sides hinted at the need to ease the border tension through peaceful means.

On June 19, the Indian Prime Minister [addressed](#) an all-party meeting on the border skirmishes.⁴⁰ There was [criticism](#) in the media that the Prime Minister's statement generated confusion as to the nature of Chinese transgressions.⁴¹ Subsequently, the Prime Minister's Office issued a [clarification](#) seeking to validate India's position at Galwan valley.⁴² On June 20, the [Chinese Embassy's official website](#) in India put out a statement attributed to Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian giving a "step-by-step account of the Galwan Valley incident."⁴³ It also reiterated China's "unverified" claim over the entire Galwan Valley. However, India soon [rejected](#) China's Galwan Valley claim as 'untenable, exaggerated'.⁴⁴ Further, the Indian ambassador to China [added that](#) any attempts to "change the status quo by resorting to force or coercion, is not the right way forward."⁴⁵ Following the June 15 clash, there was reportedly a

change in engagement rules at the LAC, with India giving its defence forces 'full freedom' to "respond in an adequate and proportionate manner to any hostile act, in accordance with their judgement".⁴⁶

Meanwhile, shocked and saddened by the brutality and gruesomeness of the face-off, anti-China sentiment reached its peak in India and protests broke out in several places, with people demanding military retaliation against China and an absolute boycott of Made in China products. There were several reports of the [central](#) and [state](#) governments in India terminating contracts with Chinese firms.⁴⁷ On June 29, the Indian government [banned](#) 59 Chinese mobile apps citing data security and privacy concerns.⁴⁸

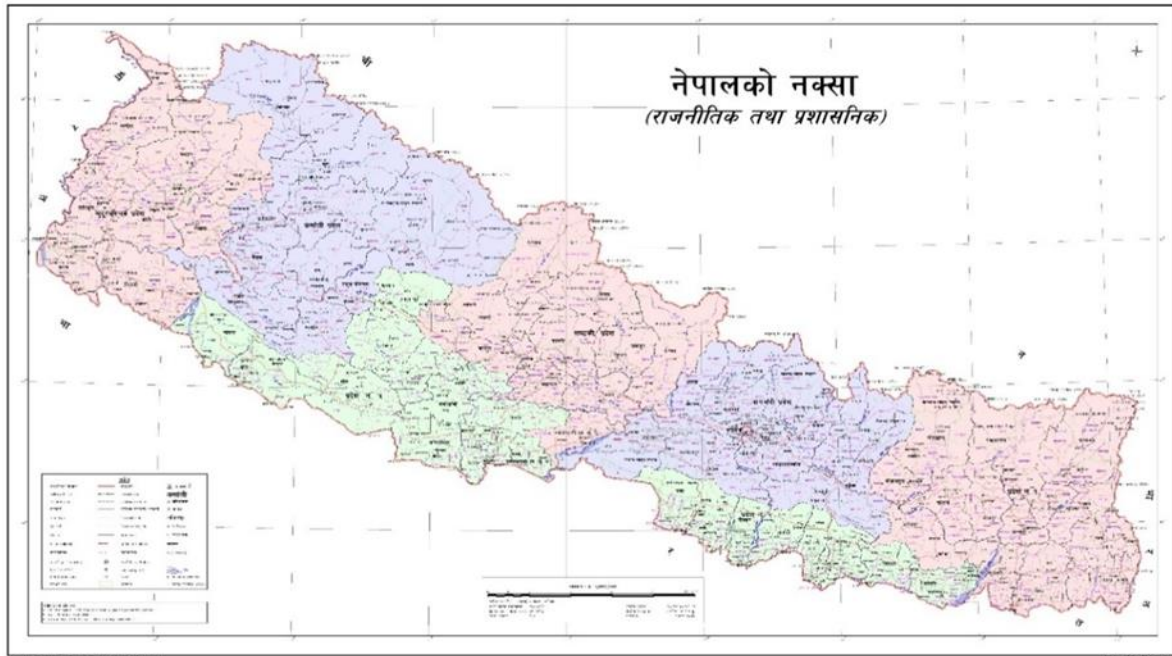
There have been continuous efforts to ease the stand-off and facilitate de-escalation. The meeting between the Corps Commanders of India (XIV Corps Commander Lt General Harinder Singh) and China (South Xinjiang Military Region Commander Major General Liu Lin) on June 22 and June 23 [resulted](#) in a "mutual consensus to disengage, planned in stages in each sector" with "no timeline for the disengagement process."⁴⁹ The 15th [meeting](#) of the Working Mechanism for Consultation & Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC) was held through video-conference on June 24, 2020 where it was "reaffirmed that both sides should sincerely implement the understanding on disengagement and de-escalation that was reached by the Senior Commanders on 6th June."⁵⁰ However, the situation at the LAC continues to be tense as the forces of both sides still stand eyeball to eyeball at various locations along the disputed LAC.

New Frontiers of Discord: Developments Across India's Neighbourhood

Mohit Musaddi

India-Nepal Border Dispute

On May 8, the Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh had [inaugurated](#) a road link from Dharchula (Uttarakhand) to Lipulekh (China border).⁵¹ It caused an uproar, with the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) [claiming](#) that the Link Road connecting to Lipulekh passes through Nepali territory.⁵² The official spokesperson of India's MEA [emphasised](#) that the "road section in Pithoragarh district in the State of Uttarakhand lies completely within the territory of India and follows the pre-existing route used by the pilgrims of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra".⁵³ After various rounds of diplomatic assertions, the Nepal Law minister, on May 31, tabled a constitutional amendment bill in the House of Representatives in a bid to update the map of Nepal to include Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura as part of Nepalese territory. Subsequently, the bill was unanimously adopted by both Houses of Parliament and signed by President Bidhya Devi Bhandari on June 18. MEA's spokesperson [responded](#) by reiterating that Nepal's revised political map includes parts of Indian territory.⁵⁴ He urged the Government of Nepal to "refrain from unjustified cartographic assertion and respect India's sovereignty and territorial integrity".⁵⁵ Strategic experts, including some officials, have [hinted that](#) Nepal's reaction could be linked to the recent Chinese aggression along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).⁵⁶ Others have [pointed out](#) that the decision may have been an attempt by PM Oli to divert domestic attention from "his worst internal crisis since coming to power, in 2017".⁵⁷ On June 28, PM Oli [claimed](#) that "meetings are being organised in India to topple his government."⁵⁸

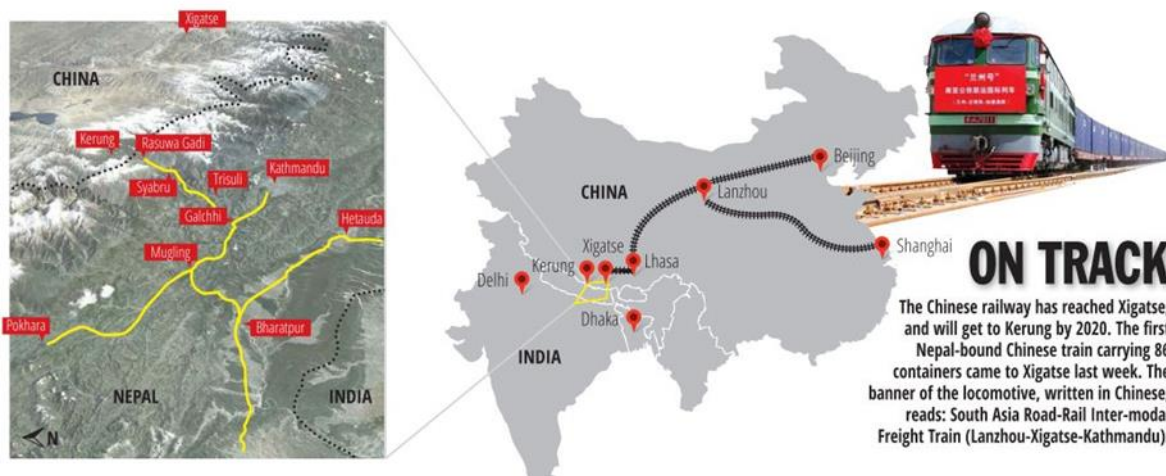


New Political Map of Nepal. Source: Ministry of Land Management, Cooperatives and Poverty, Government of Nepal

An incident along the India-Nepal border near the Sitamarhi district of Bihar on June 12 in which Nepal border guards opened fire at a crowd that was allegedly trying to enter Nepal may have further complicated matters. One Indian civilian was killed, and two others were injured in the incident. However, Indian officials [explained](#) that it was a local issue with “no country-to-country or force-to-force ramifications”.⁵⁹ This has reportedly been the sixth incident in the past six months, although there were no fatalities earlier. Since then, Kathmandu has also changed its citizenship law for Indians. On May 20, Nepal’s Home Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa [announced](#) that, as per the new rule, “any girl marrying a Nepalese citizen will have to wait for a minimum of seven years to get citizenship”.⁶⁰ While India too has a similar clause for foreign spouses, Nepalese nationals are exempted from it.

At the same time, Kathmandu’s relationship with Beijing has seen an uptick. On June 19, 100 members of the NCP, including co-chair Pushpa Kumar Dahal (Prachanda) took part in a [meeting](#) via video conference with the Communist Party of China (CPC).⁶¹ [Reportedly](#), the two parties exchanged views on contemporary politics and issues of governance and corruption.⁶² However, the move by the NCP drew sharp criticism from the opposition Nepali Congress party as it termed the exercise an attempt to “sabotage Nepal’s democratic, republican constitution”.⁶³

China also operationalised the [2016 Nepal-China Transit Transport Agreement \(TTA\)](#) in June 2020.⁶⁴ Under this [Agreement](#), Nepal will have direct land access to "China's seaports on the eastern seaboard in Tianjin, Shenzhen, Lianyungang and Zhanjiang in addition to land ports in Lhasa, Lanzhou and Xigatse".⁶⁵ "The first train carrying COVID-19 medical equipment and construction material from Xi'an arrived in Xigatse".⁶⁶ Another cargo train with "390 tonnes of goods worth \$1.3 million bound for Nepal also arrived in Xigatse from Lanzhou".⁶⁷



Source: Nepali Times

Further, the NCP has also [reportedly been under pressure](#) from Beijing to reject an American grant for a "power transmission line" and the upgradation of "300 km of roads in Nepal".⁶⁸ The critics of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) grant from the U.S., which was agreed to in 2017, contend that because the United States is part of an "Indo-Pacific Strategy to limit Chinese influence in the region...accepting the MCC would undermine Nepalese sovereignty by drawing the country into Washington's orbit".⁶⁹

Kathmandu has been coy on the recent clashes between India and China along the LAC. A [press release](#) of June 20 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal stated that "in the context of the recent developments in the Galwan valley area between our friendly neighbours India and China, Nepal is confident that both the neighbouring countries will resolve, in the spirit of good neighbourliness, their mutual differences through peaceful means in favour of bilateral, regional and world peace and stability".⁷⁰ Kathmandu ought to have taken a firmer stance on the apparent Chinese attempts to violate India's sovereignty.

Growing Chinese Influence across India's Neighbourhood

China's influence across other parts of South Asia have also gathered momentum over the past month. In a [landmark deal](#), the Bangladesh Foreign Ministry announced on June 19 that China had exempted tariffs for 97 per cent of the exports from Bangladesh.⁷¹ Exports to China from Bangladesh, which consist mainly of fisheries and leather products, are valued at a little less than USD1 billion per year.

On June 8, China had also sent a [10-member team of medical experts](#) to Bangladesh to provide consultations of pandemic control, patients treatment and laboratory tests in order to help contain the country's spread of the novel coronavirus.⁷² In the past, India has also provided emergency medical assistance to its South Asian neighbour under the SAARC Covid-19 Emergency Fund.

Myanmar however, has offered pushback against the Chinese "debt-trap" and "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy. On June 13, Myanmar's auditor general [cautioned government officials](#) about the continued reliance on high-interest Chinese loans.⁷³ Out of Myanmar's current debt of USD10 billion, almost USD4 billion is owed to China. Further, it was [reported](#) on June 18 that the government of Myanmar had convened a "tribunal to investigate irregularities surrounding a controversial China-backed city development project", located in Karen state, close to the Thailand-Myanmar border.⁷⁴ The project has regularly [been criticised](#) "due to a lack of transparency, land confiscations, confusion over the scale of construction and the growing influx of Chinese money".⁷⁵

Lifting of Trade Restrictions and Facilitating Economic Interactions

As lockdown measures across South Asia begin to be lifted, governments are addressing disruptions in supply chains caused due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of June, trade between Myanmar and India was [down by 40 per cent](#) for the fiscal year from USD128 million to USD76 million.⁷⁶ As a result, there were [reports of illegal trade](#) across the India-Myanmar border in Manipur.⁷⁷ The India-Bangladesh land borders had also been closed since late March.

However, over the past few weeks, some of the land borders between India and Bangladesh have opened. Following a meeting of exporters and transport operators, the government decided to [open the Mahadipur border](#) on June 4.⁷⁸ Since then, more borders have become functional, particularly the [Fulbari Integrated Check Post](#) on June 13 and the [Ghojadanga border post](#) on June

20.⁷⁹ In 2018-19, the [two-way trade](#) between India and Bangladesh stood at over USD10 billion.⁸⁰

Earlier this month, there were [reports](#) that a trial-run of the transshipment of Indian goods through Bangladesh may take place in June.⁸¹ Goods are expected to be carried across Tripura (India) and adjoining states via the Akhaura and Bibirbazar land ports of Bangladesh, after they arrive at Chittagong Port. The transshipment agreement, which was signed between Delhi and Dhaka in October 2018, will allow India to use the Chittagong and Mongla seaports to carry goods to and from Bangladesh.

On June 24, the [Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs of India approved](#) an "additional investment of USD121.27 million by ONGC Videsh Ltd. (OVL) towards further development... of Shwe oil and gas project in Myanmar".⁸² OVL has been "associated with exploration and development of Shwe project in Myanmar since 2002, as part of a consortium of companies from South Korea, India and Myanmar".⁸³ On June 11, Indian and Burmese officials had also held a [virtual discussion](#) to boost connectivity post the COVID-19 pandemic on June 11.⁸⁴ This was followed by a [webinar](#) on June 13 by the FICCI Ladies Organisation (FLO) to discuss collaboration between India and Myanmar to empower women entrepreneurs and generate sustainable livelihoods.⁸⁵

Reaffirming the India-Bhutan co-operation in the hydropower sector, a "Concession Agreement for the 600 MW Kholongchhu (Joint Venture) Hydroelectric Project between the Royal Government of Bhutan and Kholongchhu Hydro Energy Limited" was [signed](#) on June 29 in Thimphu in the virtual presence of EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar and Lyonpo Dr. Tandi Dorji, Foreign Minister of Bhutan.⁸⁶ "The signing of the Concession Agreement will lead to commencement of construction and other works of this first Joint Venture Hydroelectric Project between India and Bhutan."⁸⁷ Earlier, on June 3, Delhi and Thimphu had also [signed an MoU](#) in the areas of Environment. The Memorandum of Understanding will enable the "promotion of closer and long-term co-operation between the two countries in the field of environment protection and management of natural resources on the basis of equity, reciprocity and mutual benefits."⁸⁸

West Asia: Migration, Evacuation and Investments

Sanket Joshi

The COVID-19 induced economic crisis is wreaking havoc in West Asia. The pain is even more pronounced for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member nations because of falling oil prices. The Institute of International Finance estimates that the GCC will suffer its [worst recession ever](#) in 2020.⁸⁹ Thus, the oil-producing nations in West Asia have drastically reduced government spending, which has also deeply affected the Indian migrant workers. Over 27,000 foreign workers, predominantly from the Indian sub-continent, have lost their [jobs in Oman](#).⁹⁰ Kuwait too plans to reduce the [migrant population](#) from 70 per cent to 30 per cent of the total population.⁹¹ The Kuwaiti government has announced that no more expatriates would be hired by the [Kuwait Petroleum Corporation](#) and its subsidiaries for the year 2020-21. Such decisions will have long term ramifications for Indian workers in the Gulf post-COVID-19.⁹²

Earlier in May, India had launched the 'Vande Bharat Mission' to bring back citizens stranded abroad. Until June 1, around 16,000 Indians had been [repatriated from the UAE](#).⁹³ The Indian Navy has also brought back 233 Indians stranded in Iran. It is likely that by June end, around 90,000 more Indians will return from the UAE due to growing economic difficulties in the Gulf and the resulting job cuts.



Indians returning from the UAE as part of the Vande Bharat Mission, June 03, 2020.

Source: Twitter/@IndembAbuDhabi

India has been a major beneficiary of falling oil prices, which has brought down India's petroleum import bill and helped fill strategic oil reserves. [According to the latest data](#) from the Ministry of Petroleum, India has filled 39 million barrels of strategic oil reserves at an average price of USD25 per barrel, reportedly saving the government about INR.5,000 crore.⁹⁴ On June 3, 2020, Union Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas Dharmendra Pradhan held a [bilateral video meeting](#) with the Secretary-General of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) Mohammad Sanusi Barkindo. The importance of the OPEC-India partnership and further ways of strengthening dialogue were discussed. Minister Pradhan congratulated OPEC plus on the agreement reached to cut oil production. The next high-level OPEC-India meeting will be held in July 2020.⁹⁵

In terms of investment potential, Saudi Arabia has transferred USD40 billion of its foreign reserves to a sovereign wealth fund to acquire foreign assets at lower prices. It was reported in mid-June that Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) had invested USD1.5 billion in [Reliance Jio](#).⁹⁶ Reportedly, Abu Dhabi's Mubadala has also invested USD1.2 billion in Jio.⁹⁷ PIF has already spent close to USD8 billion in U.S. and European blue-chip companies such as British Petroleum, Royal Dutch Shell, Boeing, Citigroup, Disney, and Facebook.

While economic co-operation is promising for India, on the political and security front, there is still some room for manoeuvre. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) contact group on Jammu and Kashmir held a virtual meeting on June 22, 2020, and renewed commitment for a settlement of the J&K dispute. The contact group consists of the OIC Secretary-General, and the foreign ministers of Pakistan, Niger, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The OIC [called on](#) India to halt security operations, respect human rights, refrain from changing the demographic structure in J&K and settle the Kashmir conflict under relevant UNSC resolutions.⁹⁸

On the other hand, there is growing political convergence between India and Israel, and the bilateral relations have strengthened significantly in the last few years. It should be noted that the Israeli [Heron](#) medium altitude long endurance drones were deployed for surveillance in eastern Ladakh during the ongoing stand-off with China.⁹⁹ Earlier, on June 10, 2020, Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) congratulated Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu on assuming the Prime Minister's office in Israel for the fifth time.¹⁰⁰ PM Modi said, "India-Israel partnership will grow stronger in the days to come." Israel's Ambassador to India [said](#), "India and Israel have come closer during the pandemic, forged greater co-operation on research and collaboration on start-up's focused on fighting COVID-19."¹⁰¹



The Heron 1 UAV has been used to provide technical surveillance in Eastern Ladakh (file photo). Source: Wikimedia

In other major news of significance, Hezbollah Chief Hassan Nasrallah has [said](#), "China is prepared to invest in key infrastructure projects in Lebanon should the crisis-hit country embrace the East."¹⁰² While on the regional geopolitical front, the U.S. Department of State has [approved a deal](#) worth USD1.425 billion for the sale of Patriot air and missile defence system components and upgrades to Kuwait.¹⁰³

The pandemic is also having an impact on people-to-people interactions across boundaries. Saudi Arabia has barred international pilgrims from Haj this year due to the ongoing pandemic. This will affect thousands of Indian Muslims. On June 23, 2020, The Union Minister for Minority Affairs Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi [confirmed](#) that Muslims from India would not travel to Saudi Arabia for Haj 2020 and, for those who have made bookings, a refund will be provided through DBT without any deductions.¹⁰⁴

India, CAR and PAI*: Evacuation, Trade and Politics of Connectivity

Shreyas Deshmukh

Since May, as COVID-19 spread across Central Asia and Iran, the Government of India has focused on providing humanitarian assistance and relief material to the affected countries. Over the past few weeks, India has also evacuated Indian nationals from across the region through its Vande Bharat Mission. Across three phases, [41 flights](#) have been scheduled to CAR countries for evacuation, including 12 from Kazakhstan, 26 from Kyrgyzstan and three from Tajikistan.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, to evacuate people from countries in the Indian Ocean Region, India has commenced Operation Samudra Setu under the Vande Bharat Mission with the help of the Indian Navy. [INS Shardul](#) and [INS Jalshwa](#) have evacuated 920 Indian citizens from the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas.¹⁰⁶ Iran, which was one of the first countries after China to be hit by COVID-19, has been experiencing a second wave of the virus after new cases had dropped to less than 1,000 per day in May.

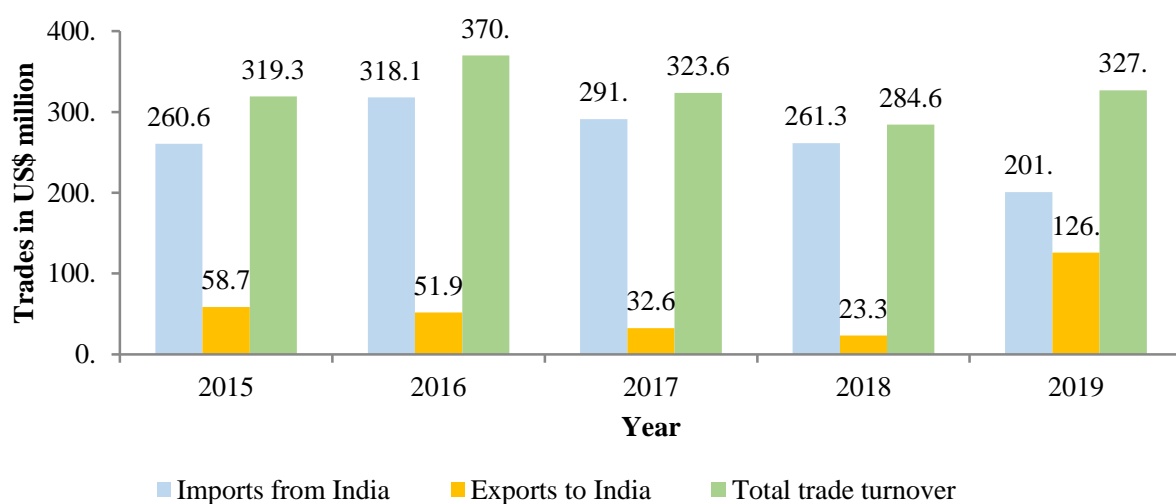


A consignment of Indian medical aid being delivered to the Tajik Agency for State Material Reserves to support their fight against COVID-19. Source: Embassy of India, Dushanbe, Tajikistan¹⁰⁷

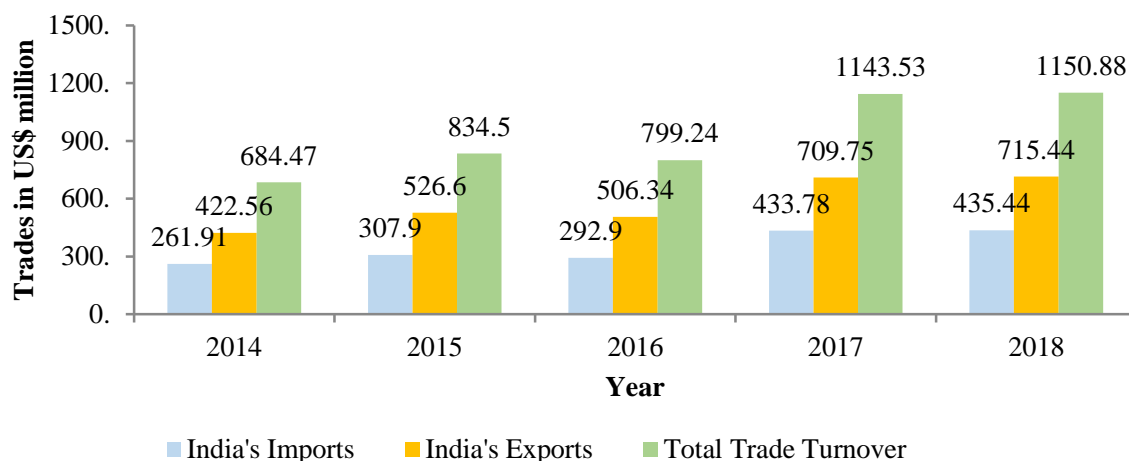
* CAR stands for Central Asia Republics and PAI stands for Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran.

Meanwhile, India continued its efforts to improve and expand its trade relations with the CAR countries. On the background of increasing trade between India and Uzbekistan, Indian Ambassador to Tashkent, said that both sides are engaged in [negotiations](#) to finalise a preferential trade agreement and a bilateral investment treaty.¹⁰⁸ India has offered a concessional line of credit to Uzbekistan of USD1 billion to support social and economic infrastructure development.¹⁰⁹ The two sides have identified four projects worth USD450 million for implementation.¹¹⁰

Graph 1: India-Uzbekistan Trade. Data source: Embassy of India Tashkent, Uzbekistan & Department of Commerce¹¹¹



The pandemic is also affecting India's trade with Iran and Afghanistan. The vice-chairman of Iran-India Joint Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Parham Rezaei, said that trade between the two countries would return to normal [by the end of June](#).¹¹² Pakistani's imports for Afghanistan have remained constant for the past three months. However, Afghan traders have not been allowed to export goods to Pakistan, which has also resulted in the freezing of India-Afghan trade through the Attari-Wagah border.¹¹³ In the last week of May, trade between the two countries resumed for a short period but was [again suspended](#).¹¹⁴ For India, such incidents provide an added impetus to develop the Chabahar Port in Iran as it seeks to increase trade with countries to the north. Therefore, despite the escalating US-Iran conflict, the Chabahar Port, which is key to economic stability in Afghanistan, has been exempted from [U.S. sanctions](#) on Iran.¹¹⁵

Graph 2: India-Afghanistan Trade. Data source: [MEA](#)

On the other hand, China has continued its efforts to rope in India in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by providing alternative to solving the issue of land connectivity to Central Asia and further to Russia. While India has not officially participated in any of the BRI-related projects, the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO) Secretary-General Vladimir Norov [said](#), "SCO serves as an effective platform for interconnecting national and regional integration initiatives, including the Eurasian Economic Union, 'One Belt, One Road', economic development strategies of Central Asian countries [and] the Russian-Indian "North-South" project".¹¹⁶ He [also announced](#) the establishment of a Consortium of think tanks to serve as a platform for the study and comprehensive analysis of factors affecting economic interaction within the SCO, considering global and regional processes.¹¹⁷ The first meeting of the Consortium will be held in autumn 2020 ahead of the regular meeting of the SCO Heads of Government Council in India. The skirmish between Indian and Chinese troops in Galwan Valley may change India's strategic outlook vis-à-vis developments in its immediate and extended neighbourhood, as well as multilateral forums such as the SCO.

Even during the pandemic, China has maintained the pace of expansion of its BRI projects in Central Asia. On June 5, China [started a new corridor](#) to Uzbekistan, bypassing Kazakhstan. A container train travelled from Dongchuan Logistic Center in Lanzhou to Tashkent, Uzbekistan (4380 km).¹¹⁸ The Pakistan government [approved](#) Main Line-1 (ML-1) strategic railway project under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) at an estimated cost of USD7.2 billion. The project will stretch from Karachi to Peshawar, which is 1872 km long.¹¹⁹ In order to improve its defence exports, Beijing has indicated that it will oppose U.S. efforts to extend the weapons ban on Iran, which is due to expire in October 2020.¹²⁰

[Clashes](#) between India and Pakistan on the Line of Control have also continued throughout June.¹²¹ Earlier, India had expelled two Pakistani High Commission officials for indulging in [espionage activities](#), which caused a diplomatic row.¹²² As a quid pro quo, two Indian High Commission employees in Islamabad were abducted by Pakistani security agencies on June 15 and later released.¹²³ In response, India summoned Syed Haider Shah, the Charge d' Affaires of the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi and handed over a strong note of protest. As a result, on June 23, the Ministry of External Affairs released a [press statement](#) informing the Charge d' Affaires that India has decided to "reduce the staff strength in the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi by 50 per cent. It would reciprocally reduce its own presence in Islamabad to the same proportion".¹²⁴

India-Russia Partnership: Neutrality and Multilateral Divergence

Anushka Nair

In the wake of the deadliest border face-off between India and China since 1975, Russia has [expressed its concerns](#) about the situation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh.¹²⁵ Russia reiterated that “these bilateral disputes should be dealt with bilaterally.”¹²⁶ In what appeared to be an attempt at articulating a neutral position, on June 10, the Chair of Russia’s Federation Council Committee on Foreign Relations [stated](#), “We respect the sovereignty of India and the sovereignty of China...[and that] We would encourage dialogue and prevent the use of military force.”¹²⁷ The Kremlin spokesperson Dmitri Peskov also stated that Russia would always be ready and willing to help iron out conflicts between its two allies if asked to mediate.¹²⁸



The virtual RIC FM's meeting in progress on June 23, 2020. Source: Twitter/@Geeta_Mohan

The foreign ministers of the Russia-India-China (RIC) grouping met for a [virtual conference](#) on June 23 to discuss opportunities for enhanced co-operation to mitigate the impact of COVID-19.¹²⁹ It was the first joint platform for the Indian and Chinese foreign ministers since the LAC stand-off became public news. Notably, the RIC was the [first platform](#) for Sino-Indian ministerial interaction after the Doklam stand-off as well.¹³⁰ While the foreign ministers of the three countries have been meeting on a regular basis since their first

exclusive trilateral meeting in 2005, the leaders level interaction has been far more sparse, with only three meetings since 2006, and a twelve-year gap between the first and second round.¹³¹

There was [speculation](#) in the media that India was reluctant to participate in the RIC video conference due to the ongoing India-China stand-off in eastern Ladakh.¹³² However, the border clash did not feature in the discussions, as the focus was on trilateral issues, primarily co-operation within the grouping to tackle the impact of COVID-19, and others such as the need to combat global terrorism, to which end Russia [reaffirmed its support](#) for the Indian initiative for a convention on the issue.¹³³ While no bilateral issues were explicitly brought to the fore, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar did obliquely [highlight](#) the responsibilities of the "leading voices of the world", which included recognising the legitimate interests of partners.¹³⁴ Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi too, [made a veiled reference](#) to Sino-Indian tensions when he said that the three RIC countries must properly handle any sensitive factors in bilateral relations.¹³⁵

RIC Foreign Minister Level Meetings

June 02, 2005	Vladivostok (Russia)
February 14, 2007	Delhi (India)
October 24, 2007	Harbin (China)
October 27, 2009	Bengaluru (India)
November 14-15, 2010	Wuhan (China)
April 13, 2012	Moscow (Russia)
November 10, 2013	Delhi (India)
February 02, 2015	Beijing (China)
April 18, 2016	Moscow (Russia)
December 11, 2017	Delhi (India)
February 27, 2019	Wuzhen (China)
June 23, 2020	Virtual Meeting (Hosted by Russia)

RIC Leaders' Level Meetings

July 17, 2006	St Petersburg, Russia (After the G-8 Summit)
December 01, 2018	Buenos Aires (Sidelines of the G-20 Summit)
June 28, 2019	Osaka (Sidelines of the G-20 Summit)

Source: Ministry of External Affairs of India

In a related development, a tri-service contingent of the Indian military [participated in Russia's Victory Day](#) parade in Moscow on June 24.¹³⁶ Prime Minister Modi had been invited as a special guest to this year's parade, but Defence Minister Rajnath Singh [accompanied the Indian contingent](#) in his stead.¹³⁷ This is the first foreign visit by an Indian cabinet minister since the outbreak of COVID-19 in the country. On his three-day trip, the Defence Minister participated in [meetings with key Russian officials](#) like Deputy Prime Minister Yury Borisov, who [assured](#) him that all ongoing defence contracts between India and Russia would be maintained, and some may potentially be fast-tracked.¹³⁸



On June 23, 2020, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh met with Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Yury Borisov in Moscow to review India-Russia defence cooperation.

Source: Twitter/@rajnathsingh

In other defence-related developments, it has been reported that the Indian Air Force is pushing for a fast-tracked [purchase of defence equipment](#) from Russia, [including](#) 21 Russian-made MiG 29 fighter jets, and 12 Sukhoi Su-30 MKI aircraft, which are to be manufactured at Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) in Bengaluru.¹³⁹ The government is reportedly open to accepting the IAF's proposal for this deal, estimated to be [worth nearly INR 6,000 crore](#), and procurement could begin within two years of an agreement being finalised.¹⁴⁰ While India-Russia defence co-operation is proceeding apace, the divergences on the future trajectory of multilateral frameworks became evident when

Russia welcomed U.S. President Donald Trump's initiative to expand the G7. On June 1, over a [phone call](#), President Trump informed Russian President Vladimir Putin that "Russia could be invited to the G7 Summit" scheduled to be held in September 2020 in the United States.¹⁴¹ Trump has also expressed his desire to invite South Korea, Australia and India to the summit. However, the Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova also [remarked](#) that "it is hardly possible to implement serious undertakings of global significance without China's participation", indicating that any grouping of world powers would be incomplete without the inclusion of China.¹⁴²



An Indian Armed Forces Tri-Service Contingent marched at the Red Square in Moscow on June 24, 2020 to mark the 75th Anniversary of WWII Victory Day. Source: Twitter/@IAF_MCC

On the trade front, the Russian Ministry of Industry and Trade has reportedly [commissioned an organisational study](#) to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on industries in Russia and India. Undertaken by the Russian non-profit ANO Data Economy and Finnish-Russian industrial digitalisation firm Zyfra, the study aims to evaluate the status of existing production lines, and envision measures to digitise manufacturing processes that help industrial enterprises adapt to the changing business environment.¹⁴³

The Maldives and Sri Lanka: India as the First Responder in the Southern Neighbourhood

Libni Garg

The Vande Bharat Mission, which is the Government of India's initiative towards repatriating Indian nationals stranded overseas due to the COVID-19 pandemic, officially commenced in May. [Phase III](#) of the mission is set to end on July 2.¹⁴⁴ The operation evacuated over [1.65 lakh](#) Indians in its first two phases through a mix of Air India flights, chartered flights and flights provided by private carriers;¹⁴⁵ it has also been supported by the Indian Navy's [Operation Samudra Setu](#), which has repatriated Indian nationals abroad in a large capacity.¹⁴⁶

The operation has been successful in evacuating approximately 1,832 Indians from Sri Lanka in the month of June. [Air India](#), [chartered flights](#) and the [Indian Navy](#) have carried out the [repatriation](#) while the Indian High Commission in Colombo has served as the nodal coordinating agency.¹⁴⁷ Private companies such as [V.R. Maritime Services](#) have also been at the forefront of the response.¹⁴⁸ On June 18, V.R. Maritime Services facilitated the evacuation of 170 people from Sri Lanka. The evacuees include fishers, migrant workers, professionals, short term visa holders and stranded tourists. Besides, Sri Lanka has been a recipient of medical aid from India; in April, New Delhi supplied its neighbour with [10 tonnes](#) of medicines in order to combat COVID-19.¹⁴⁹

"Sri Lanka is scheduled to repay USD2.9 billion of its total external debt this year" but has made [three requests](#) to India to defer payment.¹⁵⁰ During his visit to India in February, PM Rajapaksa personally requested PM Modi for a [deferment](#) on Sri Lanka's debt repayment.¹⁵¹ President Rajapaksa also recently asked PM Modi for a USD1.1 billion currency swap to supplement the USD400 million bilateral currency swap being [negotiated](#) between the two countries under the SAARC framework.¹⁵² However, even as the Indian side has put the request "[under consideration](#)", Sri Lanka may once again be turning to China for financial arrangements.¹⁵³ In May, Beijing had granted a USD500 million loan to Colombo to fight COVID-19, and officials from the Chinese embassy in Colombo have [revealed](#) that the two countries are engaged in talks regarding further financial assistance.¹⁵⁴ Amidst ongoing border tensions with China and Beijing's attempts to secure allies in India's neighbourhood, New Delhi will have to move strategically in order to retain its traditional area of influence and maintain a stronghold in the region.

Another Indian partner with financial ties to Beijing is the Maldives. The World Bank [categorised](#) Male as highly vulnerable to debt distress, as the country owes 45% of its national debt to Beijing.¹⁵⁵ In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, China has agreed to [grant the Maldives](#) a partial suspension on its debt repayment for four years under the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI).¹⁵⁶

In the month of June, approximately 2,613 Indians were evacuated from the Maldives. Carriers such as [Air India](#), [IndiGo](#) and the [Maldivian](#) have assisted the repatriation efforts.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, the Indian Navy's [INS Jalashwa](#) and [INS Airavat](#) have brought a total of 898 Indians home within this month.¹⁵⁸ Since the commencement of the Vande Bharat Mission, approximately 4,406 Indians stranded in the Maldives have been brought back to the country.



INS Airavat Arrives in Male for the evacuation of Indian nationals under Operation Samudra Setu. Source: Twitter/@HCIMaldives

India has also been the first responder to the COVID-19 crisis in the region. As a part of its response, the country has provided medical assistance to several neighbours. The Maldives was one of the first countries to receive a variety of aid from India. In March, New Delhi supplied Male with [500 MT of sugar and 993 MT of rice](#) along with [5.5 tonnes](#) of essential medicines.¹⁵⁹ Under [Operation Sanjeevani](#) carried out by the Indian Air Force in April, India provided the Maldives with 6.2 tonnes of essential medicines and hospital consumables including influenza vaccines, anti-viral and medicines for cardiac conditions.¹⁶⁰ At the request of the Maldivian Government, India also gifted the country [50,000 Hydroxychloroquine tablets](#) in order to fight COVID-19.¹⁶¹ Additionally, in May, as a part of [Mission Sagar](#), INS Kesari transported 580 tonnes of food items to Male.¹⁶² The Maldives has continued to purchase medical equipment from its South Asian neighbour. The Indian High Commission in Male [recently revealed](#) that New Delhi has "approved the

transport of medical equipment purchased by Maldives's State Trading Organisation (STO)" in double quotation marks.¹⁶³

The Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid, on behalf of his country, has also [extended condolences](#) to India over the lives lost during the Galwan Valley border skirmish with China.¹⁶⁴ The country has time and again reiterated its strong bilateral relationship with New Delhi, the latest show of which was its [support for India](#) at the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation (OIC) meeting last month.¹⁶⁵



Passengers at the Male Airport waiting to board, June 20, 2020.

Source: Twitter/@HCIMaldives

ENDNOTES

I. Overview: Mapping Contestations, Challenges and Opportunities

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II. India-China Relations: Discord a New Normal?

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