



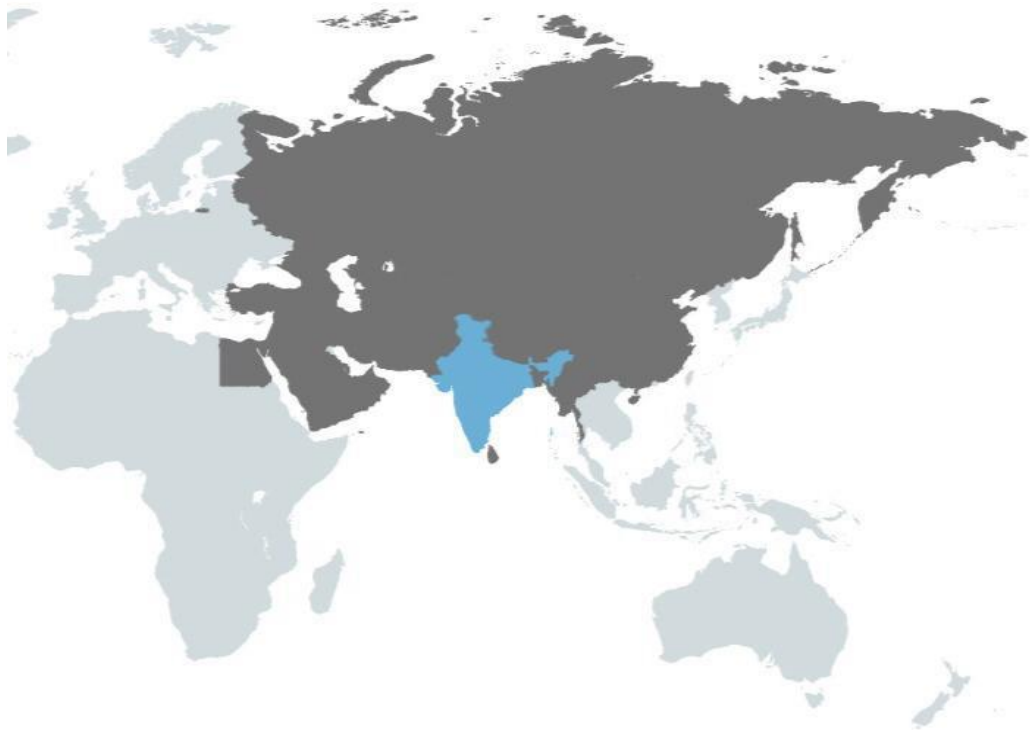
Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

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DPG India Strategic Review

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DPG INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

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

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World map

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Overview: Multipolarity and Multilateralism

Sanjay Pulipaka and Mohit Musaddi

The international order is in the midst of a structural shift. However, the shift is not as sudden as the fall of the Berlin Wall, which marked the end of the Cold War. Rather, it has been taking place steadily over the past decade and a half. The economic power shift towards the Indo-Pacific heralds movement towards a multipolar order. However, it appears that Beijing is intent on preventing such a shift, and instead wants to establish bipolarity. To this end, it has resorted to three means, namely, aggressive territorial assertions against other rising powers, constraining space for others through economic activities that create irreversible dependencies, and resisting reforms in international organisations which it has started to influence.

Moreover, the uncertainties that are inherent to multipolarity get amplified because of new areas of contestation, which include the digital domain where nation-states have been able to alter perceptions about others, about themselves and have also been marginally successful in impacting political processes outside their natural domain. With the growth of new technologies, and the advance of IR 4.0, new dimensions of political contests have come to the fore.

China's Multiple Wars

China's use of digital means for political espionage and hybrid warfare came to light through a series of investigations by leading newspapers across the world. In India, an [Indian Express report](#) revealed that a Chinese data firm has been tracking over 10,000 Indian nationals, including leading personalities such as current and former Prime Ministers.¹ While there is little surprise that Beijing has been monitoring the world's data, what is revealing is the scale of operations that are being carried out. A [similar report](#) was published in Australia, which revealed that up to 35,000 Australians were being monitored.² It is becoming increasingly evident that China views future contestations as data-oriented.

In May 2020, the US launched '[The Clean Network](#)' programme, an "approach to safeguarding the nation's assets... from aggressive intrusions by malign actors, such as the Chinese Communist Party".³ The [new programme](#) is centred around ensuring that emerging global digital infrastructure, particularly of 5G

technology, is built without Chinese companies.⁴ Over 30 countries, including India, have already signed up or are supportive of the programme.

Meanwhile, border tensions between Beijing and Delhi have entered into a sixth month and show little sign of abating. There are [reports](#) indicating that more than a month before the stand-off began, Indian troops were prevented from accessing traditional patrol points on the north bank of Pangong Tso.⁵ In September, India established [fortified positions](#) on “six new major hill features on the Line of Actual Control (LAC)”.⁶ These include Magar hill, Gurung Hill, Recehen La, Rezang La, and Mokhpari; the action is expected to give Indian forces a dominating presence over Chinese positions near the Pangong Tso lake and adjoining areas.⁷ After the Indian Army moved into Mokhpari, it foiled a Chinese attempt to reach the top of the hill on September 7. In the process, PLA troops “fired a few rounds in the air” as [warning shots](#).⁸ This was the first instance since 1975 that shots were fired anywhere along the LAC. On September 22, speaking in the Lok Sabha, Defence Minister [Rajnath Singh](#) termed Chinese conduct as being “in complete violation of all mutually agreed norms”.⁹

On de-escalation, the month saw a shift in goalposts. A meeting between Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Moscow on September 10 concluded with an agreement on a [five-point approach](#) to resolving the crisis.¹⁰ After a 12-hour marathon joint military talks on September 21, it was [mutually decided](#) that both sides will “stop sending more troops to the front line, and refrain from unilaterally changing the situation on ground.”¹¹ It is clear that the metric of success to measure [de-escalation](#) is no longer the scale of pulling back troops but rather refraining from sending additional troops.¹² The Indian contention has been that the Chinese should pull back first given that Beijing had violated all agreed protocols through its transgressions in May. As aptly summarised by the [Indian Air Chief](#) on September 29, “the present security scenario... is at an uneasy ‘no war, no peace’ status”.¹³

An Indian newspaper was informed by China that Beijing would abide by its [LAC claim](#) of November 1959, which India has never recognised or accepted.¹⁴ However, as strategist Brahma Chellaney [noted](#), the statement was not published on the Chinese Foreign Ministry website, implying that it was meant for Indian eyes only.¹⁵ Such moves by Beijing only reinforced the impression that any possibility of China withdrawing first is limited.

Towards the end of August, President Xi [Jinping visited Tibet](#) and called for the establishment of a “new modern socialist Tibet”, which would act an

“impregnable fortress” and protect against “splittism”.¹⁶ Foreign Minister Wang Yi also made similar statements on August 17 during a rare visit to Tibet. Such developments have sinister implications for neighbouring states, particularly Nepal and Bhutan.

Need for Policy Continuity in the Neighbourhood

China was [reported](#) to have encroached on Nepalese territory and constructed 11 buildings “in a remote part of the [Humla] district that Nepal claims as its own territory”.¹⁷ Although the Nepal Foreign Ministry issued a press statement denying any encroachment, this is reflective of constant Chinese intrusions in the Himalayan border region. China has also [reportedly](#) been “diverting the course of rivers while constructing roads in Tibet”, allowing it to occupy Nepali land along the border areas.¹⁸

Neighbourhood discords that were confined to the political level are in danger of being mainstreamed. Months after updating its political map to include Indian territory, Nepal reflected these claims in an academic textbook. While Kathmandu later decided to [stop the distribution](#) of the book owing to “factual errors”, this may be indicative of a long-term trend in Delhi-Kathmandu relations.¹⁹

The escalation in the India-China border areas in September led to the visits of the Indian Foreign Secretary and the Indian Army Chief to Myanmar being [postponed](#).²⁰ Myanmar, meanwhile, had received senior CCP Politburo member [Yang Jiechi](#) on September 1.²¹ During his visit, Jiechi held meetings with the President, State Counsellor and the Army Chief of Myanmar.²²

The forthcoming elections (November 8, 2020) in Myanmar may result in a spike in violence, including in the disturbed Rakhine area, which may spill over to the rest of the region. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in her [address](#) to the 75th session of the UNGA, called on the international community to facilitate the effective resolution of the ongoing crisis on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.²³ Dhaka also [summoned](#) the Myanmar Ambassador on September 13 to inquire about the reported military build-up on the Myanmar side of the border.²⁴

India’s relationship with Bangladesh faced setbacks in September. A sudden ban of [exports of onions](#) by India on September 14 led to a steep increase in onion prices in Bangladesh.²⁵ Although Delhi soon made an exception for Bangladesh and released the consignment that Dhaka had already paid for, this highlighted the need for Delhi to demonstrate greater sensitivity towards its neighbours. Lack of predictability in trade policies will only generate a trust

deficit in India-centric supply networks. Turkey, meanwhile, immediately [offered](#) to export 15,000 tonnes of onions to Bangladesh to meet Dhaka's demands.²⁶

In mid-September, a successful trial run took place through a new [inland waterways](#) route from Bangladesh to the eastern Indian state of Tripura.²⁷ On September 29, the foreign ministers of India and Bangladesh participated in the 6th India-Bangladesh [Joint Consultative Commission](#) (JCC).²⁸ An India-Bangladesh Virtual Summit will likely be held in December 2020.²⁹

Stringing the Pearls in the Ocean

India's is now deploying new frameworks of engagement with the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Decades ago, during the Cold War, India was calling for maintaining the [IOR as a zone of peace](#).³⁰ Today, with the military presence of various actors in the IOR a given fact, India has shifted to a two-pronged approach.

One, Delhi is focused on scaling up bilateral relations through sustained Overseas Development Assistance (ODA). For instance, India has scaled up its development assistance to the Maldives in the past few months. Apart from providing a grant of USD 100 million for the Greater Male Connectivity Project in August, Delhi in September [agreed to](#) finance a police training centre, a synthetic track at the local sports facility and provide USD 250 million in grant assistance for Male's pandemic response.³¹

Second, India has also worked with friendly neighbours to maintain a dominant presence in the IOR. Delhi welcomed the Maldives-US Defence Co-operation Framework agreement as it is in tune with India's overall interest.³²

Enhanced bilateral co-operation with the Maldives was reflected in multilateral platforms. While in May, the Maldives had opposed an OIC move to criticise India on Islamophobia, in September, Male [blocked a proposal](#) to hold the SAARC summit in Pakistan.³³

With Sri Lanka, India has scaled up bilateral relations. During the first digital Summit between Indian Prime Minister Modi and Sri Lankan President Rajapaksa, they agreed to [step up co-operation](#) to combat terrorism, prevent drug trafficking and increase capacity building.³⁴ India has also promised to provide assistance of USD 15 million for the promotion of Buddhist religious ties between the two countries. In September, India also continued its first responder duties by assisting the Sri Lankan Navy to put out a [fire](#) on a commercial oil tanker.³⁵

Af-Pak Dilemma – A Persistent Challenge

In the midst of concerns about a two-front war, India's relations with Pakistan continue to nosedive on diplomatic and security fronts.

India's diplomatic relations with Pakistan took a further hit when Islamabad [denied a visa](#) to Indian diplomat Jayant Khobragade, who was set to be appointed as the acting head of the Indian High Commission in Islamabad.³⁶ Pakistan reportedly denied a visa on the ground that the diplomat was "too senior for the post".³⁷ In another incident on September 16, during a virtual meeting of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO), Indian NSA Ajit [Doval walked out](#) after his Pakistani counterpart "deliberately projected a fictitious map" of Pakistan.³⁸ The Ministry of External Affairs said that the act was "in violation of the norms of the meeting".³⁹

On September 16, Pakistan's federal minister for Gilgit-Baltistan affairs conveyed that the Imran Khan administration will make Gilgit-Baltistan the [country's fifth province](#).⁴⁰ Elections to the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly will [reportedly](#) be held on November 15 2020.⁴¹ On September 29, the Government of India released a [statement](#) completely rejecting Pakistani attempts "to bring material changes in areas under its illegal and forcible occupation".⁴²

On the security front, there has been little progress on Pakistan's intentions to dismantle terrorist networks inside the country. On September 16, a joint sitting of the Pakistani parliament passed [three FATF](#) (Financial Action Task Force) related legislations to prevent being blacklisted.⁴³ However, reports also emerged that convicted terrorists continue to enjoy [safe haven](#) inside Pakistan, with some even receiving preferential treatment by the ISI.⁴⁴ Moreover, there has been no marked shift in Pakistan's attitude towards terrorist organisations. With the Taliban's nexus growing in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Islamabad may feel emboldened to further indulge in cross-border terrorist activities against India. Delhi has to ensure that Afghanistan does not once again become a base for terror operations against India.

Despite realising the need to engage with the evolving political frameworks in Afghanistan, Delhi's dilemma lies in validating regressive ideologies in the region. EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar [addressed](#) the inaugural session of the intra-Afghan negotiations on September 12 via videoconference.⁴⁵ He reiterated India's stance that any peace process must be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled. He also called for the need to preserve "the interests of minorities, women and vulnerable sections of the society".⁴⁶ In order to ensure

policy continuity in Afghanistan, Delhi must be able to balance between its principled expectations and the reality of the Taliban.

India's location next to the Af-Pak region, which has been the epicentre of terrorism and regional instability, will continue to present unique challenges.

United States

While addressing the 75th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, US President Donald Trump [criticised China](#) and called on the international community to hold Beijing accountable for its actions.⁴⁷ In his speech, he reflected the disapproval with which the US views Chinese policies, from trade to climate change.

In August 2020, the US had [imposed sanctions](#) on Chinese companies involved in building artificial islands in the South China Sea.⁴⁸ Some of these companies, particularly the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), are currently involved in mega infrastructure projects in the subcontinent. These include the Colombo port city and the New Yangon City Project. Chinese investments and infrastructure building activities will continue to have security implications in South Asia.

India is [reportedly](#) in the process of acquiring "30 General Atomics MQ-9B Guardian Drones" from Washington for approximately USD 3 billion.⁴⁹ During the 10th India-US DTTI (Defence Technology and Trade Initiative) meeting on September 15, Delhi and Washington signed a [statement](#) of intent "to strengthen the bilateral dialogue on defence technology co-operation".⁵⁰

West Asia: Recognising Multiple Fault lines

Israel has emerged as a reliable defence and technology partner for India. Delhi and Tel Aviv have created a Sub-Working Group (SWG) on [Defence Industrial Co-operation](#) to co-develop, co-produce and export defence equipment.⁵¹ India, Israel and the US have also begun co-operation to jointly develop open and transparent [5G communication](#) networks.⁵²

While the UAE had normalised relations with Israel in August, [Bahrain](#) also followed suit in September.⁵³ This trend will likely continue in the near future, with more Arab countries doing the same. This is indicative of a policy shift among Arab countries towards the Israel-Palestine dispute. Increasingly, the emerging view is that diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv need not be predicated upon the final resolution of Israel's disputes with Palestine. There is [growing recognition](#) that solutions to the civil war in Syria, political developments in

Lebanon, or the ongoing conflict in Yemen cannot be solely dependent on the Israel-Palestine equation.⁵⁴

These also provide an opportunity for India to encourage the Arab world to adopt a similar approach in South Asia as well. Co-operation between India and the Arab countries, especially in the economic and trade sectors, has gathered momentum in recent months. In end-August, an [e-marketplace](#) was launched to help bridge the gap between the Indian agricultural sector and the UAE's food industry.⁵⁵ Similarly, the [Saudi-India Business Network](#) was also launched on September 12 to enhance co-operation between the business communities of the two countries.⁵⁶

Russia

India has adopted a cautious approach on the Russian Covid-19 vaccine. The Indian private sector pharmaceutical giant Dr. Reddy's Laboratories entered into an [agreement](#) with Russia's RDIF for clinical trials and distribution of the Sputnik V vaccine in India.⁵⁷ Delhi's willingness to test the Russian vaccine also stems from its domestic requirements. India has the [second highest](#) number of active cases of COVID-19.⁵⁸ Moreover, for India, addressing its domestic requirements also necessitates large scale production and possibly multiple sources of vaccines. With Russia's Sputnik V and Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines, India is at the centre of two major vaccine development programmes. Successful large-scale vaccine production will also enable Delhi to distribute the vaccines in its immediate neighbourhood.

Russia has continued to be the focal point of multilateral interactions for India. In the last few months, Russia has hosted the RIC, BRICS and SCO meetings. Some of these multilateral platforms have provided an opportunity for Indian and Chinese ministers to conduct bilateral discussions on the sidelines. In this process, the inherent divergences and stress in some of these multilateral fora is also becoming evident. That Indian NSA Ajit Doval had to walk out of the SCO virtual meeting of NSAs after Pakistan displayed an inaccurate map is indicative of the fact that multilateral forums which have members with contested borders will see limited co-operation. This is not to advocate that India should withdraw from these forums; it is for India and Russia to work out joint strategies to ensure that their respective national interests are advanced while simultaneously ensuring that the relevance of these institutional frameworks is maintained.

Multilateralism and Quadrilateral Momentum

While the RIC, BRICS, and SCO meetings attracted considerable attention because of their high-level participation, [Quad related meetings](#) also acquired

momentum in September. These include the Australia-India-Japan-US Senior Officials Consultations (September 25), Australia-India-Japan Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (September 1), Australia-India-France Trilateral (September 9) and Australia-India-Japan-US Ambassadors' Meeting in Brussels (September 21).⁵⁹

There is an opinion in India that Delhi has a unique opportunity to present its views to the world with greater felicity.⁶⁰ Over the next two years, India will be a non-permanent member of the UNSC, president of the G20, hold the presidency of BRICS and RIC, and will host summits of the India-Africa Forum and the FIPIC (Forum for India-Pacific Islands Co-operation). Delhi must use these multilateral fora to push the agenda for reform of multilateral institutions.

PM Modi [addressed this issue](#) in his remarks at the UNGA on September 26, where he stated "we cannot fight today's challenges with outdated structures. Without comprehensive reforms, the UN faces a crisis of confidence."⁶¹ The Foreign Ministers of the [G4 group](#) – India, Brazil, Japan and Germany – met virtually on the sidelines of the UNGA Assembly on September 23 and pushed for reform of the UNSC to expand its permanent membership.⁶² Despite [China's dismissive reaction](#) to the meeting citing a lack of "widespread consensus [within the UNSC] on the arrangement of reform", the G4 initiative has received considerable support, particularly from France and the UK.⁶³

Conclusion

Persistent calls for reform of the United Nations, developments in the Middle East, collaboration between India, Israel, and the US to develop 5G networks and India's engagement with diverse actors in multiple frameworks highlight growing multipolarity in the international arena. As structural realist Kenneth Waltz has observed, "competition in multipolar systems is more complicated than the competition in bipolar ones because uncertainties about the comparative capabilities of [nation]-states multiply as numbers grow, and because estimates of the cohesiveness and strength of coalitions are hard to make."⁶⁴ To use the variables that Waltz deployed on comparative capabilities and cohesiveness of coalitions, China may have overestimated its capabilities and under-estimated the prospects of plurilateral frameworks. The Quad may be nowhere close to Euro-American alliance frameworks, but contrary to Chinese expectations, it has not disappeared like 'sea-foam'. Instead, there is greater crystallisation of such frameworks. As India and its partners move forward, there is a need to further advocate multipolarity and ensure better coordination among like-minded countries.

India and China: No War, No Peace

Antara Ghoshal Singh

The month started with a new round of tensions at the LAC after India reportedly “thwarted China’s efforts to occupy Indian territory in the southern bank of Pangong Lake” and “pre-emptively” [occupied](#) a number of strategic heights and bolstered its presence in Finger 2 and Finger 3 areas.⁶⁵ While China strongly protested India’s move, India has maintained that the strategic heights are on its side of the LAC; it has also rushed in additional troops and weapons to the region. Subsequently, Indian soldiers also occupied heights “overlooking PLA deployments on the ridgeline over Finger 4” on the northern bank of the Pangong Tso.⁶⁶ Overall, “India [has] bolstered its dominance in over [20 mountain heights](#) around the friction points near the Pangong Lake”.⁶⁷ The PLA has made repeated efforts to dislodge Indian troops from these heights as there were at least four incidents of warning shots being exchanged between the two sides between August 29 and September 8, 2020. This was the first time in [45 years](#) that shots were fired at the LAC.⁶⁸ It is understood that through these manoeuvres, India has [subtly altered](#) the dynamics at the LAC and gained itself bargaining chips at the negotiating table.⁶⁹

Amidst the heightened tension at the LAC, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh [held](#) talks with his Chinese counterpart General Wei Fenghe in Moscow on September 4 on the sidelines of the SCO ministerial meet.⁷⁰ This was also the first high-level physical exchange between the two sides after the border row erupted in Ladakh in early May.⁷¹ At the talks, which lasted for almost two and a half hours, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh reportedly pushed for “restoration of status quo ante at all friction points in eastern Ladakh.”⁷² Soon, on September 10, External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr. S Jaishankar met Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Moscow and agreed on a [five-point approach](#) to “quickly disengage” troops and “ease tensions”.⁷³ There was cautious optimism on either side over the consensus, even as questions were raised about the omission of the word “status-quo ante” in the official communique.⁷⁴

Despite the five-point agreement, subsequent [news reports](#) suggested that “there is a ‘standstill’ situation on the ground along the LAC where the armed men on either side keep holding their positions.”⁷⁵ China [continued](#) to put the ball for “disengagement in India’s court and said it was imperative for the latter to correct its “mistake”, disengage on the ground and take concrete steps to ease tensions.”⁷⁶ India, on the other hand, [stressed that](#) the “Chinese side should make the first move since it had created the rival troops’ “faceoff and military build-up by intruding into Indian Territory since early May.”⁷⁷

On September 16-17, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh spoke on China in the parliament, where he [asserted](#) that “Indian forces have shown patience, valour in the face of China’s provocations” and that “no force can stop Indian troops from patrolling Ladakh border”.⁷⁸ On September 18, a 90-minute meeting of the high-powered [China Study Group \(CSG\)](#) was held to monitor the situation on the border at the highest level, take stock of “the operational situation, set the future strategy and the agenda for future military talks.”⁷⁹

The sixth round of discussions at the Corps Commander-level was held at Moldo, the border meeting point on the Chinese side near Chushul on September 21. The main focus of the meeting was to expedite the process of implementation of the five-point agreement reached between the two foreign ministers. This was the first time that an [MEA official](#) was part of the military talks between the two sides.⁸⁰ Following a marathon 15-hours long meeting, for the first time, a joint press [statement](#) was issued stating that an agreement was reached between the two sides to “implement the important consensus reached by the leaders of the two countries, strengthen communication on the ground, avoid misunderstandings and misjudgements, stop sending more troops to the frontline, refrain from unilaterally changing the situation on the ground, and avoid taking any actions that may complicate the situation.”⁸¹ The two sides also agreed to hold the 7th round of talks in the near future.⁸²



Indian Army vehicles making its way towards Eastern Ladakh. Source: Indian Express

Despite various diplomatic meetings during the month, de-escalation and disengagement on the ground continue to remain elusive at the LAC. The situation was aptly summed up by Indian [Air Force Chief](#) RKS Bhadauria as “an uneasy, no war-no peace” situation.⁸³ It is [reported](#) that the Indian military has already begun an “advance winter stocking operation” in Eastern Ladakh⁸⁴. It is increasingly looking likely that India and China may continue to deploy a large number of troops all through the winter at extremely high altitudes.

India and the Neighbourhood: Connectivity Gains and Policy Continuity

Mohit Musaddi

Nepal

Three months after Kathmandu had passed an amendment to update its political map, which included the Indian territories of Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura, Nepal has reflected those changes in its [academic curriculum](#).⁸⁵ A book to “teach students about Nepal’s territory and border disputes” was released with the Education Minister of Nepal having written the preface. In it, [the Minister](#) “tries to explain how he campaigned 24 years back to chase the Indian Army away” from Nepali territory.⁸⁶ He also advocated that “it was natural for a proud Nepali to get hurt by the move of India to publish its political map incorporating Nepal’s land”.⁸⁷ However, a media report on September 22 said that Nepal has decided to [stop distribution](#) and printing of the books as there were a “number of factual errors” in the book.⁸⁸ Nepal has reportedly also decided to [conduct a census](#) in the areas it has claimed.⁸⁹ The next 10-yearly census exercise in Nepal is due in May 2021.



Source: Twitter/ @PiyushGoyal

Despite the border tensions, India's ongoing connectivity projects have continued. On September 18, India delivered [two DEMU train sets](#) to Nepal, which will be used for the train journey from Jayanagar (Bihar) to Kurtha (Janakpur, Nepal).⁹⁰ It will be operated by the Nepal Railways and is expected to extend to Bardibas (Nepal). The trains will operate on broad-gauge tracks, which were built in Nepal with [Indian assistance](#).⁹¹

On September 22, India also handed over cheques worth INR96 crore (USD13 million) "towards housing and school sector assistance under the Indian government's [post-earthquake reconstruction](#) commitment in the Himalayan country".⁹² The Government of India has fulfilled 92 per cent of its total commitment to re-building 50,000 houses in Nepal. Seven schools, reconstructed with Indian aid, are reportedly [ready for handover](#).⁹³

On September 4, India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval met Nepal's Ambassador to India, wherein they stressed the "need for dialogue" to [resolve differences](#).⁹⁴ Both sides have attempted to resume high-level communications and re-establish contact with some improvements witnessed in August. India is due to convene a Nepal-India Joint Commission, and the Indian Foreign Secretary is expected to travel to Kathmandu in the near future.⁹⁵



Beijing has erected 11 buildings in a territory which have been claimed by both Nepal and China. Source: The Kathmandu Post

Kathmandu must also take note of alleged Chinese encroachment into its territory. The Chinese side had reportedly [constructed 11 buildings](#) "in a remote part of the [Humla] district that Nepal claims as its own territory".⁹⁶ Senior Nepalese officials were of the view that this could have happened due to a "failure to conduct regular inspection" of border areas. However, the Nepal

Foreign Ministry released a [Press Statement](#) on September 23 clarifying that “the said buildings are not located within the Nepali territory”.⁹⁷ Even so, on the same day, there were [protests](#) near the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu against the supposed encroachments.⁹⁸

Bangladesh

On September 29, EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar and Foreign Minister Dr. A.K. Abdul Momen held the 6th meeting of the India-Bangladesh Joint Consultative Commission (JCC) via videoconference. They reviewed the “expanding connectivity in road, rail, inland waterways and ports” and agreed to expedite ongoing projects.⁹⁹ The issue of a meeting of the Joint River Commission, which had been decided upon during a [telephone conversation](#) between the two ministers on September 7, was also discussed.¹⁰⁰ PM Modi and PM Hasina are expected to hold a Virtual Summit in December 2020.



EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar at the 6th meeting of the India-Bangladesh Joint Consultative Commission (JCC), September 29, 2020. Source: Twitter/ @DrSJaishankar

Amid improving Bangladesh-China relations, US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper on September 11 had a telephone conversation with Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina, who also oversees the Ministry of Defence. [Discussions](#) covered an iteration of their “shared commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific... and specific bilateral defence priorities including maritime and regional security...and initiatives to modernise Bangladesh’s military capabilities”.¹⁰¹ While more than 70 per cent of Bangladesh’s arms imports come from China,

[the US](#) has been making steady efforts to ensure that it becomes Dhaka's "partner of choice" for purchase of defence articles.¹⁰²

On September 14, India decided to ban the export of onions in order to meet domestic demand. This caused a steep rise in onion prices in Bangladesh, which depends substantially on vegetable imports from India. Dhaka, therefore, sent an [official note of protest](#) to India, saying "such expected bans run counter to bilateral understandings".¹⁰³ To quell discontent, Delhi made an exception for Bangladesh and "released the consignment of onions that Dhaka had already paid for before the ban had come into effect".¹⁰⁴ On its part, Dhaka has also decided to give special permission to its traders to [export hilsa fish](#) to India.¹⁰⁵ Bangladesh had banned exports of the fish in 2012 but has allowed it on a case-by-case basis to meet Indian demands.

India and Bangladesh have also enhanced connectivity in recent months. An [inland waterways trial run](#) was carried out from Bangladesh (Daudkandi) to India (Sonamura, Tripura) on September 3.¹⁰⁶ In a first, a Bangladeshi barge carrying 50 tonnes of cement reached India on September 5.¹⁰⁷ The Protocol for Inland Water Trade and Transit (PIWTT) was signed between India and Bangladesh in 1972 and, in the last one year, nearly 3.5 million tonnes of cargo have been transported using the protocol routes.¹⁰⁸ The Sonamura-Daudkandi stretch is part of the 2nd Addendum to the PIWTT, which was signed on May 20, 2020.¹⁰⁹

EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar remarked on September 18 that India and Japan are looking for joint avenues for [co-operation in third countries](#), especially Bangladesh and Myanmar.¹¹⁰ The Act East Forum between Delhi and Tokyo "focuses on specific projects to modernise India's northeast region... [and] also has a larger significance for connectivity with Bangladesh and Myanmar".¹¹¹

Myanmar

In late August, India had handed over a cheque of USD5 million for the India-Myanmar Border Area Development.¹¹² This is part of an [annual commitment](#) from an MoU signed in May 2012 for the improvement of "basic infrastructure and livelihood development of the Chin State and Naga Self-Administered Zone".¹¹³

The Indian Army Chief and the Foreign Secretary were reportedly due to [travel to Myanmar](#) on September 2. However, it had to be put off due to an escalation in the India-China border stand-off.¹¹⁴ The trip would have been crucial as Myanmar goes into elections in November 2020, when State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), is expected to

win the most seats again. On September 7, the State Counsellor had formally started the [election campaign](#).¹¹⁵ However, the elections are being overshadowed in Myanmar by a second wave of the coronavirus. The opposition parties' plea to the Election Commission seeking a postponement has been [rejected](#) as the Commission is confident that appropriate arrangements have been made for a smooth voting process.¹¹⁶

China has also been actively pushing its interests in Myanmar amidst the upcoming elections. Senior Politburo member Yang Jiechi made a brief [stop in Naypyidaw](#) on September 1 on his trip to Europe. He held separate meetings with State Counsellor Suu Kyi, President U Win Myint and Myanmar military commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing.¹¹⁷ Jiechi reportedly sought assurances from the Myanmar leadership on the smooth implementation of projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹¹⁸ Recently, Myanmar has been looking to [allow other companies](#) to challenge a bid from China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) to build the New Yangon City Project.¹¹⁹ Analysts say that the move is an opportunity for Myanmar to "demonstrate transparency" and balance its "needs for foreign investments with the risk of working with CCCC", which was blacklisted by the US in August 2020.¹²⁰



Myanmar State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and Yang Jiechi, a Politburo member of the Chinese Communist Party met in the Presidential Palace in Naypyidaw on September 1, 2020.

Source: The Irrawaddy/ State Counsellor's Office

During Jiechi's trip, [China announced a grant](#) of 200-million-yuan (approximately USD30 million) grant for the Rakhine state. Beijing has promised a policy of "non-interference" on the Rohingya issue to ensure it enjoys confidence across the ranks of Myanmar's military and political class.¹²¹

However, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has called for the international community to “play a more effective role” in resolving the [Rohingya crisis](#).¹²² While addressing the 75th session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on September 26, she said that “[t]he problem was created by Myanmar, and its solution must be found in Myanmar”.¹²³ On September 13, Bangladesh had [summoned the Myanmar Ambassador](#) in Dhaka to inquire about an alleged military build-up on the Myanmar side of the border. Reportedly, there was “suspicious movement of Myanmar troops on fishing trawlers” which generated concern among the locals.¹²⁴ The movement of troops may be a result of the Myanmar Army’s ongoing conflicts with the Arakan Army.¹²⁵

Bhutan

The Chinese PLA has reportedly been building up militarily in the western and central parts of Bhutan in order to force Thimphu to [settle the border](#) on terms “favourable to China in the forthcoming 25th round of boundary talks”.¹²⁶ China has claimed 318 sq. km in the western sector and 495 sq. km in the central sector in Bhutan and is continuing to “construct roads” and “build and improve military infrastructure” to intimidate the Himalayan Kingdom.¹²⁷

On September 17, Prime Minister Narendra [Modi spoke to Bhutan](#) King Namgyel Wangchuk, during which he reiterated India’s willingness to provide the necessary support to Bhutan in its fight against the Covid-19 pandemic.¹²⁸ Bhutan has also backed the [aspirations of the G4](#) countries – India, Japan, Germany and Brazil – for the permanent candidacy of the UN Security Council (UNSC). While addressing the 75th anniversary of the UNGA, Bhutan Prime Minister Lotay Tshering “called for reform in the UN saying the world body must evolve and match the changing realities”.¹²⁹

Progress in trade and connectivity links between Bhutan and other South Asian countries has also witnessed an uptick. Dhaka and Thimphu have finalised the draft terms and conditions that will help them sign a [preferential trade agreement](#) (PTA) in the near future.¹³⁰ Bangladesh may also use Indian territory to transport goods to Bhutan (and Nepal).¹³¹ Dhaka and Delhi are reportedly working on a [transit agreement](#) that will provide an impetus to the Bangladesh-Bhutan PTA.

Overall, Delhi needs to ensure policy continuity so that gains in various sectors are not negated by inconsistent trade policies, such as the ban of onion exports.

India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka: Deepening People-to-People Linkages

Libni Garg

Sri Lanka

On September 26, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Sri Lankan PM Mahinda Rajapaksa [presided](#) over a Virtual Bilateral Summit between India and Sri Lanka.¹³² In his opening remarks, PM Modi said that India attributes “high priority to relations with Sri Lanka” under the government’s SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and Neighbourhood First policy.¹³³

The Summit resulted in various productive measures aimed at enhancing ties between the two countries. PM Modi [announced](#) a USD15 million grant for “deepening people-to-people linkages... in the sphere of Buddhism, inter-alia, through constructions/renovations of Buddhist monasteries, capacity development, cultural exchanges, archaeological co-operation, reciprocal exposition of Lord Buddha’s relics, strengthening of Buddhist scholarship, and supporting the clergy.”¹³⁴ During the discussion, the two countries also [extended](#) the MoU for High Impact Community Development Projects for a further five years from 2020 onwards.¹³⁵ PM Modi [noted](#) that Sri Lanka’s request for a bilateral currency swap arrangement worth around USD1 billion with India is under deliberation.¹³⁶ PM Modi also brought up the issue of Tamil rights and the realisation of their expectations within the Sri Lankan state; he [maintained](#) that the “implementation of the 13th amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution is essential for carrying forward the process of peace and reconciliation.”¹³⁷ In this context, PM Rajapaksa [assured](#) PM Modi that his government would “work towards realising the expectations of all ethnic groups, including Tamils.”¹³⁸ The Virtual Summit, which was not only the first of its kind between India and a neighbour but also PM Rajapaksa’s first since being sworn into office this year.

In a show of support for the neighbourhood and reaffirming its first responder status, the Indian Navy and the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) assisted the Sri Lankan Navy in [putting out the fire](#) aboard the oil tanker MT New Diamond off the coast of Sri Lanka.¹³⁹ The Indian Navy, the ICG and the Sri Lankan Navy also saved 22 of the 23 crew members. The team, engaged in response from September 3-6, eventually putting out the flame that was caused by an [explosion](#) in the tanker’s engine room.¹⁴⁰ [The accident](#) threatened an oil spill in the Indian Ocean, which was prevented by the swift efforts of the Indian Navy,

ICG and the Sri Lankan Navy.¹⁴¹ A second fire broke out on the MT New Diamond due to extreme heat and strong winds, but it was put out on September 9, when the fire was doused by the Indian Navy, the Indian Coast Guard and the Sri Lankan Navy. The operation has been called [Operation Sagar Aaraksha](#).¹⁴²



PM Modi and PM Rajapaksa at the India - Sri Lanka Virtual Bilateral Summit on September 26, 2020. Source: Ministry of External Affairs of India

On September 17, 150 Indian nationals travelled from Colombo to Bangalore on an Air India flight under the Vande Bharat mission. This is the first [Vande Bharat](#) flight from Sri Lanka since July.¹⁴³

The Maldives

India continued to make strides in forging infrastructural agreements to be financed under the grant extended to the Maldives. On September 2, a ceremony to [inaugurate](#) a Police Training Centre in Vanee took place in Male.¹⁴⁴ The project has been allocated MVR8 million under a grant of MVR200 million (USD12.6 million) provided by India.¹⁴⁵ The [ceremony](#) was attended by the Indian High Commissioner, the Foreign Minister of the Maldives and the Maldivian Home Minister.¹⁴⁶ Additionally, India also negotiated a [contract](#) with the Maldivian Ministry of Youth, Sports and Community Empowerment to build a synthetic track in Male under the infrastructure grant provided by India.¹⁴⁷ Further, Delhi is assisting in the development of the Institute of Security and Law Enforcement Studies Academy in Addu city, which is [scheduled](#) to be completed next year; it will be the largest grant project undertaken by the government of India in the Maldives.¹⁴⁸

The Indian High Commission in Male also [reported](#) that over the past two months, eight batches of over 500 patients and their attendants have travelled to India from the Maldives for “advanced medical treatment.”¹⁴⁹ The 9th batch of patients is scheduled to travel soon.¹⁵⁰

On September 10, the US and the Maldives [signed](#) the Framework for US-Maldives Defence and Security Relationship.¹⁵¹ The framework showcases “both countries’ intent to deepen engagement and co-operation in support of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean, and marks an important step forward in the defence partnership.”¹⁵² India has [welcomed](#) the agreement and interpreted it as a step aimed at ensuring “peace and security in the Indian Ocean and promoting a rules-based order that promotes stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.”¹⁵³ In the past, India has objected to attempts by the US and China to extend its influence in the Indian Ocean. For instance, in 2013, Delhi harboured [reservations](#) regarding then President Mohamed Nasheed’s negotiations surrounding the eventually shelved Status of Forces Agreement with the US, which would have allowed Washington to set up a military base in the Maldives.¹⁵⁴ However, in the context of deepening Indo-US relations, New Delhi has backed the agreement. Government of India officials [said](#) that,

“the Agreement talks of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean and promoting a rules-based order that promotes stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. The broad areas of co-operation envisioned and the explicit endorsement of a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region are in line with India’s overall interests and regional stability.”¹⁵⁵

Indian officials in Male had been apprised of the negotiations and were [reportedly](#) even shown a copy of the framework.¹⁵⁶

On September 14, the Indian High Commissioner and the Maldivian Foreign Minister [attended](#) a virtual inauguration of ‘Kolhufushi streetlights project’. Through a grant of MVR1.5 million, India assisted in the installation of 115 streetlights on the island.¹⁵⁷ Additionally, the High Commissioner and the Maldivian Foreign Minister [met](#) on September 16 to hold talks regarding the progress of ongoing collaborations and initiatives.¹⁵⁸



Indian High Commissioner to the Maldives with the Maldivian Tourism Minister on September 9, 2020. Source: Twitter/@MoTmv

There have also been developments regarding the agreements forged during EAM Dr. Jaishankar's call with Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid last month. On September 9, the Indian High Commissioner and the Maldivian Tourism Minister held [talks](#) following the announcement of an air bubble in order to boost tourism.¹⁵⁹ In addition, India [approved](#) a soft loan of USD250 million to help the Maldives cope with the COVID-19 crisis.¹⁶⁰ Further, the cargo service which was announced during the call [embarked](#) on its maiden voyage on September 21.¹⁶¹ The virtual ceremony to launch the service was [attended](#) by Indian Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Shipping and the Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation of Maldives.¹⁶²

India, CARs and PAI¹: Fragility, Violence and Hope

Shreyas Deshmukh

India-CARs at SCO

India's relationship with the Central Asian Republics (CARs) received significant impetus during the month. On September 4, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh travelled to Moscow to attend joint meetings of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO), Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). At the SCO meeting, Indian Defence Minister [introduced](#) the continental dimension of India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for all in the Region) vision.¹⁶³ The discussions also revolved around the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), and the creation of capabilities for responding to [biological threats and terrorism](#).¹⁶⁴ During his three-day visit, Minister Rajnath Singh held bilateral talks with his counterparts from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan on [defence co-operation related issues](#).¹⁶⁵ While returning to Delhi, he stopped-over at Tehran where he had a meeting with his Iranian counterpart to discuss bilateral strategic co-operation and regional [security matters including developments in Afghanistan](#).¹⁶⁶



Defence Minister Rajnath Singh in a bilateral meeting with the Defence Minister of Tajikistan in Moscow, September 5, 2020. Source: Twitter/ @DefenceMinIndia

¹ CAR stands for Central Asian Republics and PAI stands for Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran.

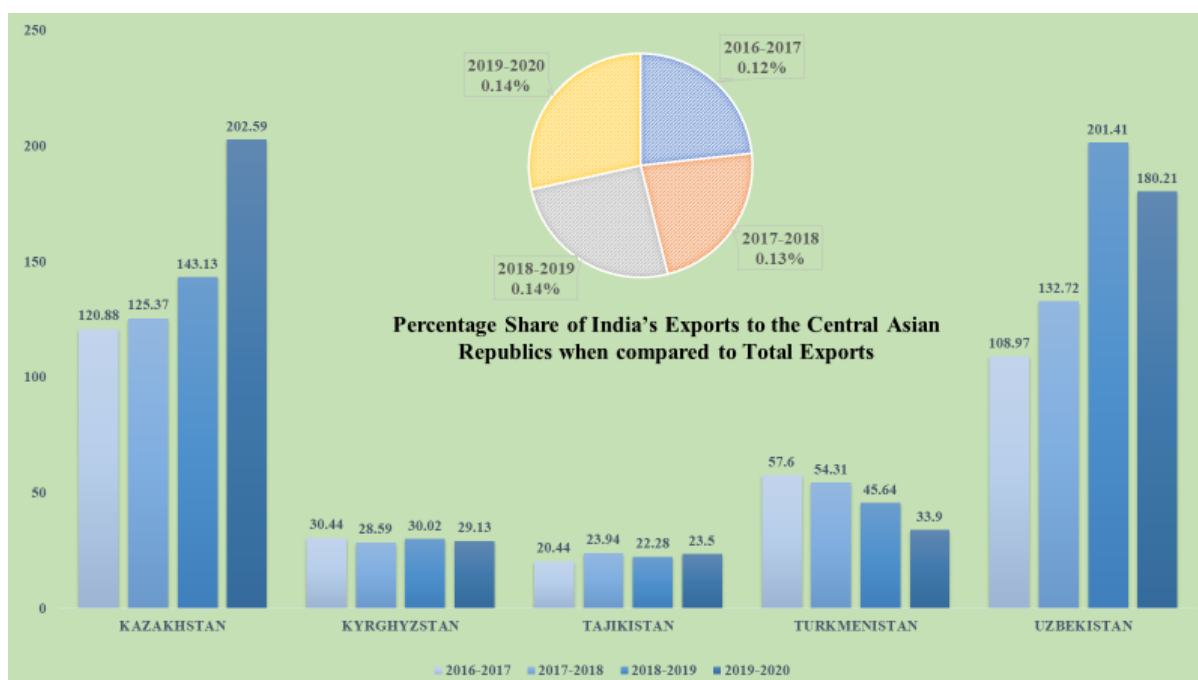
On September 8, External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr. S. Jaishankar travelled to Iran and discussed the [progress of the Chabahar port](#) project and the evolving situation in Afghanistan with his Iranian counterpart.¹⁶⁷

Subsequently, the EAM travelled to Moscow to attend a [meeting](#) of the SCO Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) on September 10.¹⁶⁸ On the sidelines of the CFM meeting, EAM Jaishankar held [bilateral meetings](#) with his Tajik, Uzbek and Kyrgyz counterparts and discussed issues of mutual interest.¹⁶⁹



External Affairs Minister of India Dr. S. Jaishankar in a meeting with Dr. Mohammad Javad Zarif, Foreign Minister of Iran in Tehran, September 08, 2020. Source: Ministry of External Affairs of India

These visits and bilateral meetings are part of India's attempts to strengthen its partnership with the CARs amidst growing strain in the India-China relations as well as China's increasing footprints in Central Asia and Iran. However, India faces several challenges to a robust engagement in the region. For instance, India's trade with the CARs is either stagnant or has been growing very slowly. In the recently held 7th meeting of the Kazakhstan-Indian joint working group for trade and economic co-operation, it was noted that the commodity [turnover between two countries](#) rose 2.2 times to USD 2 billion in 2019, which is still negligible in comparison with India's overall trade.¹⁷⁰



India's exports to the Central Asian Republics from 2016 to 2019 (USD million). Data Source: Department of Commerce, Government of India

Connectivity through the Iranian port of Chabahar is at the core of India's trade relations with the Eurasian region. Therefore, the ongoing geopolitical shifts within West Asia were one of the key themes of discussion during the EAM's and the Defence Minister's meetings in Russia. The sectarian conflict in West Asia will have a major impact on the South Asian region as well. Recently, large [anti-Shia rallies](#) were held in Karachi as well as in other cities of Pakistan, and there were targeted attacks on the Hazaras in Afghanistan, pointing to growing instability in the region.¹⁷¹

A geoeconomic competition is also brewing to secure economic interests and strategic trade routes in Central Asia and Afghanistan. The [core of discussions](#) in the recently held C5+1 meeting between the US Secretary of State and the foreign ministers of the five Central Asian nations was the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA).¹⁷² Similarly, the progress of the [Belt and Road Initiative](#) (BRI) projects was discussed in the inaugural foreign ministers' meeting between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Central Asian counterparts in July 2020.¹⁷³

India's proximity to the Central Asian region, its cordial relations with Russia and Iran and the democratic principles it propagates provide an opportunity for Delhi to restrict multilateral forums like the SCO to platforms for raising bilateral disputes and promoting unilateral interests. On September 15, Indian National Security Advisor (NSA) had to leave the virtual session of the SCO

NSAs after the Pakistani NSA [violated the SCO charter](#) by using the map that depicted Indian territories as part of Pakistan.¹⁷⁴

Intra-Afghan Peace Negotiations

The much-awaited [intra-Afghan negotiations](#) between representatives of the Taliban led by Sheikh Abdul Hakim Haqqani and the Afghan Government delegation led by Masoom Stanekzai commenced on September 12 in Doha.¹⁷⁵ US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo with the Chairman of the Afghan High Council for National Reconciliation Abdullah Abdullah, Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani and senior diplomats of a number of countries attended the inaugural ceremony.¹⁷⁶ It was indicative from the opening remarks of the heads of both delegations that initial rounds of talks would be focused on finding an [ideological middle ground](#) to establish the future governing infrastructure, which will accommodate democratic and Islamic norms.¹⁷⁷ In recent months, the Taliban has increased the [frequency of attacks](#) across Afghanistan to maintain control over the peace talks.¹⁷⁸



Afghanistan Government delegation at the inaugural session of Intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha, September 12, 2020. Source: Twitter/ @SecPompeo

Along with 17 partner countries, India's EAM also addressed the session virtually. In his address, Dr. S. Jaishankar reiterated India's support to the peace process. He maintained that [the process must be](#) "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned

and Afghan-controlled". Moreover, he stressed that the democratic Islamic Republic in Afghanistan, which protects the interest of minorities, women, and vulnerable sections, must be preserved.¹⁷⁹ India was also represented by a senior official delegation led by MEA Joint Secretary (PAI) in the inaugural ceremony, who later had a bilateral meeting with Abdullah Abdullah. India has made significant contributions towards peace and stability in Afghanistan through numerous [development projects](#).¹⁸⁰

The new Taliban leadership appears to be strong, independent, and relying on Doha, Beijing, Tehran, and Moscow for support. However, the major role of [Islamabad](#) in manipulating their decision making cannot be denied.¹⁸¹ As the Taliban and Afghan delegation sort out ideological differences and the governance model structure, and the peace process heads in a positive direction, India also might engage with the Taliban bilaterally in the future. In that regard, the strengthening India-US relationship and India's growing partnership with the Gulf may help Delhi create frameworks to engage with a Taliban-governed Afghanistan.

India-Iran

Indian Minister of State for External Affairs V Muraleedharan, responding to a query in the Lok Sabha on India's role in the construction of the [Chabahar-Zahedan](#) Railway Project, said that Delhi and Teheran are co-operating on developmental projects in Iran including the railway line and the first phase of the Shahid Beheshti Port.¹⁸² India Ports Global Limited had taken over [port operations](#) in December 2018 and has since handled 12 lakh tonnes of bulk cargo and 8200 containers.¹⁸³

Gilgit-Baltistan

Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), currently under Pakistan occupied Kashmir (POK) is geopolitically the most important, as is located at the intersection of the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan and Xinjiang province of China. An [Act](#) passed by the Pakistani cabinet had granted the region nominal self-rule by establishing an elected Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly and a Council.¹⁸⁴ There is [renewed ongoing debate](#) in Pakistan on giving complete provincial status to GB.¹⁸⁵ After the GB Legislative Assembly's tenure ended, polls were due to be held on August 18, 2020; this was, however, postponed to [November 15](#).¹⁸⁶

This comes at a time when there is heightened tension between India and China in Ladakh, which adjoins GB from where the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passes. The Imran Khan-led government is under pressure from the opposition and religious parties due to its failed Kashmir Policy. Even

after one year of India's decision to abolish Article 370, Pakistan has not been able to gather adequate traction against India. Instead, it is only alienating itself from traditional supporters such as Saudi Arabia. India's decision to abrogate Article 370 may not have changed the status quo on the Line of Control but has had a marked effect on the politico-security psyche of Pakistani patrons and extremist organisations.



EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar virtually addressing the conference on Afghan peace negotiations in Doha, September 12, 2020. Source: [Twitter/@DrSJaishankar](https://twitter.com/DrSJaishankar)

West Asia: Dawn of a New Era

Sanket Joshi

West Asia is witnessing major geopolitical shifts through the dilution of old rivalries and building of new relations. After Israel and the UAE, US President Donald Trump on September 11, announced yet another historic [peace deal](#) to normalise diplomatic relations between the State of Israel and the Kingdom of Bahrain.¹⁸⁷ The official signing ceremony of the '[Abraham Accords](#)' took place on September 15 at The White House.¹⁸⁸ It is expected that other Arab and Muslim countries may follow suit in the near future. "India welcomed the Abraham Accords as it has always supported peace and [stability in West Asia](#) while maintaining its traditional support for the Palestinian cause and the two-state solution".¹⁸⁹ India's External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar had earlier said, the "UAE-Israel deal has opened lots of [opportunities for India](#) at a time when Delhi's relations with Abu Dhabi are also growing".¹⁹⁰ [Iran, Turkey](#) and Lebanon's [Hezbollah](#), however, have strongly condemned these peace deals.¹⁹¹



Israel, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain sign the Abraham Accords at the White House, September 15, 2020. Source: Twitter/@WhiteHouse

These political shifts are enabling countries such as the UAE to procure defence weapons from the US with relatively less resistance from Israel. For instance, Israel has reportedly dropped its objections to the [sale of](#) American F-35 stealth aircraft, 'Reaper Drones' and 'EA-18G Growler jets' to the UAE.¹⁹²



External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar addresses the G20 Foreign Minister's Extraordinary (Virtual) meeting, September 3, 2020. Source: Twitter/ @DrSJaishankar

Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a telephone conversation on September 9, 2020, with Saudi Arabia's [King Salman](#) during which both leaders reviewed growing bilateral relations.¹⁹³ On September 3, during the [G20](#) Foreign Ministers' Meeting, EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar proposed the development of a voluntary 'G20 Principles on Co-ordinated [Cross-Border Movement](#) of People', which would involve standardisation of procedures/results, quarantine procedure, and 'movement and transit protocol'.¹⁹⁴ The EAM also highlighted the 'Vande Bharat Mission' and the creation of 'travel bubbles' for Indians stranded abroad as well as for foreign nationals stranded in India. During a similar G20 Finance and Health Ministers' virtual meeting, Union Minister Dr. Harsh Vardhan reiterated calls for "equitable and affordable access" to [COVID-19 vaccines](#).¹⁹⁵

India has continued to carry out humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief (HADR) exercises in West Asia. During a conversation between India's Minister of State (MoS) for External Affairs and Syria's Vice Foreign Minister on September 3, "India...conveyed support for Syria's [national reconstruction](#) efforts and the well-being of its people".¹⁹⁶ The Syrian minister "thanked India

for the timely delivery of 10 MT tonnes of [medicines](#) in July that has helped in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic".¹⁹⁷ India's MEA had also carried out a limb fitment camp in Damascus earlier this year.¹⁹⁸

On the other hand, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan once again raised the [Kashmir](#) issue in his address to the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). India has strongly criticised Turkey, Pakistan and the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation (OIC) for their remarks on India's internal matters in the UNGA as well as the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC).¹⁹⁹ Indian security agencies have reportedly begun probing [Turkey-linked NGOs'](#) involvement in Jammu and Kashmir that have become active in the past year.²⁰⁰

India-UAE agriculture trade relations are on an upward trajectory. On August 27, the Dubai Multi Commodities Centre (DMCC) launched 'Agriota E-Marketplace', a technology-driven [agricultural commodity trading](#) platform that uses blockchain to help bridge the gap between farmers in India and the UAE's food industry.²⁰¹ In another development, India's Ambassador to Saudi Arabia re-launched the '[Saudi-India Business Network \(SIBN\)](#)' to include major areas of the Kingdom.²⁰² The country-wide expansion of SIBN is a testimony to the growing economic and commercial ties between the two nations.

An Oman government yearbook revealed that most [ex-pat women](#) employed in the Sultanate's public sector are Indians.²⁰³ A total of 4,604 [Indian women](#) were employed in Oman's government sector in 2019, followed by 3,090 women from Egypt. Women comprised 37 per cent of the total Indian workforce employed in Oman's government sector.²⁰⁴

The Covid-19 induced economic crisis has led to the mass exodus of Indian migrant workers from the Gulf countries. "Over 300,000 workers have returned to India since the [Vande Bharat repatriation](#) drive began on May 7".²⁰⁵ This includes 84,497 [Indian workers](#) who returned from the UAE, 50,536 from Oman, 49,000 from Saudi Arabia, 44,248 from Kuwait, 30,509 from Qatar and 14,920 from Bahrain.²⁰⁶



Israel's Start-up Nation Central and India's International Centre for Entrepreneurship signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), September 22, 2020. Source: Twitter/@IsraelinIndia

In the field of [technological co-operation](#), India, Israel and the United States have begun a collaboration to jointly develop next-generation emerging technologies as well as transparent, open, reliable and secure 5G communication networks.²⁰⁷ The US officials noted that the growing 5G partnership affirms "the importance of this relationship".²⁰⁸ In a related development, Israel's [Start-up Nation Central](#) and India's International Centre for Entrepreneurship (iCreate) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that will bring together entrepreneurs from the two countries to accelerate collaboration on start-ups and innovation.²⁰⁹

To promote defence exports, India and Israel created a sub-working group (SWG) on 'Defence Industrial Co-operation.' The main objective of the SWG will be the transfer of technology, co-development and co-production, artificial intelligence, innovation and joint export.²¹⁰

The issue of rehabilitation of ISIS fighters has re-emerged in the United Nations. On August 31, the United States vetoed a resolution in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) that called for the prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of detained ISIS fighters and their families.²¹¹ The US took this stand as the UN draft resolution did not demand that countries actively "repatriate" [foreign fighters](#) who had joined the Al-Qaeda and ISIS to their

domiciled countries.²¹² The discussion on repatriation to deradicalise supporters of ISIS has implications for India. Recently, the Minister of State for Home Affairs told the Indian parliament that “[ISIS](#) is most active in 12 Indian states”.²¹³

India has stopped oil imports from Iran to comply with the US sanctions levied on the Islamic republic. However, the sanctions threat has not deterred China from importing Iranian crude oil. Reportedly, [Chinese customs data](#) shows the import of 120,000/bpd from Iran in July 2020, worth around USD135 million.²¹⁴ Subsequently, on September 3, the US imposed sanctions on eleven Chinese, Iranian and the United Arab Emirates companies accused of [bypassing sanctions](#) on Iran’s oil exports.²¹⁵ Washington also re-imposed all [UN sanctions on Iran](#).²¹⁶

On the energy front, China Chemical Hualu Engineering Company won a USD400-million contract to build Oman’s strategically important [bitumen refinery project](#).²¹⁷ Reportedly, China was assisting Saudi Arabia in building a civilian nuclear power plant. More recently, a Chinese report claims that “Saudi Arabia may have sufficient uranium ore to produce [nuclear fuel](#)”.²¹⁸ There have been setbacks for China on the energy front as Saudi Aramco suspended a USD10-billion oil [refinery deal](#) with China due to the budgetary constraints imposed on the Kingdom, owing to low oil prices.²¹⁹ India took advantage of the [low crude oil prices](#) in the international market and saved USD685.11 million (INR5069 crore) as the average cost of procurement was USD19 per barrel as compared to USD60 in January 2020.²²⁰

India-Russia: Enhanced Engagement

Anushka Nair

India's defence relationship with Russia has continued to develop. A [long-pending deal](#) for the purchase of 7.7 lakh AK-203 rifles from Russia for the Indian Army was finalised during Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's visit to Moscow on September 3-4.²²¹ The deal will boost the 'Make in India' programme as most of the rifles will be manufactured in India by Indo-Russia Rifles Private Limited (IRRPL). The [Indra Navy 2020](#), a biennial bilateral maritime exercise, was conducted in the Bay of Bengal between the Indian and Russian Navies on September 4-5.²²² The exercise coincided with the Defence Minister's visit to Russia, where he addressed a [combined Defence Ministers' Meeting](#) of SCO, CSTO and CIS Member States in Moscow.²²³

Multilateral Forum	Location	Date
Defence Ministers' Meet of SCO, CSTO and CIS	Moscow, Russia	September 04, 2020
BRICS Foreign Ministers' Meet	Virtual Conference	September 04, 2020
SCO Council of Foreign Ministers	Moscow, Russia	September 9-10, 2020
RIC Foreign Ministers' Meet	Moscow, Russia	September 10, 2020
SCO NSAs Meet	Virtual Conference	September 15, 2020
BRICS NSAs Meet	Virtual Conference	September 17, 2020

India's Participation in Multilateral High-Level Meetings hosted by Russia in September 2020

India and Russia have also [jointly adopted a plan](#) to develop an extended-range air-to-air class of the BrahMos cruise missiles, with the capability to shoot-down aerial targets that have an airborne warning and control system (AWACS).²²⁴ The missile is expected to be [ready for launch](#) by 2024, possibly to be carried on the Indian light-weight fighter aircraft Tejas.²²⁵ Jointly developed by India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Russia's NPO Mashinostroyeniya (NPOM), BrahMos is presently considered the world's quickest anti-ship cruise missile in military use.²²⁶

At the bilateral level, President Vladimir Putin's [greetings via a telephone call](#) to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on his birthday became an occasion to advance the India-Russia partnership.²²⁷ The two leaders reaffirmed their commitment to India and Russia's 'Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership'. PM Modi [congratulated](#) President Putin on Russia's successful chairmanship of the SCO and BRICS and conveyed that India was looking forward to the Summits of both fora later this year, as well as to the SCO Heads of Government Council, which is due to be hosted by India.²²⁸



Indian Navy Ships Ranvijay and Shakti, and Russian Navy Ships Admiral Vinogradov, Admiral Tributs and Boris Butoma participated in Exercise Indra Navy 2020. Source: Twitter/@IndianNavy

Top leaders of both countries met at several bilateral, trilateral and multilateral platforms, both virtually and in person. After attending a virtual conference of BRICS foreign ministers hosted by Russia, India's External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar also travelled to Moscow from September 8-11. In Moscow, he participated in several important meetings with his foreign counterparts, including an [RIC Foreign Ministers Meet](#), an SCO Foreign Ministers' Meet and a meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to discuss ongoing India-China border tensions. At the RIC meeting, the ministers acknowledged the need for development and co-operation between the three countries and its significant impact on peace and stability on the broader region.²²⁹ To this end, they also agreed that the three countries should bring together their considerable scientific and industrial infrastructure to help mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Once the meeting concluded, Foreign Minister

Lavrov turned over the RIC chairmanship to Dr Jaishankar for the coming year.²³⁰



Foreign Ministers Dr. S. Jaishankar, Sergei Lavrov and Wang Yi at the RIC Foreign Ministers' Meet. Source: Flickr/@meaindia

Russia [supported India](#) when Indian NSA Ajit Doval exited the virtual SCO NSA meet to protest Pakistan's NSA showcasing a map with false territorial claims over Kashmir and Junagadh.²³¹ Russia's Deputy Ambassador to India stated in an interview that Russia is [strongly opposed](#) to the use of multilateral platforms by countries to further their bilateral agendas pertaining to other countries, a clear indication that he was referring to Pakistan's move at the SCO conference.²³² The MEA spokesperson later said that the Indian side left the meeting after consulting host Russia, upon learning that Pakistan used the fabricated map in disregard of the advisory issued by the host, violating the SCO Charter as well.²³³

The Russian government is [increasing military build-up in the Far East](#), along the country's border with China, and the broader Indo-Pacific region.²³⁴ Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said that the reinforcements were being sent in response to [rising tensions](#) in Russia's 'eastern strategic direction', without specifying what contributed to the tensions.²³⁵ Experts have speculated

that the troop build-up was to ensure that Russia was suitably equipped to defend its strategic interests in the region in case of a conflict, noting the increasing possibility of a US-China naval clash in the region.

Russia's military drill [Kavkaz-2020 commenced](#) on September 21, with almost 80,000 participating service members from the militaries of Armenia, Belarus, China, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Iran, and observer delegates from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Indonesia, Iran and Sri Lanka.²³⁶ As noted in last month's ISR, while the Indian military was also invited to participate, it declined the invitation. Although the reason cited for India's decision to withdraw was the Covid-19 pandemic, it was reported that a critical factor behind India's withdrawal was its unwillingness to engage with China amid the ongoing border stand-off.

With the Covid-19 pandemic showing no signs of slowing down, Russia's RDIF and Indian pharmaceutical firm Dr Reddy's Laboratories have finalised an [agreement for clinical trials](#) and distribution of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine in India.²³⁷ Once the vaccine receives the required approval from Indian regulatory authorities, RDIF is [scheduled to supply ten crore vaccines](#) to Dr Reddy's in India, with deliveries anticipated to begin by the end of the year.²³⁸ [Clinical trials](#) for the Sputnik V vaccine are expected to begin in India as early as October. They are expected to enlist up to 2000 participants in government and private medical facilities across the country.²³⁹

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