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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 Puliapaka, 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 click here.

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World map

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Overview: Exploring Alliances and Alignments

Sanjay Pulipaka and Mohit Musaddi

China’s aggressive actions in Ladakh have prompted deeper national conversations in India on issues such as military preparedness, border infrastructure and foreign policy, among others. An emerging node in the ongoing discussion is how far India should go in considering closer alignment with the United States, short of a mutual defence commitment.

Alliances, as traditionally defined, envisage collective defence and action by two or more countries to deter aggressive behaviour by another country. However, in the past two decades, the nature of warfare has undergone significant shifts because of technological developments. In some instances, sharing of high-end technologies can have a far greater impact than pooling human resources during warfare. From an Indian perspective, the notion of armies from two countries fighting shoulder-to-shoulder is rather a 20th century or a Cold War construct. Moreover, India has one of the world’s largest militaries in terms of personnel and does not require boots on the ground from its partners. What India needs instead is rapid technological upgradation of its defence forces, the sharing of advanced military equipment and intelligence, and a co-ordinated diplomatic strategy to meet the challenges from the northern and western fronts as well as the Indo-Pacific maritime domain.

Although not an alliance, India’s most consequential relationship is with the United States. As Secretary Pompeo recently observed, “The United States is ready to do the things it can do to help deliver safety and security to the Indian people, and I’m confident that India will do the same for us all around the world…we are confident that together we can deliver the deterrence.” These new dimensions in Delhi’s relationship with Washington have partly been hastened by Chinese actions, not only along India’s borders but also across the Indo-Pacific region.

China and the LAC: No Surprises

In the past few weeks, it is no surprise that the discussions pertaining to disengagement and de-escalation between India and China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) have failed to make progress. While Beijing is adamant that the Indian forces should withdraw from the south bank of Pangong Tso, Delhi has been insistent on Chinese withdrawals as the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has violated all established frameworks along the LAC. As India’s External Affairs Minister (EAM) has noted, Chinese actions have disregarded
the multiple agreements starting from 1993 and have left the relationship “profoundly disturbed”.3

While the border stand-off continues, news reports suggest that China is assisting Pakistan to set up a new surface-to-air missile system near Lasadanna Dhok in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).4 Earlier, in February 2020, “the Indian Coast Guard [had] sighted a Chinese warship in Pakistani waters.”5 These developments further reinforce the perception that a two-front threat for India is very real.

After banning over 100 China-based apps, the Indian government has reportedly decided that all FDI proposals “with even minuscule Chinese holding will need government approval”.6 There have also been reports that the Indian government is in talks with Taiwan on a trade deal7 This comes after the Chinese Embassy in India made an ill-advised suggestion to the Indian media to play down the Taiwan national day celebrations, which the media promptly discarded.8 On the contrary, there were some posters on the streets around the Chinese mission celebrating Taiwan National Day.9

Divergences between India and China at both the bilateral and regional levels are becoming increasingly evident. Amidst the visit of US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and Secretary of Defense Mark Esper to India, the Chinese Embassy in its statement noted that the “Indo-Pacific strategy proposed by the US is to stir up a confrontation among different groups and blocs and to stoke geopolitical competition.”10

India and the US: ‘Force Multipliers’

There is growing convergence between India and the US on the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific in general and towards China in particular. The US policy towards China has at least three major elements.

First, US officials have started emphasising the distinction between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese people and the need to free the latter from the former. For instance, Secretary Pompeo remarked that the CCP “rule with an iron fist. They ensure their continued political pre-eminence as their primary mission set inside of their country.”11 Second, in addition to a trade war, the US is voicing concerns regarding China’s human rights violations. Washington is urging countries to take note of the “gravest threat” to religious freedom in Xinjiang Province.12 Much to the discomfort of Beijing, Washington has finally appointed a Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, who has already interacted with Lobsang Sangay, the President of the Central Tibetan Administration.13 Third, the US has been vocal in calling out Chinese
territorial expansionism, as evident in Washington’s diplomatic support to India at various international platforms. For instance, during the Quad and other meetings in Tokyo, Secretary Pompeo stated that the Chinese have amassed a large number of troops against India and added that the “world has awakened,” and the US has “built out a coalition that will push back against the [Chinese] threat.”

As noted earlier, the US strategy towards China has amplified the alignments in the India-US relationship. This is what led the US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun to describe the Washington-Delhi relationship as “a fundamental alignment along shared security and geopolitical goals, shared interests, and shared values.” Shortly after the Quad Foreign Ministers’ meeting on October 6, 2020, the 3rd India-US 2+2 Dialogue was held in Delhi on October 27, where Delhi and Washington called for promoting freedom and ensuring supply chain resiliency. They also concluded the BECA foundational agreement, which, along with COMCASA (2018) and LEMOA (2016), will help enhance interoperability between the Indian and American defence forces. LEMOA was reportedly used for the first time in September 2020 when the Indian Army acquired 11,000 sets of “extended cold weather clothing system (ECWCS)” from the US. Reflecting on these new dimensions of the US-India bilateral defence relationship, Secretary Mike Pompeo pointed out that India and the US can be “force multipliers” not only for “the Indo-Pacific region but for the entire world”.

**Praxis: Russia and Alliances**

On October 22, reflecting on an alliance framework with China, Russian President Vladimir Putin observed that, “we have always believed that our [Russia-China] relations have reached such a level of co-operation and trust that it [an alliance] is not necessary, but it is certainly imaginable, in theory.” President Putin’s theoretical exploration of a possible Russia-China military alliance attracted considerable international attention, including in India. However, it is possible that Putin’s statements were aimed towards US leaders who have continued to view Russia as the principal threat. For instance, US Presidential candidate Joe Biden recently stated that the “biggest threat to America right now in terms of breaking up security and our alliances, is Russia.” Therefore, it would appear that to some extent, Russia’s discussions on alliances are also contingent on the outcome of the US elections.

With India, Moscow has been exploring new avenues to further strengthen the ‘Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership’. On October 7, PM Modi discussed initiatives to enhance the Delhi-Moscow partnership with President Putin,
during a telephone conversation on the occasion of the Russian President's birthday.\textsuperscript{20} Notably, the two leaders have spoken on the phone thrice since July 2020.

Given the current security dynamic in the Indian subcontinent, acquiring defence equipment from Russia has also acquired greater urgency. \textit{Reportedly}, Delhi is in “advanced talks” with Moscow to purchase two-dozen lightweight tanks that could be used for “high altitude areas”.\textsuperscript{21} Amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, India and Russia have also been co-operating in the pharmaceutical sector, which received a further boost when the Drug Controller General of India (DGCI) allowed Reddy Laboratories to conduct \textit{Phase II and Phase III} trials of the Sputnik-V vaccine in India.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{Middle East: Three No's and Minilateral}s

Meanwhile, political realignments in the Middle East have continued to gather steam. On October 23, \textit{Sudan} became the third country after the UAE and Bahrain to normalise relations with Israel.\textsuperscript{23} These developments have completely negated the Arab states’ policy of “Three No’s – no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, and no negotiations with Israel.”\textsuperscript{24} Instead, it appears that Trump’s unconventional approach of building rapprochements is finding cautious approval from the most unlikely quarters. For instance, according to an \textit{Arab News/YouGov poll}, “52 per cent of Palestinians in the occupied territories support US efforts to play a bigger role in mediating between Israelis and Palestinians”.\textsuperscript{25} Therefore, to quote \textit{Walter Russell Mead}, “it’s clear the region is moving away from the predictable sterility of the past towards something genuinely new”.\textsuperscript{26}

Given the growing fluidity in the Middle East, the big powers are attempting to create structures in order to shape the region to their advantage. For instance, in October, the Israeli Ambassador to India said that a \textit{trilateral} involving India, the UAE and Israel is “very much in the realm of possibility”.\textsuperscript{27} EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar had also \textit{remarked} that the UAE is on the crossroads of international trade in the West.\textsuperscript{28} Delhi and Tel Aviv, on the other hand, already co-operate across various sectors, including defence, technology and healthcare. Similarly, India must work with other like-minded Middle East partners to come up with its vision of plurilateral frameworks.

On the other hand, China has also articulated a need to create regional frameworks in the Middle East involving multiple actors. On October 10, \textit{in a meeting} between Iran and China, Foreign Minister Wang Yi proposed to “build a regional multilateral dialogue platform” in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{29} However, the contours of the new dialogue platform are unclear. At the same time, Beijing
has also maintained high-level contacts with the Taliban and has articulated willingness to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to include Afghanistan. In return, China will get access to Afghanistan’s mineral resources, and the Taliban will be acquiescent on the human rights issues in Xinjiang.\textsuperscript{30}

**Déjà vu: Afghanistan on the Precipice**

The fragility in the Afghan peace process is increasingly becoming evident. Even though the intra-Afghan dialogue is in its infancy, Washington seems to be in a hurry to withdraw its troops. As a consequence, major players in the Afghan peace process have reached out to various international actors to boost their negotiating positions. During October, the Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) Abdullah Abdullah visited India to “discuss peace efforts”.\textsuperscript{31} In the peace talks, the Taliban are emerging as a dominant player. However, in the quicksand of Afghanistan’s notorious ethnic politics, ability to hold on to power over a period of time by mono-ethnic political groups is not guaranteed. While the probable emergence of a fragmented polity in Afghanistan may worry observers, the political situation in neighbouring Pakistan has also become unstable.

**Pakistan**

Islamabad is in the midst of multiple crises and uncertainties. Rising inflation and depleting foreign currency reserves have resulted in a coalition of 11 parties calling for the removal of Imran Khan.\textsuperscript{32} In addition to the dire state of the Pakistan economy, there is discontent that provincial autonomy in Pakistan is being disrespected. The news reports that Pakistan’s military abducted the Chief of Police in the Sindh province and forced him to sign the arrest warrant of Nawaz Sharif’s son-in-law Captain Safdar Awan raised serious questions on whether federalism is being rapidly eroded.\textsuperscript{33} Moreover, the Central government is reportedly planning to “gift” the twin islands Bundal and Buddo, located near Karachi, to China, as part of CPEC.\textsuperscript{34} Recently, the Imran Khan government passed a presidential ordinance that allowed the federal government to take over the islands from the Sindh government. Sindh has “vowed to resist the centre’s move, alleging that it was against the Constitution.”\textsuperscript{35}

Pakistan faced setbacks on international platforms as well. On October 23, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) announced that Pakistan would continue to remain on its “grey list” as it had failed to make progress on the FATF recommendations.\textsuperscript{36} Out of the 39 members of the FATF, only Turkey spoke in favour of Pakistan.\textsuperscript{37} While the next review is scheduled for February 2021, the
Pakistani leadership will be troubled by a lack of support from the international community. Moreover, on October 27, the Indian government designated 18 individuals based in Pakistan “as terrorists under a new clause of India’s anti-terror law”.

On Kashmir, Pakistan has been unable to generate international traction. Through various multilateral platforms, New Delhi has conveyed to Pakistan that Kashmir is an integral part of India and, therefore, any administrative restructuring in the state is an internal matter. For instance, on October 15, India’s Permanent Representative to the UN remarked that “Pakistan’s attempts to rake up this issue of Jammu and Kashmir in the UN Security Council have practically no takers.”

**Collaborations in the Neighbourhood**

In the last few months, India has increased its outreach in the neighbourhood. On October 21, the Indian Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) Chief made a dash to Kathmandu and interacted with the senior leadership, including Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli. This visit will be followed by the Indian Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General MM Naravane’s visit to Nepal early next month. Delhi’s outreach to Kathmandu needs to be looked at in the backdrop of increasing reports of Chinese incursions in Nepal. Contrary to the Nepal Foreign Ministry’s claim that no Chinese encroachments have taken place in the Humla district, a team led by a Nepali Congress (NC) parliamentarian visited the border areas and concluded that the PLA has indeed occupied large chunks of Nepali territory. If true, there may be growing concerns with Nepal’s neighbours that Kathmandu is deliberately overlooking the incursions.

In October, India’s Chief of Army Staff (COAS) and the Foreign Secretary (FS) travelled to Nay Pyi Taw to interact with Myanmar State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the Commander-in-Chief General Hlaing. A major outcome of the meeting was an agreement for India to deliver Myanmar its first-ever submarine. The FS also conveyed India’s support for a speedy return of the displaced persons of Rakhine State.

The Rohingya crisis continues to undermine regional security on India’s eastern frontiers. In September 2020, the Bangladesh Foreign Minister said that Riyadh might deport the Rohingyas living in Saudi Arabia (estimated at 54,000) and impose a migration ban on Bangladesh if Dhaka is unable to provide them with citizenship. Notably, in a telephone conversation on October 22, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi proposed a tri-partite ministerial-level meeting between China, Myanmar and Bangladesh on the issue after the Myanmar general elections, which are scheduled for November 8, 2020.
The issue was also discussed between Bangladesh and the US during Deputy Secretary of State, Stephen Beigun’s visit to Dhaka on October 14-16. Other issues discussed between the Deputy Secretary and the Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina included American assistance to Bangladesh during COVID-19 and an emphasis towards a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

Washington has significantly increased interaction with Indo-Pacific countries. After visiting Delhi, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also visited Sri Lanka (October 28), the Maldives (October 28), Indonesia (October 29) and Vietnam (October 29).

In the Maldives, Secretary Pompeo met with President Ibrahim Solih and Foreign Minister Abdulla Shaheed, and announced “plans to open a US Embassy in Male”. India has also strengthened institutional linkages with the Maldives. The Indian High Commissioner in the Maldives has interacted with members of the Civil Service Commission of the Maldives and has also held discussions with the Maldivian Housing Development Corporation Chairman. Moreover, on October 15, a delegation from the Exim Bank of India met with the Maldives Foreign Minister, where Delhi’s support for the Greater Male Connectivity Project (GMCP) was discussed, and a line of credit worth USD400 million was signed.

With the Sri Lankan President, Secretary Pompeo discussed post-pandemic recovery, and reaffirmed their shared commitment to a “free and open Indo-Pacific region”. In October, Sri Lanka also received a Chinese delegation led by CCP member Yang Jiechi. Eager to put to rest perceptions about potential debt-traps, China extended a grant of USD90 million to Sri Lanka. President Rajapaksa Gotabaya appreciated the Chinese assistance and remarked that the Hambantota Port Deal is instrumental in generating employment, and hence, cannot be considered as “debt-trap”.

**Conclusion**

India’s most-consequential and mutually reinforcing relationship is with the US. Given their converging interests, it is crucial that this ‘most consequential relationship’ translates into broader and more institutionalised co-operation that includes bilateral and multilateral elements. Recently, Delhi has expressed concerns that the sanctions committees of the UN, especially the ones that deal with terrorists and terrorist organisations, are “being politicised”. To ensure that the UN is representative of current realities, large democracies like India must have a more prominent voice. In the Joint Statement of the Third US-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, the US “reaffirmed its continued strong support for India’s permanent membership in a reformed UNSC”. India, on its part,
has demonstrated a steady commitment to the UN and associated bodies. On the occasion of the UN’s 75th anniversary, the Government of India “released a commemorative postage stamp”.\(^6\)

There may also be concerns in some quarters that India’s close relationships with the great and major powers are coming at the cost of its Neighbourhood First policy. At the same time, India’s growing bonds with major powers provide India with an opportunity to carry out third-country projects in the immediate neighbourhood with like-minded big powers.
India and China: A Prolonged Stand-off

Antara Ghosal Singh

On October 17, India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar said that “the border clashes between India and China have left the Sino-Indian relationship profoundly disturbed”. During the month, India and China have maintained “stable but confrontational" positions at the LAC, even as talks continued between the two sides at the military and diplomatic level for "a comprehensive disengagement of troops" at all friction points.

![IAF's Apache helicopter in the Ladakh region. Source: India Today/Reuters](image)

The seventh round of the corps commander’s talks between India and China took place at Chushul on October 12. After a marathon meeting of 12 hours, a joint press release stated that “the two sides had a sincere, in-depth and constructive exchange of views” and the discussions were “positive”. However, as with previous discussions, the seventh round of corps commanders’ meeting failed to make a significant breakthrough on the ground in terms of actual disengagement.

China is now reportedly asking for a “de-escalation of armoured and artillery units before disengagement,” and India has turned down the demand on the grounds that “the flatter terrain on the Chinese side, as well as the infrastructure available to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), allows them to redeploy in a shorter time span.” However, both sides are still continuing discussions through diplomatic and military channels to “peacefully resolve the impasse along the LAC as per the agreements reached between the two foreign
ministers during their meetings in Moscow on September 10”. The incident of India handing over a PLA soldier, apprehended in the Demchok area of Ladakh, is believed to have set a positive atmosphere before the talks. The dates for the next commander level talks have not yet been decided and could coincide with the 12th BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) summit, which is reportedly due to be held on November 17. Both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping are expected to participate in the event.

Meanwhile, the construction of strategic infrastructure along the LAC led to a war of words between the two sides. PM Modi, on October 3, inaugurated the Atal Tunnel which connects Manali to Leh (Ladakh). On October 12, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh inaugurated 44 new bridges, including eight in Ladakh, 10 in Jammu and Kashmir, two in Himachal Pradesh, four in Punjab, eight each in Uttarakhand and Arunachal Pradesh, and four in Sikkim. China’s foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian criticised the move while commenting that it “doesn’t recognise the so-called Ladakh Union Territory illegally set up by India or Arunachal Pradesh and opposes infrastructure building aimed at military contention in disputed border areas.” India reiterated that “Arunachal Pradesh is an integral and inalienable part of India. This fact has also been clearly conveyed to the Chinese side on several occasions, including at the highest level... the union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh have been, are, and would remain an integral part of India,” and that China has “no locus standi to comment on India’s internal matters.”

Delhi’s engagement of Taipei has become a new friction point between China and India. The Chinese embassy in India “advised” Indian media not to highlight Taiwan National Day in the light of the ‘one-China’ policy. India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson responded by pointing out that “there is a free media in India and reports as it sees fit.” Subsequently, there were reports that India may initiate discussions on a trade deal with Taiwan. Although the news was not officially confirmed, the Chinese foreign ministry cautioned New Delhi to approach Taiwan related matters prudently and follow the “One-China” principle. The Chinese state media further issued threats by stating that “if India takes the move to support ‘Taiwan independence’, China has every reason to support separatist forces in Northeast India.”

The crisis along the LAC, which is in its sixth month now, is getting murkier and more complicated by the day and marks an uncertain future for India-China relations.
Russia: Strategic Partnerships and Alliances

Anushka Nair

October 2020 marks the 20th Anniversary of the ‘Declaration on the India-Russia Strategic Partnership’, which has been upscaled to a ‘Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership’. To commemorate the declaration, the Indian Embassy in Moscow shared some of the co-operative projects that played an indispensable part in the consolidation of this strategic partnership, including the BrahMos cruise missile, the INS Vikramaditya and the Kudankulam nuclear power plant in Tamil Nadu. The Russian Foreign Ministry also issued a Press Release acknowledging the steady development of the Indo-Russian bilateral co-operation. The Indian Ambassador in Moscow gave an extensive interview on the occasion of the 20-year anniversary of formalised co-operation, where he highlighted political ties, trade and investment, defence and security and energy among others as key areas of co-operation between India and Russia in the past two decades.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi conveyed birthday greetings to Russian President Vladimir Putin via telephone on October 7. While expressing appreciation for President Putin’s initiatives to strengthen the India-Russia Strategic Partnership, PM Modi also said that he was keen on hosting his Russian counterpart in India for a bilateral summit as soon as it was safe to do so. Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister met with the Indian Ambassador on October 20 and discussed issues in the context of the upcoming Council of Heads meeting of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO).

Reports suggest that India is in discussion with Russia to acquire two dozen lightweight Sprut tanks in a deal worth USD68 million. The tanks will be of particular importance to India because, at 18 tonnes, they can be airlifted by transport aircraft for deployment in mountainous terrains.

India test-fired a naval version of the jointly developed BrahMos supersonic cruise missile from stealth destroyer INS Chennai in the Arabian Sea. In October, the Indian Air Force (IAF) also reportedly “test-fired an air-launched version of the BrahMos... from a Sukhoi fighter aircraft from the Bay of Bengal”. In September 2020, India had tested a surface-to-surface version of the missile. A defence ministry statement said that the BrahMos as a ‘prime strike weapon’ would “ensure the warship’s invincibility by engaging naval surface targets at long ranges, thus making the destroyer another lethal platform of the Indian Navy.”
After nearly five years of flight tests, the Russian Navy this month successfully test-launched a Tsirkon hypersonic missile, fired from the White Sea at a sea target situated 450 km away in the Barents Sea. President Putin lauded the test launch as a great event for Russia, stating that the development of advanced and globally unrivalled weapons systems would ensure Russian defence capabilities for years to come. The Admiral Gorshkov frigate, from which the launch was conducted, is reportedly set to conduct another three launches by the year-end.

![Russia’s Admiral Gorshkov frigate launching a Tsirkon hypersonic missile in the White Sea on October 06, 2020 Source: Russian Defence Ministry’s press service/TASS](image)

The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) announced on October 17 that Dr Reddy’s Laboratories and the RDIF had received the required clearance from the Drug Controller General of India (DGCI) to proceed with adaptive Phase II and III trials of the Sputnik V Covid-19 vaccine in India. The trials in India are expected to proceed while incorporating weekly inputs from ongoing Phase III trials in Russia. India will join the United Arab Emirates, Belarus and Venezuela on the list of countries agreeing to domestically conduct late-stage clinical trials of the Russian vaccine. President Putin has meanwhile announced the registration of Russia’s second Covid-19 vaccine candidate, christened ‘EpiVacCorona’, being developed by Siberian biotech firm Vector. Russia’s
Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova has reportedly been inoculated, along with nearly 100 other volunteers.\textsuperscript{92}

The 27 EU foreign ministers approved a plan, including travel bans and asset freezing, proposed by France and Germany in response to Moscow’s suspected involvement in the poisoning of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny.\textsuperscript{93} The Kremlin has condemned these measures, labelling them ‘consciously unfriendly.’\textsuperscript{94} President Putin stated that he personally facilitated Alexei Navalny’s safe passage to Berlin for treatment, despite travel restrictions on him in relation to ongoing judicial and criminal investigations.\textsuperscript{95}

Edward Snowden, a former security contractor with the National Security Agency of the United States, who fled the US and sought asylum in Russia, has now been granted permanent residency by the Russian government, according to his lawyer.\textsuperscript{96} Snowden, who fled the United States in 2013 after leaking files on the NSA’s domestic and international surveillance programmes, had previously stated that he would be ready to return to the US if guaranteed a trial.\textsuperscript{97} Developments pertaining to Alexei Navalny and Edward Snowden will contribute to further deterioration in the relations between Russia and the West.

On the other hand, on October 22, the Russian President remarked that although a Russia-China military alliance is “not necessary, but it is certainly imaginable.”\textsuperscript{98} While Russia and China have so far avoided a military alliance, both countries have hailed the significance of their ‘strategic relationship’ and continued military co-operation through bilateral and multilateral war games and military exercises.\textsuperscript{99} Amid simmering tensions in both countries’ relations with the United States, the possibility of an alliance between Moscow and Beijing has become a subject of discussion.
India and West Asia: New Alignments and Frameworks

Sanket Joshi

The ‘G20 Riyadh Summit’ on the theme of ‘Realising Opportunities of the 21st Century for All’ will be held virtually on November 21-22, 2020. In light of this, Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a telephone conversation with Saudi Arabia’s King Salman where the two leaders also discussed “joint opportunities to develop bilateral relations within the Saudi-Indian Strategic Partnership Council”. In the recent past, India and Saudi Arabia have also enhanced cooperation in the energy sector, particularly at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has eroded one-third of the global energy demand.

India’s External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar, National Security Advisor Ajit Doval attend Saudi Arabia’s 90th national day celebrations in Delhi, September 24, 2020. Source: Twitter/@KSAembassyIND

On October 14, Saudi Arabia hosted the ‘G20 Finance Ministers’ and Central Bank Governors’ meeting through video conferencing. India’s Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman participated in this meeting where it was agreed to extend the G20 ‘Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI)’ for a period of six months until June 2021. Minister Sitharaman also said that the “debt restructuring should help low-income countries to overcome fiscal stress caused by the Covid-19 pandemic”. Meanwhile, at the G20, Dr. Jitendra Singh, Minister of State, Prime Minister’s Office, highlighted India’s initiatives against corruption and unaccounted money (black money).
India-UAE: Prospects for Healthcare Co-operation

On October 19, a 'UAE-India Healthcare Conference 2020' was held to explore new avenues for partnership in healthcare, pharmaceuticals, medical devices and alternative medicines.¹⁰⁷ India’s Ambassador to the UAE praised the UAE government’s initiatives to explore avenues for Indian companies to set up manufacturing facilities for vaccines and generic medicines.¹⁰⁸ The UAE will provide financial incentives and create a full ecosystem to support healthcare manufacturing companies from India.¹⁰⁹ Other initiatives to promote co-operation between India and the UAE include an ‘India-UAE Food Dialogue’ to promote food security and trade and an assessment of the potential for the UAE state-owned Caracal to manufacture carbines for the Indian Army.¹¹⁰

India-Israel: COVID-19 Cooperation and Prospects for a New Regional Trilateral

India-Israel relations have continued to gather momentum in recent months. On October 5, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held a telephone conversation with PM Narendra Modi.¹¹¹ The two leaders discussed bilateral co-operation to combat COVID-19 and agreed to hold a digital conference on solar energy to jointly achieve more inexpensive solutions.¹¹²

The ‘Abraham Peace Accord’ between Israel and the UAE has changed the geopolitical dynamics of West Asia (Middle East). In light of this, Israel’s
Ambassador in Delhi spoke about the “possibility of a new trilateral bloc, ‘India-Israel-UAE’, emerging in West Asia.” The Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi also spoke with India’s External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar about bilateral co-operation aimed at addressing the COVID-19 pandemic.

To strengthen Israel-India water co-operation, Israel is likely to have a separate ‘water attaché’ in Delhi from January 2021. Tel Aviv is also planning to appoint an honorary counsel general in Northeast India to increase its presence and collaborations in the region.

Investments

During October, India explored several initiatives to increase two-way trade and investments in West Asia. On October 19, the Oman-India Joint Commission held their 9th (virtual) meeting, co-chaired by India’s Minister of State for Commerce and Industry and his Omani counterpart. Both sides agreed to expedite internal procedures to sign and ratify the protocol amending the India-Oman Double Taxation Agreement and conclude the India-Oman Bilateral Investment Treaty. The Public Investment Fund (PIF) of Saudi Arabia is in talks with Lulu Group International – Supermarket Chain’ to buy a minority stake. An Israeli company, NeoLync, is among the shortlisted companies under the ‘production-linked incentive (PLI)’ to manufacture mobile phones in India.

The ISIS Threat

The presence of the Islamic State (IS) and its offshoots in the Indian subcontinent continue to pose a major national security threat for India. According to a charge sheet filed by India’s National Investigation Agency (NIA), Al-Hind module, an offshoot of IS was planning to establish ISIS dominated areas inside the dense forests surrounding the South Indian states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. NIA also busted a 14-member module of the IS that returned from Syria and Iraq. While arresting two of its alleged operatives; it has been reported that at least 13 to 14 individuals from Bengaluru had travelled to Iraq and Syria in 2013-14.

Regional Security Issues

The United States has imposed new sanctions on 18 Iranian banks, as Washington seeks to increase pressure on Tehran. This is in light of the UN arms embargo on Iran, which came to an end on October 18 as part of Resolution 2231 of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) 2015. The US strongly opposed this, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reiterating that
“any arms sales to Iran would result in sanctions”. In a rebuke to the US, China reiterated its commitment to the JCPOA, while Foreign Minister Wang Yi “proposed a regional multilateral dialogue forum in West Asia (Middle East) to de-escalate tensions”.

In a significant development, Turkey tested the Russian S-400 missile defence system, a development that could further stoke tensions between Ankara and Washington as the United States opposes Turkish purchase of S-400s on the ground that it compromises shared NATO defence systems. It must be noted that India has also purchased Russian S-400 system and is also looking to engage with American defence companies. In October, Washington purchased the iron dome missile defence system from Tel Aviv.

**Conclusion**

In recent months, the Abraham Accord has promised to drastically change the geopolitical dynamics of West Asia. India must take advantage of the growing convergences in the region by building up its own coalitions. The ‘India-Israel-UAE’ trilateral bloc is a distinct possibility that could serve mutual interests in energy security, cybersecurity and digital technologies, as well as counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing and arms deals.
India, CARs and PAI: The Afghan Redux

Shreyas Deshmukh

The *intra-Afghan dialogue* between the Taliban and the Afghan establishment was launched in Doha in September 2020.\(^1\) Since then, recent developments indicate that the geopolitical situation in Afghanistan is rapidly heading towards pre-1995 civil war conditions. A [tweet by the US President](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1296025884089965312) Donald Trump announcing the withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan by Christmas has put more pressure on the fragmented Afghan establishment.\(^2\)

![Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation of Afghanistan, October 08, 2020. Source: Flickr/MEA Photo Gallery](https://example.com)

As a result, the major players have reached out to their international partners in order to strengthen their negotiating positions.\(^3\) The Chairman of the High Council of National Reconciliation of Afghanistan (CHCNRA) Abdullah Abdullah visited India from October 06-11.\(^4\) Leaders such as Marshal Dostum and Atta Noor have also visited India since the peace talks began.\(^5\) On the other hand, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of the Hizb-e-Islami, proposed an alliance with the Taliban\(^6\) and also visited Pakistan, where he stated that Washington has “no choice except to leave the country”.\(^7\)

\(^1\) CARs stands for Central Asian Republics, and PAI stands for Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran.
The Taliban has intensified its attacks all over the country and has taken control of the major highways. The Afghan National Army (ANA) successfully repelled major offensives by the Taliban in the north and central provinces but it lacks air support from American troops. The US-Taliban deal signed on February 29, 2020, which restricts attacking each other. However, the fierce, short battle, which began in the second week of October in Lashkargah, the capital of Helmand province, forced US troops to send aerial support to the ANA. Overall, the Taliban has managed to retain the upper hand in both the negotiations and in the battleground and has declined offers of a ceasefire.

**Time line according to Agreement**

- **Release of Combatant/Political Prisoners**
  - 10 March
  - 2 September

- **Intra-Afghan Negotiations Begins from**
  - 10 March
  - 12 September

- **Bringing Down US Troops level 8600**
  - 13 July
  - 19 June

- **Lifting UNSC Sanctions**
  - May 29
  - Not Lifted

- **Lifting US sanctions**
  - 27 August
  - Not Lifted

- **Withdrawal of all Foreign Troops**
  - July 2021
  - Majority of US troops may withdraw by end of December 2020

- **US will help post-settlement Afghan Islamic Government in Economic Reconstruction of Afghanistan**

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan with the help of the US will prevent any group or individual including al-Qaeda, ISIS-K from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the US and its allies.

Source: Compiled by the author from various sources

**Intra Afghan Dialogue**

The intra-Afghan peace talks are in the very early stages, and, discussions pertaining to power-sharing and the nature of the governance structure are yet to begin. The Afghan establishment is fragmented with multiple agendas of...
different power brokers. That includes safeguarding democratic values, women rights, rights of minorities and personal interests of political patrons.

The Taliban does look more homogeneous with a clear agenda, which is a complete withdrawal of foreign troops and establishment of the Islamic Emirate based on the Hanafi School’s interpretation of the Sharia. Taliban may want to conclude negotiations before the new US administration assumes responsibility and simultaneously pressurise the Afghan government by establishing firm control over large swathes of the country.

Regional Actors

At present, the entire focus of the entire US strategy appears to be based on containing and eliminating the threat of Al-Qaeda and increasing the status of the Taliban, calling them a partner in the fight against the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP). Yet, a surge in the level of violence by the Taliban raised concerns in the US military leadership. The US is waiting for the initial breakthrough in the intra-Afghan dialogue to reduce force level to 4,500.

The US is also intensifying efforts to engage with Central Asian states on trade and connectivity. While it appears that Washington seems to be retreating from the region, it is keen on working with friends and allies (such as Bahrain, Israel, UAE and Qatar) in managing geopolitical dynamics in Central and West Asia.

On the other hand, Russia is supporting the US-led peace process and is patiently waiting for the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan. The US and Russia came out with two joint statements after the US-Taliban deal. At present, Moscow is geopolitically stretched with multiple commitments in the Black Sea, Caspian Sea, Syria, Libya, Armenia and Ukraine. Therefore, Russia does not have the political and economic capital to play an active role in Afghanistan. However, it has maintained contacts with all actors, including the Taliban.

China is positioning itself to play an important regional role after the US withdrawal. It is maintaining a high-level contact with the Taliban bilaterally and through Pakistan. Moreover, strengthening China-Iran relations will have a major impact on the future of China’s Afghan policy, as it has already initiated projects to bring Afghanistan under the CPEC (BRI) umbrella. This may result in a regional trade and connectivity bloc (CARs+Pakistan+Afghanistan+Iran), headed by China.
Pakistan is primarily focused on fortifying gains achieved from four decades of war before the situation again deteriorates in its tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. It is building fences and sealing the Durand Line to ensure greater control on trade and border crossings. Negotiations with the Taliban and Afghanistan government have continued for early repatriation of Afghan refugees.

China, the US and the Afghan establishment understand the importance of the role of Pakistan in bringing stability to Afghanistan. Ambassador Khalilzad and the commander of Resolute Support mission General Austin Miller held a meeting with the Pakistan Chief of Army Staff General Bajwa in the first week of October. The recent visit of Abdullah Abdullah to Islamabad is also crucial in this regard. From Pakistan’s perspective, ensuring a stable governance structure in Afghanistan with the Taliban as lead ensures greater control within Kabul. Islamabad will hope that the security situation in its eastern borders will also be addressed with these developments.

A Crucial Visit

The visit of Abdullah Abdullah to India came immediately after his visit to Pakistan. Although such a balancing act was expected, his visit nevertheless comes at a crucial juncture of the intra-Afghan peace process when the rules of engagement are about to be finalised, and actual negotiations are imminent. He was, therefore, received by Prime Minister Modi, the External Affairs Minister and the National Security Advisor.

India’s ‘principled position’ on Afghanistan (sovereign, peaceful, united, democratic, inclusive, stable and secure) has prevented Delhi from taking sides and interfering in the internal politics of Kabul. During his visit to Delhi, Abdullah Abdullah appreciated India’s stance, but also signalled that a hasty US withdrawal from Afghanistan might have adverse consequences. For the Afghan establishment, a delay will provide much needed time to build consensus, retain much of the present Constitution and at the same time incorporate the Taliban’s idea of an Islamic Emirate.

Pakistan

While much of the discussion on India’s western frontiers focused on Afghanistan, the domestic political situation in Pakistan has become volatile in the past month. After two years in power, the Imran Khan-led government is facing serious challenges such as rising inflation, food crisis, the sectarian divide and depleting foreign currency reserves. As a result, 11 opposition parties have formed the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) coalition against the
ruling party Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI). The opposition coalition has organised rallies in the major cities including Gujranwala, Karachi, and Quetta. While the main focus is on Imran Khan, the opposition has also openly criticised the role of the military establishment in politics. It needs to be seen whether such tactics by the opposition can impact the political situation and the security dynamics of Pakistan.\textsuperscript{150}

\textit{People assemble at the Bagh-e-Jinnah in Karachi, Pakistan for an anti-government rally organised by the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), October 18, 2020. Source: ANI}

Central Asia

The political situation in Central Asia is also becoming volatile. Two Central Asian states, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, conducted elections in October. Emomali Rahmon, ruling Tajikistan since 1992, was re-elected as the President for another seven-year term.\textsuperscript{151} Kyrgyzstan, though, has descended into political chaos after the results of the recently held elections were allegedly rigged.\textsuperscript{152} Violent public protests and demonstrations have ensued, and it is expected that the next presidential elections will be held before January 2021.

Meanwhile, India has continued to enhance its co-operation with its partners in Central Asia and will soon operationalise an air corridor between India-Uzbekistan and others in the region.\textsuperscript{153} The President of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, held a telephone conversation with the President of India on October 15. Collaboration between Indian and Turkmen
companies, particularly in the pharmaceutical sector, and the status of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project were discussed.154

On October 28, the 2nd meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue was held through videoconference. During the meeting, India announced a provision of USD1 billion Line of Credit for developmental projects in fields such as connectivity, energy, IT, healthcare, education and agriculture. India also hosted the 19th Meeting of the SCO Ministers responsible for Foreign Economy and Foreign Trade Activities, which focused on Covid-19 response, Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) and exchange of information on MSMEs.155

The timing of the conference was crucial on the backdrop of the ongoing Afghan Peace process. Peace and political stability in Afghanistan will also pave the way for regional development and help in improving the North-South connectivity.

### Defence Updates

- The Russian and Kazakh defence ministers signed an agreement in the Kazakh capital on October 16 on bilateral military co-operation to replace a deal that has been in place since 1994. It covers issues including military education and training, arms and equipment deliveries and participation in bilateral and multilateral drills and exercises.156
- Joint Secretary (DIP) of the Indian Ministry of Defence, while speaking at the inaugural session of the India-Kazakhstan Defence Co-operation Expo on October 13, said that several Indian companies are in talks with Kazakh defence industries for co-development and co-production of defence equipment. India and Kazakhstan are looking at exploring opportunities that provide win-win solutions to industries on both sides.157
India and the Neighbourhood: New Collaborations and Regional Security

Mohit Musaddi

India’s neighbourhood is dotted with fluid political dynamics. Myanmar is going through an election process which will have a deep impact on the overall political transition of the country. In Nepal, there is uncertainty associated with Prime Minister Oli’s administration. Bhutan and Bangladesh have a relatively more stable political system. These developments have constituted India’s outreach in the neighbourhood.

Myanmar

Myanmar Navy’s new Kilo-class submarine participates in the Bandoola naval exercise, October 16, 2020. Source: Diplomat/Wikimedia Commons

India and Myanmar took stock of their bilateral relationship via multiple channels in October. On October 1, Delhi and Nay Pyi Taw virtually held the 19th round of Foreign Office consultations where the two sides reviewed relations, including border infrastructure, India’s ongoing projects in Myanmar and ways to enhance power and energy co-operation.158 This was followed by a high-level visit of the Indian COAS and the FS to Myanmar on October 4-5.159 Ahead of the Myanmar general elections on November 8, the Indian delegation called on State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the Myanmar Commander-in-Chief General Hlaing. Key discussions during the visit
included consensus for early operationalisation of the Sittwe Port, India’s proposal to establish a USD6 billion oil refinery in Myanmar, and a grant of USD2 million for the construction of a border haat bridge in Chin state.\textsuperscript{160} Notably, the foreign secretary also inaugurated a liaison office of the Embassy of India in Nay Pyi Taw.\textsuperscript{161}

India handed over a Kilo-class submarine to the Myanmar Navy, giving Nay Pyi Taw its first-ever submarine.\textsuperscript{162} The transfer took place in October during Myanmar’s Bandoola fleet exercise and comes at a time when Delhi is engaged in military tensions with China.\textsuperscript{163}

**Nepal**

India’s R\&AW chief Samant Goel called on Nepal Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli on October 21 in Kathmandu.\textsuperscript{164} Even though no official details of the meeting have been revealed, such high-level interactions between India and Nepal constitute preliminary steps to resolve the differences that have crept up in recent months. The visit also comes at a time when PM Oli has reshuffled his Cabinet and reassigned the Defence Ministry portfolio to himself.\textsuperscript{165} The former Defence Minister Ishwar Pokhrel has been critical of India in the past and is reportedly part of the main faction that has opposed Nepal’s attempts to mend ties with India.\textsuperscript{166} COAS General Naravane is set to visit Nepal in November in what will be the first Indian high-level visit since the boundary dispute gained momentum.\textsuperscript{167} Therefore, PM Oli’s move to keep the defence portfolio could also ensure that the discussions with the COAS are cordial, productive and mutually beneficial. During his visit, the COAS will also be conferred the rank of an Honorary General of the Nepal Army.\textsuperscript{168} It is a reciprocal arrangement between the two countries, and the Nepal Army Chief was conferred the honorary rank in the Indian Army in January 2019.\textsuperscript{169}

The COAS may also discuss China’s territorial encroachments in Nepal’s Humla district. Beijing has reportedly constructed infrastructure on Nepal’s side of the border. Although the claims have been refuted by the Nepal Foreign Ministry, a team led by Nepali Congress (NC) parliamentarian concluded in October that a damaged pillar had been replaced by the Chinese “in such a way that a large chunk of Nepal’s territory [has] gone to China”.\textsuperscript{170} The team came to such a conclusion after an 11-day visit to the Nepal-China border areas and has claimed that China may have occupied “up to one-and-half kilometres” of Nepali territory.\textsuperscript{171} On October 28, a major border customs point (Tatopani), along the Nepal-China border was operationalised.\textsuperscript{172}

On October 2, the Indian Ambassador to Nepal handed over “forty-one ambulances and six school buses to various governmental and non-
governmental organisations... across 30 districts of Nepal”. Since 1994, the Indian Embassy has gifted 823 ambulances and 160 school buses.\(^{175}\) On October 8, a school built with Indian financial assistance in the Kailali District of Nepal was jointly inaugurated by the Embassy of India and local representatives under the ‘Nepal-Bharat Development Co-operation’ Agreement.\(^{174}\) On the same day, the Indian Ambassador to Nepal met Nepal’s Civil Aviation minister to “discuss ways to promote tourism in both countries”.\(^{175}\)

**Bangladesh**

India and Bangladesh entered into an ‘air-bubble agreement’, nearly eight months after travel suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic.\(^{176}\) The air bubble was inaugurated by the Indian High Commissioner in Bangladesh on October 28.\(^{177}\)

Delhi and Dhaka have also been working on building border infrastructure in the recent past. The incoming Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh visited the border areas in October and took stock of ongoing projects including a Special Economic Zone (SEZ), Integrated Check Posts (ICP) and the under-construction India-Bangladesh railway project.\(^{178}\) Another railway link, from Haldibari (India) to Chilhati (Bangladesh), is reportedly being revived, with work likely to be completed by December 2020.\(^{179}\) Along with that, Delhi and Dhaka are reportedly also “negotiating the modalities” for a meeting of the Joint Rivers Commission.\(^{180}\) The two countries are expected to sign a “Framework Agreement for sharing of waters of six joint rivers”.\(^{181}\) The Commission will also discuss water-sharing of the Teesta River, which has stalled in the past.\(^{182}\)

Amidst increasing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean region, the US Deputy Secretary of State, Stephen Biegun, travelled to Dhaka on October 14 for a two-day visit. He met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen and other senior officials. Discussions included American assistance to Bangladesh, the need for a more permanent solution to the Rohingya crisis and emphasis towards a “free, open, inclusive, peaceful and secure Indo-Pacific region, with shared prosperity for all”.\(^{183}\) Biegun had also visited India from October 12-14, ahead of the US-India 2+2 ministerial meeting.

Taking forward defence co-operation, India and Bangladesh held the 2\(^{nd}\) edition of the bilateral naval exercise ‘Bongosagar’ in the Bay of Bengal on October 3.\(^{184}\) The exercise which was aimed at “developing inter-operability and joint operational skills”, was followed by the 3\(^{rd}\) edition of the IN-BN
Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) on October 4-5. Prime Minister Modi and Sheikh Hasina are expected to hold a virtual summit in December 2020.

![The second edition of the India-Bangladesh bilateral exercise ‘Bongosagar’ underway in the Bay of Bengal, October 3, 2020. Source: Twitter/@indiannavy](image)

**Bhutan**

On October 16, India allowed *market access* to five Bhutanese agricultural commodities. These include areca nuts, mandarins, apples, potatoes and ginger. The Indian National Plant Protection Organisation (NPPO) will *further examine* the possibility of allowing market access to Bhutan for other agricultural products such as carrots, peas and soya bean. This will be a significant boost for Bhutan's agricultural sector, particularly given the ongoing COVD-19 pandemic. India and Bhutan have also entered into a *transport bubble* agreement to restart commercial passenger services during the pandemic. Further, on October 29, the Small Development Project Committee (SDPC) from Bhutan and India *approved 70 projects* worth approximately USD16.7 million (Nu1.25 billion) for Bhutan's 12th Five Year Plan. The approved projects include development in areas such as “water supply, urban infrastructure... and health and education” among others.

On October 8, India also handed over the 7th *medical consignment* containing a portable digital x-ray machine to the Government of Bhutan. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in the subcontinent, India has delivered several consignments of essential medicines and medical equipment to Bhutan.
Moreover, “India is also collaborating with Bhutan for conducting Phase-III trials of the COVID-19 vaccine candidates”\textsuperscript{192}

Corresponding to the Land Customs Station (LCS) that was made operational in Ahllay, Pasakha, by the Government of India in July 2020, a new route from the Torsha tea garden (India) and Ahllay (Bhutan) was made operational on October 16.\textsuperscript{193} This will further help decongest the Jaigaon-Phuentsholing route, which is the main point of transit between India and Bhutan.

In spite of COVID-19 and the associated economic slowdown, India has been consistent in its ‘Neighbourhood First Policy’, whether it be through economic and military assistance in Myanmar and Bangladesh, or through development projects in Nepal and Bhutan.
The Maldives and Sri Lanka: Engaging Major Powers

Libni Garg

The Maldives

This month saw a further strengthening of ties between India and the Maldives. In his United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) speech, the Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid thanked India for its provision of a USD250-million soft loan arrangement for COVID-19 assistance, calling it the "single largest financial assistance from a donor during this pandemic."194

On September 29, the Maldivian Housing Development Corporation chairman met with the Indian High Commissioner to discuss developmental opportunities in Hulhumale with Indian assistance.195 Furthermore, members of the Civil Service Commission of the Maldives held talks with the Indian High Commissioner to revive training with India’s National Centre for Good Governance (NCGG).196 To this end, online training courses are scheduled to commence soon.197

The Indian Embassy in Male also revealed that under the USD800-million line of credit extended by India to the Maldives in March 2019, a 100-bedded cancer hospital and a 22,000-seater cricket stadium in Hulhumale would be built.198

Line of Credit Agreement worth USD400 million was signed between Exim Bank of India and the Government of Maldives for undertaking the Greater Male’ Connectivity Project. Source: India Exim Bank
New Delhi’s support to the Greater Male Connectivity Project (GMCP) was operationalised on October 12, as a Line of Credit Agreement of USD400 million was signed between India’s EXIM Bank and the Maldivian Ministry of Finance to fund the project.199 During their visit, the delegation from the Exim Bank also met with the Maldivian Foreign Minister.200 Besides, the India-Maldives air bubble, which was announced in August, was operationalised, and flights between Mumbai and Male commenced from October 15.201

As a part of his visit to Indian Ocean countries, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo visited the Maldives on October 28 where he met with President Solih and Foreign Minister Shahid.202 During the visit, he announced Washington’s intent to open an Embassy in the Maldives, thereby “underscoring the United States’ unshakeable commitment to the Maldives and the Indo-Pacific region.”203 With this, the US attempts to strengthen its presence in the Indian Ocean amidst strategic competition with China.

The Chinese Ambassador to the Maldives held talks with Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid and the Maldivian Finance Minister on October 15 regarding economic co-operation between Beijing and Male in the context of COVID-19.204 On October 14, the Ambassador had also met with the Maldivian Minister of Commerce Science and Technology to discuss China-Maldives co-operation in the field of the digital economy, new infrastructure and smart cities.205

**Sri Lanka**

This month saw multifaceted engagements between India and Sri Lanka through SLINEX-20 (Sri Lanka-India Naval Exercise) and numerous meetings between Indian and Sri Lankan representatives to build inter-sectoral linkages. During the month, Colombo also received high-level delegations from Washington and Beijing.

On October 6, India’s Deputy High Commissioner to Colombo met the Vice-Chancellor of the Kotelawala Defence University, which is Sri Lanka’s joint service academy for members of the Army, Navy and Air Force. The two representatives discussed areas of collaboration in research and development along with linkages between scholars, think-tanks and academic institutes.206

On October 12, the Indian High Commissioner to Colombo held talks with Sri Lanka’s Water Supply Minister Vasudeva Nanayakkara to discuss areas of co-operation between the two countries in the development of water supply infrastructure. The Indian Embassy in Sri Lanka maintained that access to clean water remains a top priority for both New Delhi and Colombo and, to that end,
India had provided credit to build the greater Dambulla Water Supply project in Sri Lanka, along with two other projects, which are underway.\textsuperscript{207}

The Indian High Commissioner also met with the Sri Lankan Minister of Energy on October 15 to explore means to deepen co-operation in the energy sector.\textsuperscript{208} On October 17, the High Commissioner called on the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Gunawardena, and they discussed the implementation of the agreements made by the Prime Ministers at the virtual bilateral summit in September.\textsuperscript{209} In a related development, India’s Deputy High Commissioner to Colombo met with Prof. Kapila Gunawardena from the Ministry of Buddhadasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs to discuss the implementation of the USD15-million grant for the promotion of Buddhist ties between the two countries that was announced by PM Modi during the summit.\textsuperscript{210}

The Indian and Sri Lankan navies also conducted the 8\textsuperscript{th} edition of the annual bilateral maritime exercise, SLINEX-20 between October 19 and 21 off the coast of Trincomalee in Sri Lanka. The exercise attempts to “enhance interoperability, improve mutual understanding and exchange best practices and procedures for multifaceted maritime operations between both navies.”\textsuperscript{211}

Beijing’s outreach to Colombo in October was led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) member Yang Jiechi. On October 9-10, Sri Lanka hosted a Chinese delegation led by Jiechi and the Chairman of China’s International Development Co-operation Agency, Wang Xiatao.\textsuperscript{212} A team of Sri Lanka’s top
leadership, including President Rajapaksa, Prime Minister Rajapaksa, Foreign Minister Gunawardena and Foreign Secretary Colombo held talks with the visiting delegation. The Sri Lankan leaders requested the Chinese leaders to facilitate market access to some of Sri Lanka’s unique commodities that could find demand in the Chinese domestic market. A USD90-million grant was extended by Beijing to Colombo after President Rajapaksa reportedly asked the Chinese delegation to help refute the allegation that Chinese-funded projects leave recipients vulnerable to debt-traps. Simultaneously, President Rajapaksa also claimed that the Hambantota port deal was not a “debt trap” as it provided income and employment opportunities. This was in marked contrast with the Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary’s statement a few months ago who had characterised the deal with China as a mistake. The Foreign Secretary’s remarks were understandable as the Hambantota Port has failed to generate revenue and employment thus far.

Reportedly, Colombo is also engaged in talks to procure a USD500-million concessional loan from Beijing. If granted, the loan will bring Sri Lanka’s total borrowings from China to USD1 billion this year. After the conclusion of the high-profile visit from the Chinese delegation, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo visited Colombo on October 28 in what was viewed as a measure to counterbalance Beijing’s influence in a key Indian Ocean country.

US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo’s visit to Sri Lanka was preceded by an acrimonious diplomatic exchange between Beijing and Washington. In a press briefing regarding the visit, a State Department official urged Colombo to make “necessary decisions to secure its economic independence”. This may have been a reference to the Chinese debt-trap that Sri Lankans may find themselves in. The briefing induced a sharp criticism from China, which accused the US of using Secretary Pompeo’s visit to “interfere in China-Sri Lanka relations and to coerce and bully Sri Lanka.” The much-anticipated visit included discussions around the China-Sri Lanka relationship. During a press briefing with Foreign Minister Gunawardena, Secretary Pompeo said that the US believes that a “strong, sovereign Sri Lanka” could be a “beacon for a free and open Indo-Pacific.” He held that Beijing’s interactions of “bad deals, violations of sovereignty and lawlessness on land and sea” indicate that the Chinese Communist Party is a “predator”, unlike the US which is “a friend and as a partner.” On Colombo’s behalf, Minister Gunawardena conveyed that “Sri Lanka is a neutral, non-aligned country committed to peace” which will continue relations with the US and “other countries.”

An important domestic development in Sri Lanka was passing of the controversial 20th Amendment on October 22 which widens the mandate of the
President. The Amendment nullifies the 19th Amendment, which was passed in 2015 in order to strengthen the Parliament at the expense of the President’s power. The 20th Amendment is controversial because according to critics, it provides the President “unbridled powers”. Having been passed by a 156-65 vote, it has reinforced the strong influence that the Rajapaksas enjoy in Sri Lankan politics.
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