



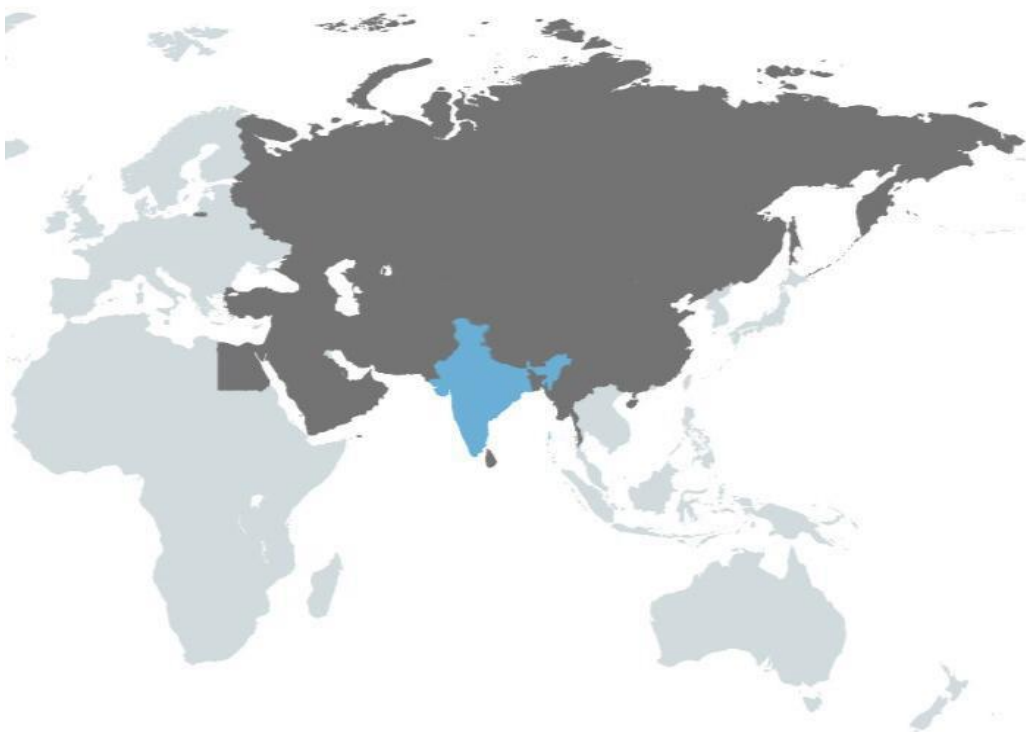
**Delhi Policy Group**

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



# INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

## NOVEMBER 2020



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Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

## DPG India Strategic Review

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### ABOUT US

Founded in 1994, the Delhi Policy Group (DPG) is among India's oldest think tanks with its primary focus on strategic and international issues of critical national interest. DPG is a non-partisan institution and is independently funded by a non-profit Trust. Over past decades, DPG has established itself in both domestic and international circles and is widely recognised today among the top security think tanks of India and of Asia's major powers.

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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, 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](mailto:mohit@dpg.org.in). To subscribe, please [click here](#).

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*World map*

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# DPG India Strategic Review

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## Overview

Sanjay Pulipaka and Mohit Musaddi

In the study of international relations, systemic variables such as balance of power receive considerable attention, and not so much the impact of domestic politics on foreign policy. It is generally argued that the constellation of power relations, and not domestic affairs, defines the behaviour of states. While this argument may hold true in a unipolar or a bipolar world order where power is concentrated, in the emerging multipolar order significant shifts in domestic affairs are more likely to impact foreign policy making and reverberate across the wider neighbourhood as well. Moreover, political stability or its absence in smaller states generates opportunities for external powers to alter the geopolitics of the wider region.

For instance, political developments in the island state of the Maldives have far greater implications for regional stability today than they did in the past. The emergence of a stable government following the Myanmar elections not only allows Nay Pyi Taw to conduct a more independent foreign policy, but also ensures that there is greater order along India's eastern frontiers. In India's north-west, however, persistent domestic political turmoil in Pakistan has adverse geopolitical implications. In terms of systemic implications, the uncertainty that is marking the post-election presidential transition in the United States (US) is generating significant anxiety among Asian powers. Likewise, the shift from a collegium model to an individual-centric decision-making process has amplified Beijing's aggressive and revisionist agenda, which has regional as well as systemic implications.

### China: Need to Recognise Dichotomy

On November 14, while addressing soldiers of the Indian Army, Prime Minister [Narendra Modi said](#) that “today the whole world is troubled by expansionist forces. Expansionism is... a mental disorder”.<sup>1</sup> India's position with respect to the ongoing stand-off in Ladakh with China is that peace and tranquillity are the fundamental premises based on which the bilateral relationship can move forward. The old dichotomy of periodic border tensions and enhanced economic engagement seems to be no longer applicable. Instead, India appears to be moving towards a calibrated economic de-coupling with China. On November 24, India [banned 43 more](#) Chinese digital applications citing “growing concerns about data security”.<sup>2</sup> Overall, the government of India has so far banned at least 170 Chinese apps. The government has also been taking necessary steps to limit Chinese investments and access to government

procurement and projects. On the other hand, Beijing continues to demand that border issues be delinked from the broader relationship as was the case in the past, prolonging the stalemate in bilateral ties.

The [8<sup>th</sup> round](#) of the India-China Corps Commander level talks were held in Chushul on November 6. According to India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), "the two sides had a candid, in-depth and constructive exchange of views on disengagement along the Line of Actual Control in the Western sector of India-China border areas."<sup>3</sup> While the ninth round of talks is expected to take place soon, the Indian Army has [reportedly](#) "settled down to defend the LAC from any further transgression by the PLA".<sup>4</sup>

Delhi has reportedly deployed the Indian Navy's Marine Commandos (MARCOS) in the Pangong Tso area of Ladakh. The Indian Air Force's Garud commandos and the Army's Para Special Forces have been stationed in the area "since day one of the conflict", and the [MARCOS 'deployment](#) will "enhance the integration of the three services and provide the naval commandos exposure to extreme cold weather conditions."<sup>5</sup> This comes at a time when there have been [reports that](#) China is not moving back from Finger 4 on the north bank of Pangong Tso.<sup>6</sup> Instead, it is building better infrastructure "to enable faster deployment of troops".<sup>7</sup> Over the past few months, Delhi has also scaled up its defence acquisitions which may help the Indian Army respond to surprise manoeuvres in the harsh winters of the Himalayas. Therefore, while there may be a power asymmetry at a larger level, the gap is not as tall on the Himalayan frontiers.

### **Institutionalising Cooperation in India's Neighbourhood**

China has reportedly occupied land and constructed a village at least two kilometres inside Bhutanese territory. It has also built a 9-km road close to the India-Bhutan-China tri-junction of Doklam. If true, this is a serious territorial encroachment. As Stephen Lee Myers notes, China is using the [same tactics](#) in the Himalayas as "in the South China Sea, where it fortified and armed shoals claimed by Vietnam and the Philippines, despite promising the United States not to do so".<sup>8</sup> However, the Bhutanese Ambassador to India has [denied such reports](#), saying "[T]here is no Chinese village inside Bhutan".<sup>9</sup>

During the month, the Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla travelled to the Maldives (November 9) and Nepal (November 26-27). In Male, he signed MoUs on High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDP), co-operation in Sports and Youth Affairs, and a USD100 million grant for the Greater Male Connectivity Project. [In Kathmandu](#), he inaugurated schools that were built with Indian assistance and reviewed the multi-faceted India-Nepal

relationship.<sup>10</sup> Earlier in the month, India's Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General MM Naravane had also travelled to Nepal, as Delhi looks to scale up engagement with Kathmandu.

Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval visited Sri Lanka from November 27-29 for a [trilateral](#) maritime security conference between India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.<sup>11</sup> A decision to hold regular deputy NSA level meetings between Delhi, Male and Colombo indicates India's keenness to institutionalise security co-operation with these Indian Ocean island states.

The Maldives' defence-related interactions with other Quad countries has also been gaining momentum. While in September 2020, the Maldives had signed a Defence and Security Framework with the US, on November 22, Male and Tokyo [signed an agreement](#) for a Japanese grant worth USD 7.6 million for the Maldivian Coast Guard and Maritime Rescue and Co-ordination Centre.<sup>12</sup> Growing convergences between India and its Quad partners means that such co-operation with India's neighbours is welcomed in Delhi as it helps reinforce stability and prosperity across the Indo-Pacific.

However, Delhi will need to take into account the views of various actors within these states. For instance, NSA Doval held a meeting with Sri Lankan Tamil leader [R. Sampanthan](#) on November 29.<sup>13</sup> The meeting was significant as it came months after PM Modi "highlighted India's concerns about the rights of Tamil minorities" in Sri Lanka.<sup>14</sup> In the Maldives, Delhi will be wary about an opposition-led "[India Out](#)" campaign that has been ongoing. Besides "anti-India rallies and campaigns on social media, the opposition has taken its fight to the [Maldivian] Parliament as well".<sup>15</sup> The opposition has accused the government of "selling off [the] Maldives to India".<sup>16</sup>

With Myanmar, prospects for an enhanced bilateral relationship look brighter after Daw Aung San Suu Kyi led the National League for Democracy (NLD) to a resounding victory in the 2020 general elections held on November 8. PM Modi [congratulated](#) Suu Kyi for the NLD's victory and stated that the "successful conduct of polls is another step in the ongoing democratic transition in Myanmar".<sup>17</sup> A majority government in Myanmar will continue to ensure a greater balance between India and China in its foreign policy. This was already evident when the Myanmar military "sent [letters of objection](#)" to Beijing for constructing fences on the Myanmar-China border without intimation.<sup>18</sup>

## Middle East: Navigating Change

While Delhi can to an extent define the trajectory of political developments in India's immediate neighbourhood, in the Middle East India needs to adjust to fast-paced political developments to better promote its interests.

The recent churn in Middle East politics has continued to gather momentum. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [reportedly](#) flew to Saudi Arabia in November to meet Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and US Secretary Mike Pompeo.<sup>19</sup> However, Saudi Arabia's [foreign minister](#) said that "no such meeting occurred".<sup>20</sup> Given the recent US elections, it is possible that the outgoing US administration could be pushing to cement faster rapprochement between Israel and Arab states in the Middle East. In November, the US State Department officially [approved the sale](#) of F-35 fighter jets and MQ-9 unmanned systems to the UAE.<sup>21</sup> However, there may yet be greater fluidity in Washington's Middle East policies as US President-elect Biden's team has not articulated a clear policy for the region. The outgoing Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [warned that](#) lifting of US sanctions against Iran would be a "dangerous choice, bound to weaken new partnerships for peace in the region and strengthen only the Islamic Republic."<sup>22</sup>

India, on its part, seems to be building on new openings in the Middle East. Indian companies have received significant investments from the region. In November, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund announced that it would [invest](#) approximately USD 1.3 billion in Reliance's retail unit.<sup>23</sup> With institutional mechanisms such as the India-UAE high-level task force, the scale of investments from the Middle East may continue to gain momentum. On the political front, India had robust engagements with its regional partners during the month. On November 3, India and the GCC Troika held their [annual political dialogue](#), in which External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar participated.<sup>24</sup> He also [travelled](#) to Bahrain (November 24-25) and the UAE (November 25-26) for talks to scale up relations.<sup>25</sup>

While countries in the Middle East are building their relationships with India, they also persist with their stance on issues such as Kashmir. During a meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation ([OIC](#)) on November 27, foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Niger "brought up the Kashmir issue in their remarks" and expressed "strong and unequivocal support" for Kashmir in the OIC resolution.<sup>26</sup> India [rejected](#) the "factually incorrect, gratuitous and unwarranted references" and expressed regret that the "OIC continues to allow itself to be used by a certain country".<sup>27</sup> This issue will remain a point of



dissonance in India's relations with West Asian countries, but India will gain from the regular inflow of investments from the region.

### **Afghanistan-Pakistan: Growing Instability**

India announced major projects and investments in Afghanistan. Speaking at the 2020 Afghanistan Conference on November 23-24, External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar announced the launch of [Phase-IV](#) of high impact community development programmes (HICDP) "which envisages more than 100 projects worth US\$ 80 million that Indian would undertake in Afghanistan".<sup>28</sup> He also announced that "India's development portfolio in Afghanistan has to-date amounted to over US\$3 billion".<sup>29</sup>

There were indications that President Trump may order a significant [reduction of the US presence](#) in Afghanistan before he leaves office. Such a move will dent "support to Afghan forces, intelligence gathering and counter-terror operations against Al Qaeda and the Islamic State."<sup>30</sup> It may also negatively impact the intra-Afghanistan negotiations, incentivising the Taliban to achieve their objectives through military means. Prospects for stable and sustainable national reconciliation in Afghanistan remained uncertain. India, Iran and Russia held a [trilateral meeting](#) on November 3 to discuss the peace and stability situation in Afghanistan.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to instability in Afghanistan, Pakistan also experienced sustained demonstrations by opposition groups calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Imran Khan. However, to divert attention from internal governance challenges, the Pakistan government ratcheted up tensions with India over Kashmir.

On November 1, Prime Minister Imran Khan announced that Pakistan had decided to grant provincial status to Gilgit-Baltistan. India's Ministry of External Affairs [responded](#) that Islamabad "has no locus standi on territories illegally and forcibly occupied by it".<sup>32</sup> [Gilgit-Baltistan](#) has strategic importance for Pakistan as it provides a direct land route to China (via the Xinjiang Autonomous Region).<sup>33</sup> To the west of Gilgit-Baltistan is Afghanistan and to its south is Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.<sup>34</sup>

During the month, at least 15 Indians, including security personnel, were killed in "[multiple ceasefire violations](#) by Pakistani troops" in various sectors of Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>35</sup> Reportedly, more than 4,100 such violations by Pakistan have taken place this year, "which is the highest in the past decade".<sup>36</sup>



On November 14, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and military spokesperson Major-General Babar Iftikhar [claimed that](#) "Indian intelligence agents were operating out of neighbourhood Afghanistan to plan attacks within Pakistani borders".<sup>37</sup> Pakistan also [handed over](#) a "dossier on India's terror campaign" to the United Nations.<sup>38</sup> It [demanded that](#) "India needs to be scrutinised at FATF platform in the light of [the] evidence presented by Pakistan" and alleged that New Delhi is operating a large number of terror camps (66 in Afghanistan and 21 in India).<sup>39</sup> India dismissed these claims as a "futile anti-India propaganda exercise".<sup>40</sup> The Afghanistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly [rejected Pakistan's claims](#) that Afghan territory is being used for acts of terror in Pakistan.<sup>41</sup>

### Russia: Defence Sales and Economic Imperatives

Adding to the growing discomfort in India with Russia-China relations, Moscow has also been scaling up relations with Pakistan. In November, Russia and Pakistan held a joint military exercise, '[Friendship-2020](#)', at the Tarbela special operations training ground.<sup>42</sup> Pakistan has been seeking deeper military co-operation with Russia, including the purchase of arms from Moscow. However, [reports suggest](#) that Russia will not sell "any war equipment to Pakistan".<sup>43</sup> On the economic front, Moscow and Islamabad are [reportedly working](#) on a deal to jointly operationalise a major gas pipeline that runs from Karachi's Port Qasim to Kasur in Punjab.<sup>44</sup>

Russia, meanwhile, has also been [scaling up defence sales](#) with India and there were reports of a deal which will allow the Philippines to purchase the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile.<sup>45</sup> It is evident, therefore, that Russian defence co-operation and arms sales are driven more by economic considerations rather than strategic options. Given the current challenges that the Russian economy is facing with a decline in oil prices, Moscow is looking to increase sales of its defence equipment. Therefore, despite India procuring defence equipment from Russia on a large scale, Delhi should not be surprised if Moscow sells weapons to its adversaries.

### The US: State of Uncertainty

The outgoing Trump administration continued to move forward with its policies on China. The US [reportedly plans](#) to add China's "top chipmaker SMIC and oil giant CNOOC to a blacklist of alleged Chinese military companies".<sup>46</sup> It has already blacklisted 31 Chinese companies on similar grounds.

Dr. Lobsang Sangay, the President of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), made a [historic visit](#) to the White House on November 18.<sup>47</sup> It was reportedly the first time “in the last six decades” that the head of the CTA had been invited to the White House. Last month, Sangay had met the newly appointed US Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues.<sup>48</sup>

However, it remains to be seen whether the new US administration will continue Trump’s stance on Tibet and other issues related to China. The worldview of a Biden administration and its approach to foreign policy is not yet clearly defined. As a result, Delhi will have to navigate this phase of uncertainty with abundant caution.

### Month for Multilateralism

In November, India engaged in various multilateral meetings. Speaking at the 15th G20 virtual summit hosted by Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister Modi called for a “new global index for the post-Corona world that comprises [four key elements](#) – the creation of a vast talent pool, ensuring that technology reaches all segments of society, transparency in governance systems, and dealing with mother earth with the spirit of trusteeship”.<sup>49</sup> To coincide with the 75th year of its Independence, India will be hosting the G20 summit in 2023 instead of 2022.

India also participated in multilateral summits/meetings such as the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO) Council of Heads of Government (November 30) and Council of Heads of State (November 10); the 12<sup>th</sup> BRICS Summit (November 17); the 15<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit (November 14) and 17<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-India Summit (November 12); and the India-GCC Political Dialogue (November 3).

## India and the Neighbourhood: Outreach Amid Chinese Expansionism

Mohit Musaddi

### Nepal

In November, the Indian Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General M.M. Naravane (November 4-6) and Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla (November 26-27) visited Nepal. General Naravane [called on](#) Nepal Prime Minister K. P. Oli and President Bidya Devi Bhandari to discuss the bilateral relationship.<sup>50</sup> During the meeting with the Prime Minister, the two sides [discussed](#) outstanding boundary issues and stressed the need to enhance communication to resolve differences.<sup>51</sup> Reportedly, Delhi and Kathmandu are also in touch regarding a meeting of the [Boundary Working Group](#) (BWG).<sup>52</sup>



Indian Army Chief General M. M. Naravane called on Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli in Kathmandu, November 6, 2020. Source: Kathmandu Post/ Prime Minister's Secretariat

General Naravane also met his Nepali counterpart General P.C. Thapa to discuss India-Nepal [army-to-army](#) relations.<sup>53</sup> On November 5, the Army Chief was conferred the [honorary rank](#) of General of the Nepali Army.<sup>54</sup> On behalf of the Indian government, General Naravane presented [medical equipment](#), including X-ray machines, ICU ventilators and ambulances for the Nepali Army.<sup>55</sup> On November 8, the Indian Ambassador to Nepal [handed over](#) 28 ICU ventilators to assist in Nepal's fight against the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>56</sup>

On November 26, Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla met with the Nepal Foreign Secretary and called on the President, Prime Minister and the

Foreign Minister of Nepal. In his meetings, [FS Shringla](#) took stock of India-Nepal relations covering “trade, transit, connectivity, infrastructure, energy, agriculture, investment, culture, people-to-people relations among others”, and also discussed outstanding boundary matters.<sup>57</sup> On November 27, he also addressed a gathering hosted by the Asian Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs (AIDIA). During his remarks, the [FS highlighted](#) India’s High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDP) that have been “implemented in all 77 of Nepal’s districts and... cover diverse sectors such as education, health, irrigation, drinking water... and agriculture”.<sup>58</sup> India handed over 2,000 vials of Remdesivir to assist Nepal’s fight against COVID-19. On November 27, FS Shringla inaugurated three schools in the Gorkha district built with Indian assistance; reviewed the Government of India’s commitment to building houses as part of its 2015 post-earthquake assistance to Nepal and virtually inaugurated a monastery in Manang district.<sup>59</sup>



On November 26, Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla called on Nepal Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli. Source: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

As part of the Indian government’s objective to “systematise the movement of cross-border cargo trucks”, India has started the [construction](#) of an integrated check post (ICP) in Nepalgunj.<sup>60</sup> Further, on November 19, the 4<sup>th</sup> India-Nepal Joint Working Group on Railway Co-operation discussed cross-border [rail link projects](#), particularly between Jaynagar-Kurtha and Jogbani-Biratnagar.<sup>61</sup> It should be noted that the Government of Nepal in September 2020 had procured two DEMU train sets from India. Nepal has also been exploring the possibility of a North-South highway, which will [connect India and China](#). To that effect, PM Oli carried out an aerial inspection of the Koshi highway and visited the Kimathanka border point on November 11.<sup>62</sup>



Soon after the Indian Foreign Secretary's visit, Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe made a one-day working visit to Kathmandu on November 29. The Defence Minister called on Nepal President Bidya Devi Bhandari and Prime Minister K. P. Oli (who is also Defence Minister). He also met with the Chief of Army Staff General P. Thapa. Very few details of the subject of his visit were made official, but it was [reported that](#) "a protocol on implementing an RMB150-million military assistance that Nepal and China have agreed upon" was to have been signed during Wei's visit.<sup>63</sup>

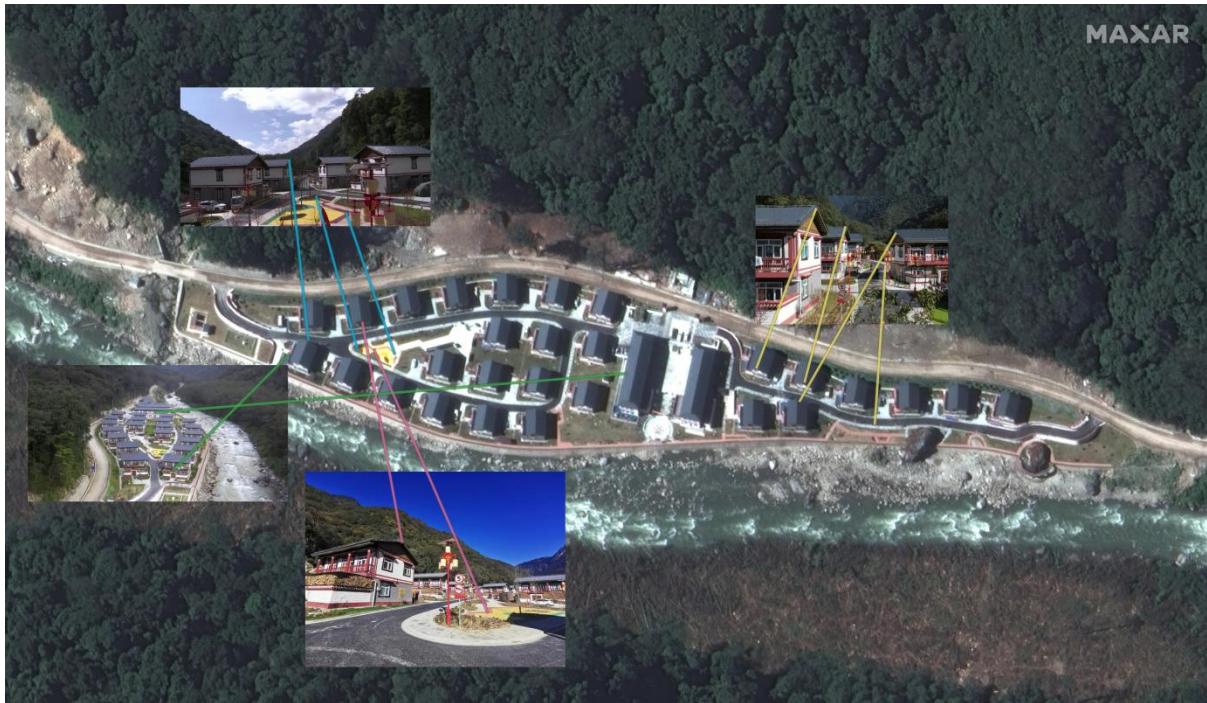
In November, Kathmandu and Beijing finally reached a [consensus](#) on the official height of Mount Everest. However, they have not announced what the new height is, and "are in close communication regarding the specific arrangement".<sup>64</sup>

It should be noted that China has repeatedly denied claims of border incursions in Nepal. Even after the Nepali opposition lawmaker Jeevan Bahadur Shahi claimed to have concrete findings of Chinese encroachment in Nepal, China's [foreign ministry](#) has termed it as a "completely unfounded rumour".<sup>65</sup> The Nepal foreign ministry has also consistently refuted such claims.

## **Bhutan**

There are reports that China has occupied and established a village 2 km inside Bhutan's territory. On November 23, the Chinese state media [CGTN](#) said that China had built a new border village "near Bhutan", but the image released "placed the village in a disputed territory" along the Bhutan-China border.<sup>66</sup> However, the [Bhutanese Ambassador](#) to India said that "there is no Chinese village inside Bhutan".<sup>67</sup> China has also [reportedly](#) built a road in the area which stretches 9 km inside Bhutanese territory.<sup>68</sup> The village area is on the east of the China-Bhutan-India tri-junction on the Doklam plateau. The 9-km road could provide the Chinese with "an alternate route to the Zompelri bridge, which the Indian Army had prevented Chinese forces from accessing in 2017 when the two sides faced off" in Doklam.<sup>69</sup>

On November 25, Bhutan established [diplomatic relations](#) with Germany. Bhutan's Ambassador to India and his German counterpart exchanged official documents in New Delhi.<sup>70</sup> Germany, however, has no plans to set up an Embassy in Thimphu and will conduct its relations through its Indian Embassy. New Delhi noted the development and said that Germany is an important partner of Bhutan.<sup>71</sup>



Images of the Chinese village 'Pangda' located 2 km inside Bhutan. Source: NDTV and Twitter/@Nrg8000

On November 20, PM Narendra Modi [launched](#) "phase two of the RuPay card in Bhutan" that would make "tourism, shopping and other transactions easier for Bhutanese tourists in India".<sup>72</sup> "The [implementation](#) of Phase-I of RuPay cards in Bhutan has enabled visitors from India to access ATMs and point of sale (PoS) terminals across Bhutan. Phase-II will now allow Bhutanese cardholders to access the RuPay network in India."<sup>73</sup> During the launch, PM Modi also spoke about the recently signed [India-Bhutan](#) "framework for Peaceful Usage of Outer Space".<sup>74</sup> Thimphu is also working with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to implement a renewable energy pilot project. As

part of Bhutan's 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (2018-2023), the ADB-administered Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction (JFPR) approved a [USD3-million grant](#) in November 2020 to "demonstrate the viability and sustainability of solar power as an alternative energy and income source".<sup>75</sup>

On November 2, the Government of India handed over "a [consignment](#) of COVID-19 RT-PCR test kits (for conducting 20,000 tests)" to Bhutan.<sup>76</sup> This is the 8<sup>th</sup> consignment of essential medical supplies handed over by India to Bhutan since March 2020.<sup>77</sup> In November, the US government also [donated 15 ventilators](#) to Bhutan to assist the country in its fight against COVID-19.<sup>78</sup>

## Bangladesh

PM Modi and PM Sheikh Hasina will reportedly hold a [virtual summit](#) on December 17 during which at least four MoUs will be signed to boost bilateral co-operation.<sup>79</sup> To finalise the MoUs, the Bangladesh Foreign Secretary is expected to travel to Delhi on December 8.<sup>80</sup> Bangladesh has also extended an invitation to PM Modi to visit Dhaka in March 2021 for "celebrations marking 50 years of the country's independence".<sup>81</sup>



The first-ever commercial shipment from Bangladesh to Karimganj, India, on the PIWTT route, November 9, 2020. Source: Twitter/@ihcdhaka

India and Bangladesh have recently stepped up their [defence co-operation](#). In a ceremony on November 10 at the Petrapole-Benapole ICP, the Indian Army gifted 20 military horses and ten mine-detection dogs to Bangladesh.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, India could assist Bangladesh with defence-related shipbuilding. India has already extended a [line of credit](#) of USD500 million to Bangladesh that



is operational.<sup>83</sup> Dhaka has an ambitious “military modernisation drive called Forces Goal 2030”, and Delhi believes that the Indian defence industry can help serve Bangladesh’s requirements.<sup>84</sup>

There have been development and connectivity initiatives between India and Bangladesh in November as well. On November 26, Bangladesh signed an MoU with the Serum Institute of India to purchase three crore doses of the [COVID-19 vaccine](#) being developed by AstraZeneca.<sup>85</sup> India received the first commercial shipment on November 9 via the Protocol for Inland Water Trade and Transit ([PIWTT](#)) route from Bangladesh.<sup>86</sup> On November 22, the Government of India allowed the Border Security Force (BSF) to [deploy UAVs](#) along the India-Bangladesh border “to crack down on infiltration and smuggling”.<sup>87</sup>

Bangladesh has set up a special committee to review the costs of three China-funded projects. The Bangladesh Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) has [reportedly](#) “issued directions to significantly reduce the cost of two China-funded railway projects” after they were ascertained to be overpriced.<sup>88</sup> This includes the Akhaura-Sylhet dual-gauge line project (overpriced by 20.8 per cent of total cost) and the Joydebpur-Ishwardi dual-gauge double line project (overpriced by 12.91 per cent of the total cost).<sup>89</sup>



At least 50,000 Bangladeshis took part in the protests in Dhaka, which also demanded a boycott of French products. Source: Al Jazeera/AP Photo

Despite Bangladesh reeling under the COVID-19 pandemic, at least 50,000 people in Bangladesh staged a [demonstration](#) against French President

Emmanuel Macron's "stance on the right to publish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad" in the first week of November.<sup>90</sup> The rally started at Bangladesh's biggest mosque in Dhaka but was stopped before it could get closer to the French Embassy. However, the Government of Bangladesh has not commented on France or the protests.<sup>91</sup>

## Myanmar

Amidst the ongoing pandemic, Myanmar successfully held its General Elections on November 8, 2020. The Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) comfortably [secured a majority](#), winning 396 of the 476 seats up for elections in the national parliament (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw).<sup>92</sup> The main opposition was the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which could only win 33 seats in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw. It should be noted that 25 per cent (166) of the seats are reserved for the military. Moreover, roughly 1.5 million people were [not allowed to vote](#) as the Union Election Commission (UEC) cancelled voting in 22 seats across the country citing "safety concerns amid the Covid-19 pandemic".<sup>93</sup> Political commentators were of the view that Daw [Suu Kyi's popularity](#) and her "mother-like image" was one of the main reasons behind the NLD's victory.<sup>94</sup> The opposition lodged "more than 800 electoral complaints" as they felt that the [elections were unfair](#).<sup>95</sup> However, the [Myanmar military](#) distanced itself from the opposition on this occasion and said that calls for re-elections is "not the stance of the Tatmadaw".<sup>96</sup>

On November 12, PM Modi [hailed the elections](#) as "another step in the ongoing democratic transition in Myanmar".<sup>97</sup> Leaders from around the world, including Thailand, Cambodia, Japan, China and the EU also congratulated Suu Kyi for her victory.<sup>98</sup> Xi Jinping called for continuity in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. However, the China-Myanmar border areas have recently been under the radar after China [reportedly constructed](#) fences near the border in the Shan state.<sup>99</sup> Subsequently, the Chinese "suspended construction after receiving letters of objection from the [Myanmar] military."<sup>100</sup>

Overall, the NLD's victory demonstrates Myanmar's steady transition to democracy and also ensures continuity and stability. On November 24, the Indian Minister for Commerce and Industry [co-chaired virtually](#) the 7<sup>th</sup> India-Myanmar Joint Trade Meeting with the Minister of Commerce of Myanmar.<sup>101</sup> The two sides [reviewed bilateral issues](#) ranging from "trade, investment, banking, connectivity, capacity building and upgradation of border infrastructure".<sup>102</sup>





Officials from Myanmar and China discuss a disputed fence border post BP-125 on the frontier between China and Shan state. Source: The Irrawaddy/Ngwe Do

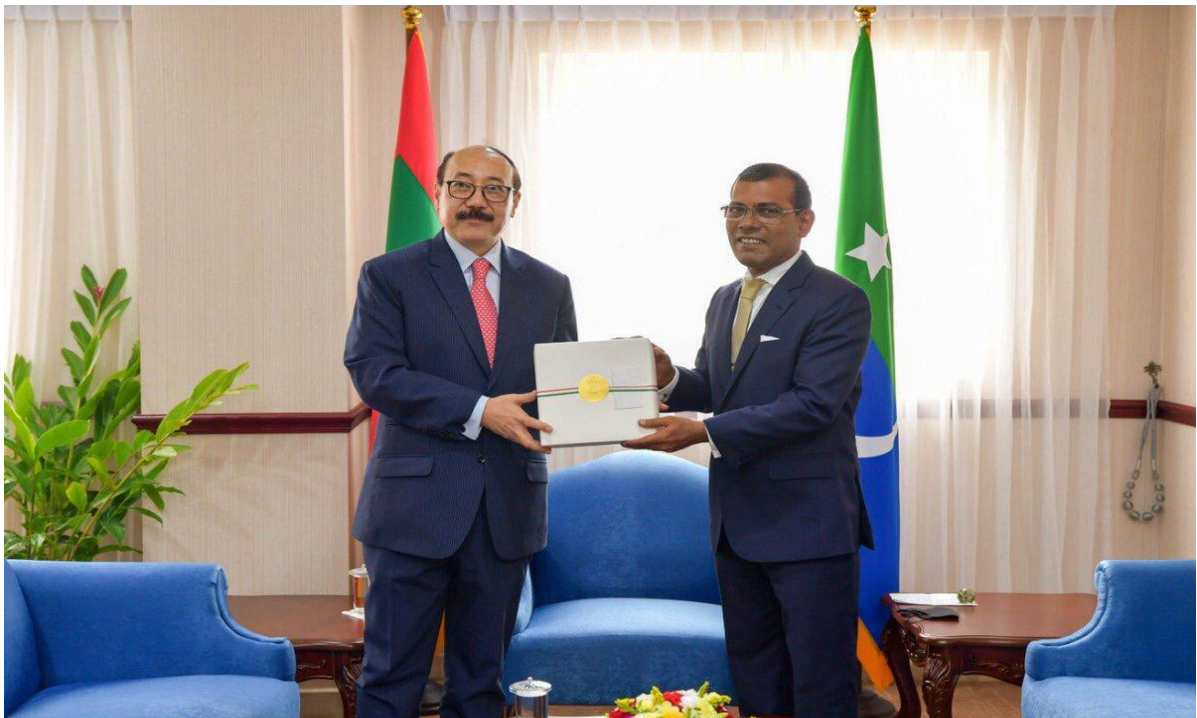
Given the absolute mandate to Suu Kyi and the NLD, there is greater scope for Nay Pyi Taw to build on an independent foreign policy.

## India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka: Strengthening Security Cooperation

Libni Garg

### The Maldives

On November 9, the Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla [visited the Maldives](#) in what was the “first high level in-person interaction between the two sides since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.”<sup>103</sup> Secretary Shringla [expressed](#) gratitude to President Solih for the country’s ‘India First’ approach and maintained that the Maldives is an integral part of India’s ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy.<sup>104</sup> The visit [resulted](#) in two MoUs for High Impact Community Development Projects, one MoU on Co-operation in Sports and Youth Affairs and a MoU for a USD100-million grant to fund the Greater Male Connectivity Project.<sup>105</sup> The Foreign Secretary was also [present](#) at the event to handover 67 children’s parks built across the Maldives and the inauguration of a synthetic track, made with Indian assistance.<sup>106</sup>



Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla with Speaker Mohamed Nasheed, during his visit to the Maldives on November 09, 2020. Source: Twitter/@HCIMaldives

After operationalising the air bubble, India [decided](#) to further facilitate travel between the two countries as restrictions on Maldivians seeking visas for educational and business purposes have been eased.<sup>107</sup> This move [comes](#) in addition to special medical visas already being granted by New Delhi to Male.<sup>108</sup>

Subsequently, India was [reported](#) as the second highest source of tourism for the Maldives after Russia, with approximately 5,500 Indians having arrived in the Maldives since July.<sup>109</sup> This can be interpreted as the success of the high functioning India-Maldives air bubble and New Delhi's active efforts to rejuvenate Male's tourism sector, which forms a significant aspect of its economy.

Furthermore, India has also partnered with the Maldives to implement domestic connectivity projects in the country. On October 31, PM Modi inaugurated India's first seaplane service from the Statue of Unity (Narmada district) to Ahmedabad in Gujarat. The [seaplane](#), operated by India's SpiceJet has been wet-leased from Maldives Island Aviation Services, which will also provide crew, maintenance and insurance for the aircraft.<sup>110</sup> [Reportedly, it](#) flew over 100 passengers in its first three days.<sup>111</sup>

India-Maldives co-operation also extended to the education sector this month. With New Delhi's [assistance](#), the Maldivian Ministry of Higher Education commenced a training programme on quality assurance of online teaching. The programme comprises 30 participants from 14 institutes.<sup>112</sup>

On November 3, India and Maldives [celebrated](#) "Victory Day" which [marked](#) Indian assistance against the coup in the Maldives 32 years ago.<sup>113</sup> The then-Maldivian President had [called](#) on India for intervention against a group of mercenaries who sought to overthrow the government and the Indian government obliged by launching Operation Cactus, which helped Male preserve its sovereignty.<sup>114</sup>

As the New Delhi-Male relationship grows stronger, it has also been at the receiving end of backlash from sections of the Maldivian opposition. The [IndiaOut](#) campaign, which is an opposition-led movement in the Maldives aimed at attacking the prevailing government's close relationship with India, has surfaced significantly in the past few months.<sup>115</sup> In an interview last month, Foreign Minister Shahid [criticised](#) the IndiaOut campaign by terming it a "desperate attempt to fulfil a political purpose".<sup>116</sup> Minister Shahid [maintained](#) that Indian presence is greatly beneficial to the Maldives and such "hatemongering" campaigns could hurt Male's foreign policy.<sup>117</sup>

The Maldives, which has traditionally maintained close relations with India, has also recently experienced enhanced ties with the US and Japan. On November 22, Japan [extended](#) a USD7.6-million grant to the Maldives Coast Guard and the Maritime Rescue and Co-ordination Centre to "further strengthen" capabilities.<sup>118</sup> The [grant](#) will also provide "communications equipment, professional search and rescue dive equipment to be used by the Maldives



Coast Guard during search and rescue operations.”<sup>119</sup> The framework of the [US-Maldives](#) Defence Agreement was signed in September 2020, and India has [welcomed](#) efforts to enhance defence co-operation between Washington and Male.<sup>120</sup>

## Sri Lanka

On November 10, Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa participated in the [signing](#) of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to implement High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDP) under Indian grant assistance in Sri Lanka.<sup>121</sup> The extension of the pre-existing MoU was [announced](#) during the virtual bilateral summit between PM Modi and PM Rajapaksa in September 2020.<sup>122</sup> Under the HICDP, a total of 64 projects, [costing](#) approximately SLR20 billion (approx. USD108 million) have been completed with Indian assistance. With the [new](#) framework, “individual developmental projects costing up to SLR 300 (USD1.6 million) million in social sectors such as health, education, water, sanitation, agriculture, etc., can be taken up in Sri Lanka” and the “total outlay of all such projects at any given time can be up to SLR 5 billion.”<sup>123</sup>



Signing of the India-Sri Lanka Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to implement High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDP) on November 11, 2020.

Source: High Commission of India in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

While the Sri Lankan government deliberates on the development of the East Container Terminal with India and Japan, it was [reported](#) that the Adani group is a “front-runner” for the project with support from the Indian government.<sup>124</sup> The project, which was announced in 2019, was put on hold by the Rajapaksa government in July 2020 after protests from labour unions.

On November 27-28, Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval participated in the 4<sup>th</sup> NSA level meeting on Trilateral Maritime Security Co-operation between India, Maldives and Sri Lanka. The forum, launched in 2011, has "served as an effective platform for co-operation among Indian Ocean countries", and was hosted by Colombo this year. During the meeting, the three countries agreed to [enhance co-operation](#) "by expanding the scope to improve intelligence sharing and include issues such as terrorism, radicalisation, extremism, drugs, arms and human trafficking, money laundering, cybersecurity and effect of climate change on maritime environment."<sup>125</sup> The meeting also resulted in the decision to set up Deputy NSA level working group meetings biannually for co-operation at the operational level.<sup>126</sup>

This month also saw further developments in the Sri Lanka-China relationship, the precedent for which was set by Yang Jiechi's visit to Colombo last month. After [extending](#) a USD90-million grant to Colombo in October,<sup>127</sup> Beijing [signed](#) a USD300-million agreement with Sri Lanka to build an "export-oriented tyre factory in an industrial zone adjacent to the Hambantota International Port."<sup>128</sup> The deepened co-operation with China comes after President Rajapaksa [implored](#) Beijing for assistance in order to disprove the debt-trap allegations against it.<sup>129</sup> The investment agreement is a significant step for China in the context of the India-China tussle to secure influence in Sri Lanka.

The Chinese navy has been conducting independent operations in Sri Lanka. Two Chinese research vessels were [reportedly](#) seen in Sri Lankan waters during the last month, which could be a "part of a larger ploy to gather data vital for conduct of naval operations, especially that of submarines."<sup>130</sup>

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's October visit to Colombo, which was preceded by acrimonious [diplomatic exchanges](#) between China and the US also reportedly sparked a sharp reaction from the Sri Lanka-China Friendship Association (SLCFA).<sup>131</sup> The organisation allegedly [condemned](#) the US and its allies for the "massive campaign of misinformation and disinformation about Sri Lanka's relationship with China."<sup>132</sup>

The need for Colombo to maintain a '[neutral](#)' foreign policy, and balance between Delhi and Beijing comes at a time when its accumulating external [debt](#) has made it highly vulnerable.<sup>133</sup>



## India-West Asia: In Search of New Solidarities

Sanket Joshi

To commemorate the Saudi Kingdom's [G20 presidency, Riyadh](#) released a new [twenty-riyal banknote](#) last month with an inaccurate depiction of India's Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>134</sup> Responding to India's objections, Saudi Arabia has reportedly promised to withdraw the bank note as soon as possible.<sup>135</sup>

In a significant development, the [Organisation of Islamic Cooperation](#) (OIC) has snubbed Pakistan's proposal to discuss 'Kashmir' in the 47<sup>th</sup> session of the council of foreign ministers to be held in Niger on November 27-28.<sup>136</sup> The [OIC statement](#) has no mention of Kashmir in the agenda announced in Riyadh.<sup>137</sup>

### G20 Riyadh Summit 2020

On November 21, Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud chaired the [G20 summit](#) on a virtual platform with the theme 'Realising Opportunities of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century for All'.<sup>138</sup> During the summit, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted "the need to develop a [new global index](#) based on talent, technology, transparency and trusteeship towards the planet"<sup>139</sup> and stressed the need to [multi-skill](#) and re-skill workers.<sup>140</sup>



G20 leaders at the Riyadh Summit, November 21, 2020. Source: Twitter/@g20org

## OPEC-India Dialogue and Energy Security

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) Secretariat hosted the 4<sup>th</sup> High-Level meeting of the [OPEC-India dialogue](#) on November 5, 2020.<sup>141</sup> OPEC plays a critical role in India's [energy requirements](#) as it caters to 78 per cent of India's crude oil demand, 59 per cent of the liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) demand and 38 per cent of the liquefied natural gas (LNG) demand.<sup>142</sup> India's Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Dharmendra Pradhan "urged OPEC to address the historical aberration in crude pricing for Asia by ending the '[Asian Premium](#)' recognising the shifting oil demand to Asia".<sup>143</sup> Minister Pradhan also "urged the OPEC members to invest in India and help transform the country into a global manufacturing hub". In another development, Saudi Arabia's minister of energy H.R.H. Prince Abdulaziz addressed the '[India Energy Week 2020](#)' where he reiterated that, "India is a valued partner that shares greater synergy and interdependency".<sup>144</sup>

India's [oil imports](#) from the Middle East fell to a four-month low in September 2020.<sup>145</sup> India's Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) is also looking to diversify its supplies of '[Liquefied Petroleum Gas \(LPG\)](#)' by seeking bids from global suppliers for at least a fifth of its LPG needs in 2021.<sup>146</sup>



Union Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas addresses the OPEC-India dialogue, November 5, 2020. Source: Twitter/@dpradhanbjp

## Investments

In a significant development, Saudi Arabia's Sovereign Wealth Fund, the PIF, acquired a 2.04 per cent equity (USD1.3 billion) stake in India's [Reliance Retail Ventures Limited](#) (RRVL). Earlier in the year, PIF had acquired 2.32 per cent stake in Reliance Jio.<sup>147</sup>

India and the UAE also explored ways to facilitate investments during the 8<sup>th</sup> meeting of the [India-UAE High Level Joint Task Force](#) on Investments.<sup>148</sup> The two sides agreed to encourage investments, recognised the importance of [civil aviation](#) to their respective economies and agreed to ensure speedy normalisation of air transport operations between the two countries.<sup>149</sup> In another development, [Investcorp Bahrain](#) invested around USD110 million in Indian e-commerce logistics platform Xpressbees.<sup>150</sup>

## Defence Co-operation

India's Ministry of Defence (MoD) has been organising a series of webinars, such as the recent 'Indian Defence Industry Global Outreach for Collaborative Partnership: [India-UAE Defence Co-operation](#)', to boost defence exports and achieve its export target of USD5 billion over the next five years.<sup>151</sup> [Oman-India relations](#) are also on an upward trajectory with Oman's Ambassador in Delhi showing interest in furthering India's 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' by becoming a hub for India's trade with East Africa and the Indian Ocean region.<sup>152</sup>

## India-GCC Relations

On November 3, India's External Affairs Minister, Dr. Jaishankar, attended the third annual political dialogue with the [Gulf Co-operation Council](#) (GCC) in which he urged GCC members to facilitate the return of large numbers of Indian workers and professionals.<sup>153</sup> The EAM also visited Bahrain and the UAE on November 25 and 26 respectively, where he held meetings with his Bahraini counterpart and Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince. India thanked the UAE and Bahrain for taking special care of the [Indian diaspora](#) during the ongoing pandemic.<sup>154</sup> In another development with far reaching impact for Indian migrant workers, Saudi Arabia announced easing of certain restrictions, beginning March 2021, in its [kafala system](#), which restricts migrant workers from changing jobs or leaving the country without the employer's consent.<sup>155</sup>





EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar meets Bahrain's Foreign Minister Dr. Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani in Manama, November 25, 2020. Source: Twitter/@DrSJaishankar

## Israel and Northeast India

In a major boost to the growing India-Israel partnership, Israel's Ambassador visited India's Northeast and expressed Tel Aviv's interest in "sharing advanced technologies to boost [manufacturing](#) capabilities in the region".<sup>156</sup> Israel has also agreed to collaborate to set up two agricultural centres of excellence in the North-eastern state of [Meghalaya](#).<sup>157</sup> On the healthcare front, the '[30 second coronavirus test](#)' jointly developed by India and Israel has reached its final stage and is now being calibrated by the Israeli team after testing was completed in India.<sup>158</sup>

On the security front, India welcomed the normalisation of relations between [Sudan and Israel](#) and the removal of Khartoum from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism.<sup>159</sup> In another development, EAM Dr. Jaishankar wished the Palestinian people on the day of the [declaration of independence](#) (November 15) and reiterated support to Palestine's aspirations of statehood.<sup>160</sup>

## Regional Security Issues

Recently, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan stated that his country is "under pressure to [recognise Israel](#)".<sup>161</sup> However, the Prime Minister has refused to do so and said that "Islamabad would continue to follow in [Muhammad Ali] Jinnah's footsteps vis-à-vis Palestine".



F35 Lightning II at Eielson Air Force Base in Alaska, April 22, 2020. Source: Twitter/@usairforce

The 'Abraham Accords' have a major bearing on arms sales in West Asia. In a significant development, the Trump administration officially announced its approval and subsequent notification to the US Congress of its intent for the sale of 50 [F-35 stealth aircraft](#) worth USD10.4 billion, 18 MQ-9B drones worth USD2.97 billion, and USD10 billion worth of air-to-air and air-to-ground munitions to the United Arab Emirates.<sup>162</sup> This total arms package is worth around USD23.37 billion.<sup>163</sup> Reports also suggest that a bill is likely to be introduced in the US Congress that would require consideration to sell '[bunker buster bombs](#)' to Israel.<sup>164</sup>

The US-China 5G confrontation has reached Egypt, with the US urging Egyptian government to join the '[clean network](#)' initiative and keep Chinese companies out of the country's 5G telecommunications infrastructure.<sup>165</sup> On the other hand, the [China State Construction Engineering](#) Corporation has

agreed to a USD2.2 billion loan to finance the Central Business district in Egypt's New Administrative Capital.<sup>166</sup>

### Managing Middle East: New Strands of Solidarity

Since last month, there has been a sharp rise in [anti-French sentiment](#) in the Middle East in the aftermath of President Macron's remarks portraying cartoons of Prophet Muhammad as part of freedom of expression.<sup>167</sup> India has "strongly deplored the personal attacks on President Emmanuel Macron...and also condemned the brutal terrorist attack that took the life of a French teacher".<sup>168</sup> During a statement in an open debate at the UN Security Council, "India urged concerned parties in the Middle East to completely stop support to the terrorist organisations like [ISIL](#) (Islamic State of the Iraq and Levant) and others".<sup>169</sup>

India and Greece also held foreign ministerial level talks on "strengthening [Greece-India relations](#) and developments in the Eastern Mediterranean and South Asia".<sup>170</sup> Considering the growing threat of the Pakistan-Turkey partnership, Delhi and Athens are exploring the possibilities of working closely with each other in international forums. As the Middle East experiences significant geopolitical changes, India is moving quickly to build new partnerships.

## India, PAI and CARs\*: Instability and Half-Life Syndrome

Shreyas Deshmukh

### Pakistan in Crisis Mode: Political Developments

Even as a second wave of the coronavirus pandemic swept through Pakistan, opposition parties held rallies across major cities, most recently in Peshawar on November 22. The rallies were staged by the [Pakistan Democratic Movement](#)<sup>171</sup> (PDM), the 11-party alliance formed in late September to challenge the Imran Khan-led government. As the 'half-life syndrome' comes back to haunt the ruling regime, the opposition alliance does not seem to be on the same page on [many issues](#).<sup>172</sup> For instance, the Army inquiry report published on November 10 on the arrest of [Captain Safdar](#), son-in-law of Nawaz Sharif, was [welcomed by PPP](#) leader Bilawal Bhutto but was '[rejected](#)' by Nawaz Sharif.<sup>173</sup> However, the PDM held together in demanding the resignation of Imran Khan by labelling him a 'selected Prime Minister'. Imran's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) remained busy [countering the narrative](#) of the PDM in a bid to avert future political instability.<sup>174</sup> However, an inability to directly address issues like rising food prices has only helped the opposition.

### Economic uncertainty

Pakistan's economic future looks grim as its foreign currency reserves held with the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) stands at [USD12.18 billion](#) out of which approximately USD10 billion is in the form of "foreign loans or swaps obligations".<sup>175</sup> Given Pakistan's dependence on imports, it is expected that the quantum of foreign reserves could last for about three to four months.<sup>176</sup> Islamabad has therefore requested a rollover of USD2 billion from Saudi Arabia, and may also receive another USD2 billion in the form of "loan deposits from the UAE" in the near future.<sup>177</sup>

Excessive dependence on external donors, agricultural mismanagement and structural economic deficiencies have led to the collapse of the economic base. The country, traditionally famous for the production of wheat, has faced a major staple food crisis in the last few months, prompting it to import 200,000 tons of wheat [from Russia](#).<sup>178</sup> Cotton stockpiling has fallen by 43 per cent to 3.45 million bales (as on October 31). The country requires an additional 7 million bales worth USD3 billion to fulfil [domestic demand](#).<sup>179</sup> The Pakistani power sector's circular debt has reached Rs.2.3 trillion in November. Remarkably,

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\* PAI stands for Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran while CARs stands for Central Asian Republics.



more than Rs.1 trillion has been added in the last two years of the [PTI government](#).<sup>180</sup> To compound the misery, it was [reported on November 9](#) that the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) committee has ruled in favour of an Australian copper mining joint venture in the [Reko Diq litigation](#) "to collect 50 per cent of the massive July 2019 \$5.97 billion arbitral award against Pakistan".<sup>181</sup>

In the last two decades, Pakistan's economy has become dependent on external support from three major segments. This includes multinational organisations like the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, major economic powers like the US, Saudi Arabia and the UAE and more recently from China, which has invested heavily in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

However, Islamabad's traditional international donors like the IMF have lost faith and are pressing hard for structural reforms in the power sector, tax collection and currency regulation before releasing any funds under the [Extended Fund Facility](#).<sup>182</sup> With the US withdrawal from the Afghanistan Coalition Support Fund to Pakistan, major donors like Saudi Arabia have lost interest in Pakistan, in part to Islamabad's refusal to participate in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. In November, [Riyadh indicated](#) that it might refuse to roll over a debt of USD2 billion to Pakistan as promised earlier.<sup>183</sup>

On the other hand, China invested in strategic projects like Gwadar Port and connectivity infrastructure but is rigorously negotiating investments in the next phase of the CPEC. 14 key foreign funded projects, such as Jamshoro power generation project and a project pertaining to electricity transmission projects, have become [white elephants](#) due to slow disbursement of funds and lack of supporting infrastructure.<sup>184</sup>

On November 18, Russia and Pakistan [signed a revised deal](#) for laying the Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline. Pakistan will have a stake of 74 per cent whereas Russia will have a 26 per cent stake in the project. The agreement is to build a high-pressure gas transmission pipeline from Port Qasim (Karachi) to Kasur (Punjab).<sup>185</sup>

## Social restructuring

The Imran Khan government has introduced the [new education policy](#) keeping in view Madrassah reforms.<sup>186</sup> According to a report by the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, around 1.8 million children study in [religious seminaries](#).<sup>187</sup> The reforms aim to create a single national curriculum, which will be implemented from 2021. Renowned educationalists have

criticised the reforms as being more divisive than cohesive. Over the past few months, the country also witnessed increased sectarian violence and attempts to strengthen blasphemy laws.



Site of a Blast at madrassah in Peshawar, October 27, 2020, Source: [Dawn](#)

### Re-rising terrorism

Since the launch of military operation [Radd-ul-Fasaad](#) in 2017 against home grown terrorists across the country, Pakistan claims to have recorded a significant decrease in terrorist activities.<sup>188</sup> Under pressure from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the PTI government passed the Anti-Money Laundering (Second Amendment) Bill 2020 in August 2020 to [curb terrorist funding](#). However, in what has become a trend in the last two years, the government passes a few laws and the judiciary shows some proactiveness by speeding the proceedings of cases against terrorists close to the date of an FATF evaluation. For instance, in November 2020, an anti-terrorism court (ATC) convicted the Jama'at-ud-Da'wah (JuD) chief [Hafiz Saeed](#) and three others in two separate terror-financing cases and handed down 10 years and six-months of imprisonment each.<sup>189</sup> There have also been frequent news reports regarding the seizure of [narcotic substances](#) in large quantities across the country in the months of October and November.<sup>190</sup> It appears that these actions are designed to ensure that Pakistan does not get blacklisted by the FATF.

Rising attacks on [security personnel](#) across the country,<sup>191</sup> incidents of [kidnapping](#) of Shia pilgrims<sup>192</sup> and [reappearance of posters](#) warning female students to abandon education in the erstwhile FATA<sup>193</sup> give the impression that the strategies drawn by Pakistan's National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) have failed to disband terrorist infrastructure and defeat extremists.

Pakistan has blamed India for the unification of [TTP factions](#)<sup>194</sup> as well as recent attacks in the country and handed over a [dossier](#) to the UN Secretary General on November 25.<sup>195</sup> This fits the usual pattern of Pakistan's ruling regime seeking to divert attention from the failure of governance and increased terrorist incidents and ceasefire violations on the Line of Control [in Kashmir](#).<sup>196</sup> The ruling regime has attempted to declare an unofficial national emergency due to the deteriorating security situation.



Four Humvees of Nato forces torched in Khyber, October 17, 2020, Source: [Pakistan Forward](#)

## Afghanistan and Central Asia

While Taliban and the Afghanistan government have reached an agreement on the modalities for proceeding with the peace talks, the situation continues to remain fragile. The Taliban have maintained its aggressive posture while US President Donald Trump has been pressing for withdrawal of troops by mid-January 2021. This has increased pressure on the Afghan government and the US's NATO allies. A pledge of [USD12 billion](#) announced by foreign donors in civilian aid to Afghanistan over the next four years at the Afghanistan Conference organised at Geneva (over VTC) on November 24 provided much-



needed financial relief.<sup>197</sup> However, the funding comes with caveats such as ensuring progress in peace talks.

On November 19, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, with the Foreign Minister and DG ISI, visited Kabul and met President Ghani and other stakeholders. The focus of their [discussion](#) was on bilateral security and economic ties.<sup>198</sup> Pakistan could have played an important role in the peace process by pushing the Taliban for a ceasefire as a preamble to peace process. Instead, it has restricted itself to just taking credit for bringing the Taliban to the [negotiating table](#) and blaming the US and other countries for violence.<sup>199</sup>

Peace in Afghanistan is necessary to ensure India's increasing engagement with the Central Asian Republics (CARs). Therefore, options to decrease violence in Afghanistan formed the central issue discussed at the [trilateral meeting](#) between India-Iran-Russia on November 4.<sup>200</sup> At the 2020 Afghanistan Conference held on November 23-24 in Geneva, India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar announced the [conclusion of an agreement](#) for the construction of the Shatoot dam with Afghanistan, which would provide safe drinking water to 2 million residents of Kabul city.<sup>201</sup> He also announced the launch of Phase-IV of High Impact Community Development Projects in Afghanistan, which includes more than 100 projects worth USD80 million.<sup>202</sup>

On November 17 and 20, India held Foreign Office Consultations via digital video-conference with [Kazakhstan](#) and [Uzbekistan](#) respectively.<sup>203</sup> The consultations included discussions on bilateral co-operation and implementation of projects covered under the Indian Line of Credit.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO) Summit 2020, November 10, 2020, Source: [MEA](#)

On November 10, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi participated in the 20<sup>th</sup> Summit of the SCO Council of Heads of State and [reiterated](#) India's commitment to strengthening connectivity in the region with initiatives like the International North-South Transport Corridor, Chabahar Port and the Ashgabat Agreement.<sup>204</sup>

### Defence Updates

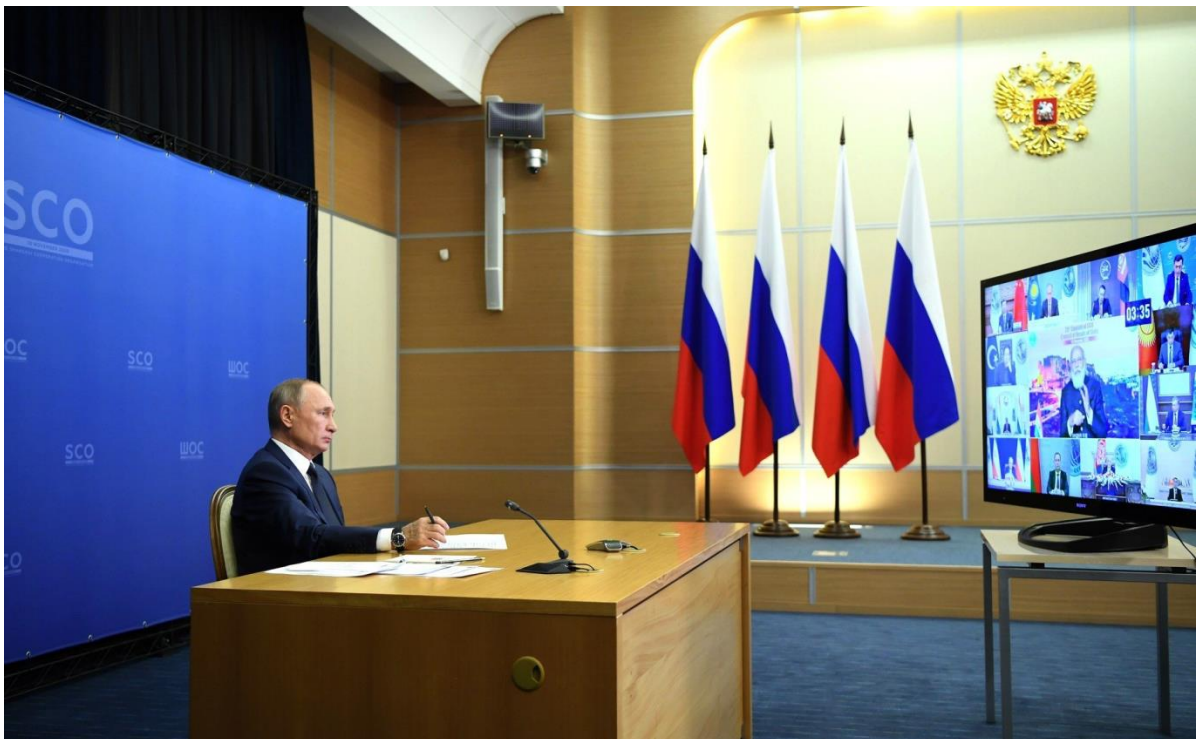
- Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, among other countries, will now be able to send their officers to India for annual training at the National Defence College (NDC). According to Defence Secretary Ajay Kumar, over the next two years, NDC will increase its intake from its current capacity of 100 by 20 participants. Of the existing capacity, 75 are reserved for Indian senior defence and civil services officers and 25 are for officers from foreign nations across the continents.<sup>205</sup>
- The commissioning ceremony of Pakistan Navy ship Tabuk was held at the Black Sea Port of Constanta in Romania on November 13, 2020. The contract for two corvettes for the Pakistan Navy was signed between the Ministry of Defence Production Pakistan and M/s Damen, Romania earlier. The first ship, PNS Yarmook, was commissioned on February 13, 2020.<sup>206</sup>

## Russia: Strengthening Multilateral Engagements

Anushka Nair

Russia hosted the 20<sup>th</sup> Summit of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO) Council of [Heads of State](#) on November 10.<sup>207</sup> [Discussions](#) centred round co-operation in the economic, medical, counter terrorism and business spheres.<sup>208</sup> Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his address, reflected on the need for reformed multilateralism, regional peace and security and strengthening connectivity.<sup>209</sup>

On November 17, Russian President Vladimir Putin chaired a video conference of the [BRICS](#) heads of government, where the five countries adopted the Moscow Declaration, reflecting a joint approach towards strengthening economic co-operation and counter-terrorism plans.<sup>210</sup> India will chair the BRICS forum in 2021.



President Putin at the 20<sup>th</sup> Summit of the SCO Heads of State, November 10, 2020.

Source: Twitter/@RusEmbIndia

The 5<sup>th</sup> joint military exercise, '[Friendship-2020](#)' was held between Russia and Pakistan from November 9-21.<sup>211</sup> The exercise was held at the Tarbela special operations training ground in Pakistan for troops to gain shared experience in highland combat training and combating illegal armed groups.<sup>212</sup>

Russian President Vladimir Putin has [held off](#) on congratulating the USA's President-elect Joe Biden, with the Kremlin announcing that it would wait for an official declaration of the vote count. A Kremlin spokesperson also noted that the delay in President Putin's congratulations was also influenced by the fact that incumbent President Donald Trump announced his intent to challenge the verdict legally, and thus Russia felt it appropriate to wait for an official announcement.<sup>213</sup> A Russian [Foreign Ministry spokesperson](#) had previously called the US electoral system 'flawed', and said that the race was hindered by "the archaic nature of the relevant legislation and a lack of regulation on (sic) a number of fundamental points".<sup>214</sup> In an [interview](#) with the Russian State Television, President Putin explained his unwillingness to congratulate President-elect Biden and pointed out that many had made the error of congratulating Hillary Clinton in 2016, when in fact Donald Trump was the victorious candidate.<sup>215</sup>

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi had a [telephone conversation](#) on November 18, during they discussed aligning of development plans for the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>216</sup> The two ministers also noted the commencement of the China-Russia Year of Scientific and Technological Innovation, and agreed to [maintain high-level bilateral exchanges](#) leading up to the 20-year anniversary of the signing of the China-Russia Treaty of Good-neighbourliness and Friendly Co-operation next year.<sup>217</sup> In continuation to President Putin's remarks about the China-Russia relationship last month, the [Chinese foreign ministry](#) in November acknowledged that the comments "demonstrate the high level and special nature" of Moscow's bilateral ties with Beijing.<sup>218</sup>

In a move that may irk Beijing, a Russian diplomat in New Delhi said that the [Philippines has expressed keen interest](#) in purchasing the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, developed jointly by India and Russia.<sup>219</sup> The acquisition could provide the Philippines a strong deterrent against Chinese belligerence in the disputed territories of the South China Sea, and a deal is expected to be finalised in early 2021.

Russia's deputy chief of mission in New Delhi also recently stated that Moscow is willing to co-operate with New Delhi on requests to expedite the delivery of the [S-400](#) air defence systems, and that the handover of the first batch should be complete by the end of next year.<sup>220</sup> He also said that the two countries are nearing the finalisation of a [deal for 200 Ka-226 helicopters](#), valued at USD2 billion.<sup>221</sup> In line with the AatmaNirbhar Bharat and Make in India schemes, the



deal, if finalised, will ensure the highest possible degree of localisation of components.

A [statement](#) released by the Russian Embassy in India said that Russia's state-owned United Shipbuilding Corporation (USC) will make a bid to acquire Indian shipyard Reliance Naval and Engineering Ltd (RNEL).<sup>222</sup> The USC is in the process of auditing RNEL and reviewing investment options. While the COVID-19 pandemic had caused some delay in the analysis and prevented direct interaction between officials from the two sides, the statement said that USC's decision on a formal bid for the [RNEL shipyard](#) will be revealed soon.<sup>223</sup>

Russia is witnessing a second wave of the Covid-19, and cases are springing up in distant provinces that lack the medical infrastructure and amenities easily available to patients in the cities. At the same time, Moscow is rushing to keep up with Western pharmaceuticals firms in the race for a vaccine. The RDIF recently announced that based on the ongoing Phase-3 trials, the Sputnik V vaccine has an "interim efficacy" [of 91.4 per cent](#).<sup>224</sup> The first batches of the vaccine were also reported to have arrived in India on November 11, and the adaptive Phase II/III trials are on track to commence soon, according to the RDIF's partner in India, Dr. Reddy's Laboratories. The RDIF has also entered a deal with Hyderabad-based [Hetero Biopharma](#) "to manufacture over 100 million doses annually".<sup>225</sup>

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