



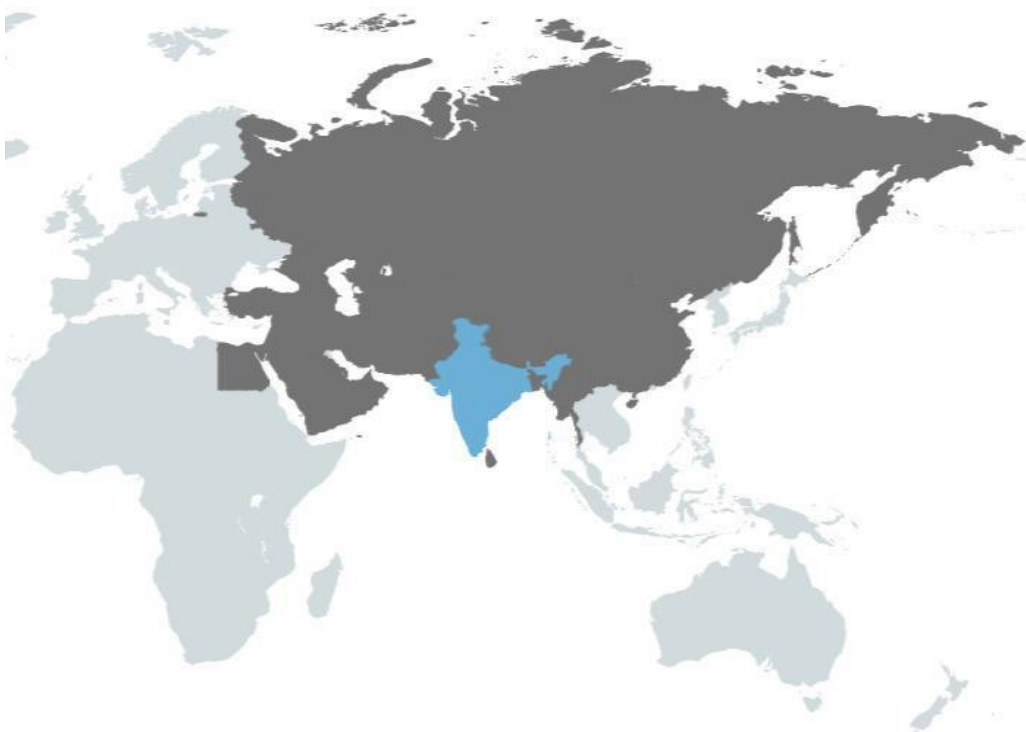
Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

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DPG INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

The DPG India Strategic Review (ISR) is a monthly survey of key developments, trends and policies pertaining to India's immediate and continental neighbourhood with chapters by Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.) and Mr. Sanjay Pulipaka. The research team includes Shreyas Deshmukh and Sanket Joshi. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to Sanjay Pulipaka at sanjay@dpg.org.in. To subscribe, please [click here](#).

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World map

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Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

AFGHANISTAN

A Looming Humanitarian Crisis

Afghanistan faces an impending humanitarian crisis of massive proportions. The latest Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) report, co-led by the Food and Agriculture Organisation and World Food Programme, found that more than one-in-two Afghans will face Phase 3 crisis or Phase 4 emergency levels of acute food insecurity from November through March. This is the highest number of acutely food insecure people ever recorded by the U.N. during ten years of conducting IPC analyses in Afghanistan.¹ UNICEF deputy executive director Omar Abdi, who visited Afghanistan, warned that "at least one million Afghan children face severe malnutrition and even death" unless immediate assistance is provided.²

Some help is flowing in. This month, the European Union pledged 1 billion euros in humanitarian aid and other forms of support. After his visit to Kabul on October 21, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi announced that Pakistan would provide about \$280 million in humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.³ China has announced emergency humanitarian aid to Afghanistan worth approximately \$31 million, including three million COVID-19 vaccine doses, food, medicine, and other winter supplies.⁴ India has promised to send 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat to Afghanistan, but there has been no reply to India's demarche to Pakistan for allowing movement of trucks across its territory.⁵

In the first direct talks between the U.S. and the Taliban since the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, held at Doha on October 10, the two sides "discussed the United States' provision of robust humanitarian assistance, directly to the Afghan people."⁶ In September, the U.S. had announced \$64 million in new humanitarian assistance that would flow through independent humanitarian organisations.

On October 26, Prime Minister Imran Khan and President Xi Jinping issued a joint appeal to the international community calling for urgent humanitarian and economic aid to Afghanistan to alleviate suffering and prevent instability.⁷

While the need is well understood, the provision of humanitarian assistance is hampered because the international community is reluctant to provide any sort of legitimacy to the Taliban government unless it shows some progress on inclusive government, human rights and the treatment of women and minority groups. So far, there has been no progress in these areas.

Internal Instability and Spread of Terrorism

While the Taliban are in control of Afghanistan, there are concerns about internal stability. The Taliban government warned U.S. and European diplomats at talks in Doha that continued attempts to pressure them through sanctions will undermine security and trigger a wave of economic refugees. Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi said, "weakening the Afghan government is not in the interest of anyone because its negative effects will directly affect the world in [the] security sector and economic migration from the country."⁸

Pakistan is also reiterating the fear of Afghanistan slipping into instability unless there is international support. Prime Minister Imran Khan, in an interview to the Middle East Eye, said that the world must engage with Afghanistan because "if it pushes it away, within the Taliban movement there are hardliners, and it could easily go back to the Taliban of 2000 and that would be a disaster."⁹ He also stated that "the Taliban was the only option for fighting Islamic State (IS) in the region."

While Pakistan has a vested interest in suggesting international engagement with the Taliban, the stability of Afghanistan and the spill-over of terrorism remains a cause of concern for the neighbouring countries. In a meeting between the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Taliban's Acting Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar on October 25 at Doha, Wang Yi said, "China hopes and believes that the Afghan Taliban will make a clean break with the ETIM and other terrorist organisations and take effective measures to resolutely crack down on them."¹⁰

In a virtual summit of the Commonwealth Independent States on October 15, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Russian data has revealed that 2,000 Islamic State fighters are in the north of Afghanistan and "seek to enter the territory of the Commonwealth under the guise of refugees."¹¹ While the Taliban initially rejected Putin's allegation, at an international conference in Moscow on October 20, they agreed to work with Russia, China, and Iran on regional security.

Meanwhile, doubts continue to be raised on the Taliban having forsaken support to transnational terrorist groups even as it battles the Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP). The Taliban have committed to preventing terrorist attacks outside of Afghan territory, but it is uncertain whether they have the ability or the desire to do so. A recent report indicated that the Taliban has provided Tajik militants based along the border with Tajikistan with new U.S.-made military vehicles, weapons, and other equipment.¹²



State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Acting Deputy Prime Minister of Afghan Taliban's interim government Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Doha during his visit to Qatar, October 25, 2021. Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC

Concerns over terrorist activity have prompted Tajikistan to sign an agreement that will permit China to take over a security base near the Wakhan border in exchange for funding a new base for Tajikistan's Rapid Reaction Group at the cost of \$10 million.¹³ Four thousand servicemen from Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) held joint military drills near the Afghan border in Tajikistan between October 18 and 23.¹⁴ One of the focus areas of the exercise was terrorism response. Besides Tajikistan, which has a long border with Afghanistan, the Russia-led CSTO includes Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Belarus.

The IS-KP and the Taliban are locked in a brutal battle in Afghanistan. The IS-KP bombings at the Shi'a mosques at Kunduz on October 8 and Kandahar on October 15 killed 135 people, mainly from the Hazara community. While the Taliban have promised to provide greater security to the Shi'a mosques,¹⁵ their own treatment of the Shi'a minority gives little confidence. In early October 2021, the Taliban forcibly evicted hundreds of Hazara families from southern Helmand and northern Balkh provinces. These followed earlier evictions from Daikundi, Uruzgan, and Kandahar provinces.¹⁶

Apart from attempting to incite sectarian conflict, the IS-KP's efforts are directed at undermining the legitimacy of the Taliban government by the assassination of officials and frequent attacks against isolated Taliban patrols. A recent report by the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) notes that the "presence of IS-KP propaganda materials indicates that IS-KP is expanding in northern and southern Afghanistan." The expansion is aided by some Taliban splinter groups that appear to be defecting to IS-KP.¹⁷ In retaliation, the Taliban has been carrying out gruesome, extra-judicial killings of IS-KP members and their sympathisers.¹⁸ Whether this approach will succeed or help IS-KP recruit more is uncertain.

The ISW report warns that sectarian attacks are resulting in a Shi'a community mobilisation. A new Hazara militia called "The Anonymous Soldiers of Hazaristan" was raised on October 8. The group announced that it saw no difference between the Taliban and IS-KP and would fight both. A major sectarian conflict could also "raise pressure among Iran's hardline factions to defend Shi'a communities under attack."

India and Afghanistan

India's stance on Afghanistan was articulated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the G20 Extraordinary Summit on Afghanistan on October 12.¹⁹ Noting the friendship between India and Afghanistan, he emphasised the need for the international community to ensure that Afghanistan has immediate and

unhindered access to humanitarian assistance. The Prime Minister also underlined the need to ensure that Afghan territory does not become a source of radicalisation and terrorism, regionally or globally.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi Addressing G20 Extra Ordinary Summit on Afghanistan, October 12, 2021. Source: Narendramodi.in

The Prime Minister called for an inclusive administration in Afghanistan, which includes women and minorities. He called on the international community to forge a unified response without which it would be difficult to bring about the desired change in Afghanistan's situation.

A similar sentiment was expressed by the External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar at the India Today Conclave on October 8. He stated that the international community has some basic expectations of Afghanistan, of which "the most basic...is actually the fact that Afghan soil will not be used for terrorism against other countries."²⁰ He also noted that the nature of the government should be inclusive in some form.

On the side-lines of the third meeting of the Moscow Format of consultations on Afghanistan, an Indian delegation, led by Joint Secretary at Ministry of External Affairs J.P. Singh, met a high-level Taliban delegation led by Deputy Prime Minister of Afghanistan's interim government Abdul Salam Hanafi.²¹ This was the second bilateral meeting between India and the Taliban after Indian envoy to Qatar Deepak Mittal's meeting with Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, the Taliban's deputy foreign minister, at Doha in August. Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid was quoted as saying that the Indian side had expressed readiness to provide extensive humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. The two sides also emphasised the need to take into account each other's concerns and improve diplomatic and economic relations.

India is planning to host a national security advisor-level meeting on Afghanistan in New Delhi. The tentative dates of the proposed in-person dialogue are November 10-11, and the format is likely to be similar to the

regional security conference held in Iran in 2019. Apart from Russia, Iran, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, invitations have been sent to China and Pakistan. Both China and Pakistan have declined to attend the meeting, an indication of the hurdles in arriving at a common regional approach towards Afghanistan.

PAKISTAN

U.S. - Pakistan Ties

After its scrambled and chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, the U.S. is assessing its relations with Pakistan. In a congressional hearing on Afghanistan, U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley said that “we need to fully examine the role of Pakistan sanctuary” in understanding how the Taliban withstood U.S. military pressure.²²

The U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman visited Pakistan during the month, the first visit by a high-ranking diplomat since President Joe Biden took office. Before coming to Islamabad, Ms. Sherman was in India, where she stated that the visit to Pakistan is for a “very specific narrow purpose” and that “we [the U.S.] don’t see ourselves building our broad relationship with Pakistan and we have no interest in returning to the days of a hyphenated India, Pakistan. That’s not where we are, that’s not where we are going to be.”²³

The Pakistan government was shocked at these statements, and Ms. Sherman received a cold reception at the Foreign Office, where she was received by a mid-level diplomat.²⁴ In her meeting with the Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, the latter said that Pakistan wants broad-ranging, long-term and stable relations with the United States to promote economic cooperation and establish peace in the region. Sherman called on the Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa, where matters of mutual interest, the regional security situation, and collaboration in humanitarian measures in Afghanistan were discussed. In their meetings with Sherman, both the NSA Moeed Yusuf and Qureshi brought up the issue of human rights violations in Kashmir.²⁵

After many months of denial that Pakistan would provide bases to the U.S. for counterterrorism operations,²⁶ a CNN news report claimed that the U.S. is nearing a formalised agreement with Pakistan to use its airspace to conduct military and intelligence operations in Afghanistan.²⁷ In response to this report, Pakistan Foreign Office conceded that Pakistan was discussing ‘counterterrorism cooperation’ with the United States but that there was no agreement on the use of its airspace. Spokesperson Asim Iftikhar said in a statement, “Pakistan and the U.S. have longstanding cooperation on regional

security and counterterrorism, and the two sides remain engaged in regular consultations.”²⁸

Security Situation along Pak-Afghan Border

There has been a surge in attacks by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Most of these attacks are in the North and South Waziristan districts. According to a Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS) report released on October 13, TTP-linked killings, which were on a decline since 2018 and came down to 140 in 2020, have increased again to reach 171 in 2021. The surge has been noticeable since July 2021. Between July and September 2021, the TTP has carried out 44 attacks, claiming 73 lives.²⁹

The links between the Afghan Taliban and the TTP remain strong. Zabihullah Mujahid, ‘spokesperson’ for the Afghan Taliban, declared in an interview on October 20, “The relationship between the TTP and the Afghan Taliban will continue to be dictated by religious-ideological convergence, ethnic-fraternal linkages, and close camaraderie.”³⁰ Meanwhile, Prime Minister Imran Khan has stated in an interview that the government is in talks with some groups of the TTP, seeking a reconciliation.

Following Imran Khan’s statement, the Shura Mujahideen of North Waziristan, headed by commander Hafiz Gul Bahadur, announced a 20-day ceasefire after negotiations with government intermediaries. Two other militant commanders of North Waziristan, Sadiq Noor and Sadiqullah, also endorsed the Shura decision.³¹ However, the TTP has repeatedly rejected the government’s offer of amnesty and insists on the implementation of Sharia in Pakistan.

There is also no political unanimity in Pakistan over a deal with the TTP. Parliamentarians belonging to the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) have expressed apprehensions over the government’s secret talks with the TTP without keeping the Parliament informed.³²

A high-level delegation led by Major General Mohammad Bagheri, Chief of the General Staff of Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran, met Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee General Nadeem Raza and General Qamar Javed Bajwa. During the meeting, a wide range of issues were discussed, including the Afghanistan situation, regional security, and border management, particularly fencing along the Pak-Iran border.³³

Security Situation along India-Pakistan border

The ceasefire agreement that was arrived at in February 2021 is still holding but has come under some pressure. Speaking at the India Today Conclave on October 9, India's Chief of the Army Staff, General Mukund Narvane, said that the understanding to follow the ceasefire agreement in February worked till July, but "from the end of July, these sporadic incidents have started again. It is again following the pattern of 2003 when it started with one odd incident and then rose to as good as not having a ceasefire."³⁴

Speaking about infiltration from Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, General Narvane said that over the last month, "we again see renewed attempts at infiltration" and have foiled "two or three" such attempts. This has led to heightened terrorist activity along the Line of Control (LoC) in the Jammu region.

In the Poonch-Mendhar sector, there is an ongoing operation against a group of terrorists that started on October 11. The Indian Army has lost 11 soldiers in this firefight with the terrorists.³⁵ On October 30, one officer and a jawan were killed in a mine explosion, and one jawan was injured close to the LoC in the Rajouri sector.³⁶ If the Indian Army continues to suffer losses along the LoC in actions by terrorists who infiltrate from Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, it is unlikely that the ceasefire will hold for very long.

Internal Developments in Pakistan

Two events in October reveal the political fragility in Pakistan. The first was the Prime Minister-Army Chief differences over the appointment of a new Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Chief. On October 6, the Pakistan Army announced that Lieutenant General Nadeem Ahmed Anjum had been appointed as the new director-general of ISI. Lt. Gen. Faiz Hameed, the serving ISI director general, was posted as the Peshawar corps commander.

Imran Khan wanted Lt. Gen. Faiz Hameed to continue for some time as Gen. Faiz knows the Afghanistan situation exceptionally well. However, the reason given for not clearing the appointment was that the Prime Minister wanted the military authorities to fulfil "legal and constitutional" requirements by sending three names of the candidates for the Chief of the ISI.³⁷

Imran Khan and General Bajwa held a meeting on October 15 to find a way out of the deadlock, but the impasse persisted. Finally, after three weeks, the Prime Minister approved the appointment of Nadeem Ahmed Anjum as the ISI director general. The appointment will take effect from November 20, and the outgoing ISI chief Faiz Hameed will remain in office till November 19.³⁸

There is speculation in the Pakistani media about how the split between the Army and Imran Khan will play out and whether it could lead to the ouster of the Prime Minister.³⁹ While the future is uncertain, the episode reveals the fraught nature of civil-military relations in Pakistan, with the Pakistan Army seen to be beyond the control of the political leadership.

The second event was the clashes between supporters of the outlawed Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and the police in areas around Lahore, Muridke, Gujranwala, and Islamabad. These violent protests led to the death of at least four policemen, with over 250 injured.⁴⁰ The TLP was demanding the release of their jailed chief Saad Rizvi and the expulsion of the French ambassador.



TLP supporters in protest march heading towards Islamabad, October 27, 2021. Source: Dawn

The disarray in decision-making among the political leadership was evident throughout the crisis. On October 24, the government released more than 350 activists of the TLP and announced that the cases against others would be withdrawn by October 27. With protests continuing, in a federal meeting presided over by the Prime Minister, the government decided to act tough. At a post-meeting press conference, Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry declared, “The cabinet has decided to treat TLP as a militant organisation, and it will be crushed as other such groups have been eliminated...It was decided that the TLP would no more be dealt as a political party but as a militant organisation, and it would not be tolerated anymore.”⁴¹

On October 31, the government announced that it had reached an agreement with the TLP but refused to divulge any details. This indicated the difficulties facing the Pakistani state in dealing with outfits like the TLP. The TLP has been described as “a movement that is more rooted in urban and peri-urban Punjab than any previous religio-political one.” It has “support from large swathes of the Punjabi lumpen classes with sections of the trader/merchant petty bourgeoisie through an embedded religious leadership that commands a large mosque network.”⁴² A Pakistani political leadership that is at the forefront of promoting religious identity will obviously be reluctant to act firmly against organisations like the TLP.

STANDOFF AT THE INDIA-CHINA LAC

Deadlocked Negotiations

The India-China standoff that commenced in Ladakh in May 2020 is developing into a stalemate. After the disengagement from Pangong Tso in February and Gogra in August, it was expected that the 13th Round of military-level talks held on October 10 would result in some agreement on disengagement from Hot Springs and the overall de-escalation in eastern Ladakh.⁴³ However, the talks failed to break the deadlock.

In unusually strong statements, both sides blamed each other for the failure of the talks. A statement released by the Indian Army said, “During the meeting, the Indian side, therefore, made constructive suggestions for resolving the remaining areas, but the Chinese side was not agreeable and also could not provide any forward-looking proposals. The meeting thus did not result in resolution of the remaining areas.”⁴⁴

Colonel Long Shaohua, spokesperson for China’s PLA Western Theater Command, in his statement, claimed that “during the talks, China has made great efforts to promote the easing and cooling of the border situation and fully demonstrated its sincerity in order to maintain the overall situation of the relations between the two militaries. However, India still insisted on the unreasonable and unrealistic demands, which made the negotiations more difficult.”⁴⁵

Some indications of a hardening of positions were visible. Two days before the military commanders met at Ladakh, reports had emerged that an estimated 215 PLA soldiers had attempted to push their way across the LAC at the Yangtse area in Arunachal Pradesh. This had led to a scuffle with Indian Army troops before the PLA soldiers were overpowered.⁴⁶ Yangtse has seen PLA incursion

attempts in the past, but the number of soldiers and their aggressive behaviour was unusual.

Infrastructure and Force Build up

India and China are both building up infrastructure and deploying additional forces and modern equipment along the LAC. The Border Roads Organisation is working speedily to construct the Sela tunnel that would help provide all-weather connectivity to Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh.⁴⁷ Last month, the Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways, Nitin Gadkari, reviewed the construction work of the strategically important Zojila and Z-Morh tunnels on the Srinagar-Leh highway and gave a deadline of December 2023 for their completion.⁴⁸

In the eastern sector of the LAC, the army has deployed new weapon systems to strengthen its capability. These include the M777 ultra-light howitzers imported from the U.S. that can be swiftly deployed in the mountainous terrain using the CH-47F Chinook helicopters, and the upgraded L-70 anti-aircraft gun.⁴⁹ There is also a greater focus on technology to improve the surveillance over the LAC and boost situational awareness.

There is similar activity by the PLA in Tibet. In a press conference, the Indian Air Force Chief stated that the PLA Air Force is “still deployed at three air bases” facing eastern Ladakh and that the Chinese “infrastructure development is going on at a very high rate”.⁵⁰ Indian Army’s Eastern Army Commander Lieutenant General Manoj Pande informed a group of reporters that both sides were also attempting to scale up infrastructure near the LAC in the eastern sector. He said, “Annual training exercises by PLA have increased in their depth areas. Reserve formations mobilised (after the Ladakh standoff began in May 2020) still remain in training areas in the depth.”⁵¹

Increased PLA activity is also being reported across the Eastern sector. One newspaper report indicates that in eastern Arunachal Pradesh, a rise in patrolling and transgressions has been observed in the Anjaw, Zikyen La, and Dome La regions. At some places, sources say, there have even been temporary constructions by the intruding Chinese troops. In the Chumbi valley, the area of the 2017 standoff between India and China, the Chinese side has recruited at least 350 locals this year, deploying them to critical locations of potential conflict.⁵²

The ongoing standoff and the deployments on both sides are leading to comparisons with the LoC with Pakistan. Speaking at the India Today Conclave on October 9, the Indian Army Chief General Narvane stated, “Yes, it is a matter

of concern that the large-scale build-up has occurred and continues to be in place, and to sustain that kind of a build-up, there has been an equal amount of infrastructure development on the Chinese side. So, it means that they (PLA) are there to stay. We are keeping a close watch on all these developments, but if they are there to stay, we are there to stay too." He went on to say, "But what this would, especially if they continue to stay there through the second winter, definitely mean that we will be in a kind of LC (Line of Control) situation though not an active LC as is there on the western front."⁵³

China's New Land Border Law

In another signal that China is in no hurry to resolve the ongoing standoff, on October 23, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China passed a new law for the "protection and exploitation of the country's land border areas," which will come into effect from January 1. The law stipulates that the "sovereignty and territorial integrity of the People's Republic of China are sacred and inviolable" and that the Chinese military "shall carry out border duties" to "resolutely prevent, stop and combat invasion, encroachment, provocation and other acts."⁵⁴

India reacted sharply, and Arindam Bagchi, Spokesperson, Ministry of External Affairs, said, "China's unilateral decision to bring about a legislation which can have implications on our existing bilateral arrangements on border management as well as on the boundary question is of concern to us." He added that "We also expect that China will avoid undertaking action under the pretext of this law which could unilaterally alter the situation in the India-China border areas."⁵⁵

In response to India's concerns, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said that the law "will not affect China's compliance with existing treaties related to national land boundary affairs China has already signed or change China's current mode of boundary management and cooperation with countries sharing a land boundary with it. Nor will it alter China's position and proposition on relevant boundary issues."⁵⁶

Notwithstanding China's claims that the law will "advance international cooperation," there is deep suspicion on the Indian side that the new law will legitimise China's unilateral military actions of last year and complicates any chance of an agreement on the pull-out of the PLA forces from areas currently under negotiations. Taking all the recent events together, the second winter of enhanced deployment by both sides is well on the cards.

India's Neighbourhood: Changing Dynamics

by

Sanjay Pulipaka

Nepal – Reinvigorating Engagement

An important dynamic in India-Nepal relations is the intense interactions at the societal level. The pandemic had drastically reduced the cross-border movement of people between the two countries. However, in the first week of October 2021, Indian tourists started visiting Nepal through the land border. Further, in late October, with reduced incidence of Covid-19 cases, the India-Nepal bus service resumed its operations, indicating a movement towards normalisation of cross-border movement of people.⁵⁷ In 2019, before the pandemic, India was Nepal's "top tourist source market...with Indians accounting for 209,611 arrivals".⁵⁸

Delhi and Kathmandu have stepped up cooperation in other sectors as well. During the last month, they signed an "agreement to develop the 400 KV cross border transmission line between Butwan (Nepal) and Gorakhpur (India)".⁵⁹ The transmission line will help in the two-way transmission of electricity. It also makes it a prerequisite for Nepal to receive a grant of USD500 million under the United States Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) which will be utilised to connect Butwal to Damauli and Hetauda in Nepal through a 315-km transmission line.⁶⁰ The project, therefore, demonstrates possibilities of Delhi collaborating with like-minded countries in developing big-ticket infrastructure projects in India's immediate neighbourhood (There continue to be reservations in sections of Nepal's political spectrum regarding the MCC funded projects⁶¹). India has also allowed Nepal to sell electricity in India's power exchange market for the first time. In the recent past, Nepal sold 39MW of electricity which was produced by the 24MW Trishuli Hydropower Project and the 15MW Devighat Hydropower Project in the India Energy Exchange Limited (IEX).⁶² Notably, both of those projects have been developed by Nepal using Indian assistance.⁶³

During the month, India and Nepal agreed to conduct a location survey for the Kathmandu-Raxaul broad-gauge railway line and reached an agreement to exchange standard operating procedures for initiating passenger train services between Jaynagar and Kurtha.⁶⁴ The 34.9km-long Jaynagar to Kurtha cross-border railway line, which will also pass through Janakpur, was handed over to the Nepal government on October 22.⁶⁵ The cross-border rail-link project

entailed gauge conversion and was built with Indian grant assistance.⁶⁶ Improved railway connectivity between the two countries will reduce the costs associated with cross-border trade and will also facilitate movement across the borders.



"India-assisted cross-border rail link connecting Jaynagar in Bihar to Kurtha in Province 2 has been completed & handed over to Nepal Railways Company in the presence of Ambassador Shri Kwatra & MoPIT Minister Ms. Renu Kumari Yadav."

Source: [Embassy of India](https://embassyofindia.gov.in/), Kathmandu, Nepal

In the political realm, the leaders of the ruling Nepali Congress visited India to interact with Bharatiya Janata Party leaders to strengthen party to party interactions.⁶⁷ During the visit, Nepal's foreign minister Prakash Sharan Mahat stated that while there is a "consensus over the fact that Kalapani in Uttarakhand is part of Nepal's sovereign territory... We are confident that the territorial dispute can be solved through dialogue."⁶⁸ However, it is unlikely that the border issue will be resolved anytime soon. The visiting delegation also met with the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, as the state has a long boundary with Nepal.⁶⁹ The visit of the ruling Nepal Congress delegation to Delhi indicates an effort to scale up bilateral relations through multi-track diplomacy.

The armies of India and Nepal conducted exercises during the month in Uttarakhand.⁷⁰ The heads of Nepal's Armed Police Force (APF) and India's Shastra Seema Bal held a meeting to ensure better coordination between the two forces to tackle cross-border crimes.⁷¹ In late October, during the meeting of the 14th India-Nepal Bilateral Consultative Group on Security Issues, both sides deliberated on various issues such as training, capacity building requirements, cooperation in disaster management, and Nepal's army access to Indian defence stores.⁷²

Over the past few months, there have been reports that China may have intruded into the territory of Nepal. The Government of Nepal constituted a panel, led by a Joint Secretary from the Ministry of Home Affairs, to study the reports and conduct a field visit to the areas of transgression. The panel reportedly noted that "that the Chinese side has put up wires and fencing in the Nepali territory."⁷³ Nepal's Ministry of Home Affairs communicated to its "Foreign Ministry to take the matter up with China so as to resolve the issues."⁷⁴ Meanwhile, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in a telephonic conversation with his Nepal counterpart on October 19 noted that China will "support Nepal in safeguarding its national sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, and speak up on issues concerning Nepal's core interests."⁷⁵

Chinese investments in Nepal are reviving. Nepal reportedly received USD182.41 million in FDI from China in the first quarter of this financial year compared to USD187.32 million received during the last fiscal year.⁷⁶ There are concerns in India that China may be using Nepal as a base to export products to India. News reports during October indicated that China may be using Nepal to export tea into India, which may be negatively impacting the demand for Assam tea in domestic as well as external markets.⁷⁷

Bangladesh – New Challenges

With the intent to consolidate growing bilateral trade between the two countries, the Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh noted during the month that "a good Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) will create a clear and mutual benefit for both Bangladesh and India".⁷⁸ The High Commissioner also pointed out that "due to the power given to states under the Indian constitution... [Bangladesh should also] build relationships at the state as well as the national level."⁷⁹

In early October, India's ONGC Videsh (OVL) announced that it has initiated exploratory drilling at Maheshkhali Island in Bangladesh, which will be followed by drilling at two other wells subsequently.⁸⁰ On October 10, 2021, during the installation program of the reactor pressure vessel of the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant (RNPP) project, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed interest in establishing a second nuclear power plant.⁸¹ PM Hasina stated that "if the government can build another nuclear power plant in the country, there'll be no problem in power supply."⁸² It will be recalled that a few months ago, the Bangladesh government had scrapped a proposal to construct ten new coal-fired power plants, which included a couple of China supplied plants as well. The RNPP is part of a Russia-India initiative to develop civilian nuclear-

powered plants in third countries. Two years ago, Chinese firms had expressed interest in developing the second nuclear power plant in Bangladesh.⁸³



"The Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant is located on the bank of the Ganges river at a distance of 160 km from Bangladesh's capital Dhaka." Source: [Hindustan Times](#)

As India-Bangladesh economic ties continue to grow, communal violence in Bangladesh has cast a shadow on the Delhi-Dhaka relationship. During the Dusshera festive season, many Hindu places of worship were subjected to vandalism and arson. India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson noted that this communal violence was disturbing and called for "the prompt action of the Bangladesh government to ensure the control of the situation."⁸⁴

News reports suggest that organisations such as Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh may have organised these riots to "embarrass the Sheikh Hasina government but also put a strain on excellent bilateral relations between two neighbours."⁸⁵ In addition to generating stress in the India-Bangladesh relationship, the communal violence was also aimed at changing the contours of domestic discourse. First, as Bangladesh is celebrating 50 years of Independence, public discussions revolved around the rapid economic progress that the country has achieved in the recent past. More importantly, there was considerable discussion on the better economic performance of Bangladesh compared to Pakistan, which was attributed to relatively lower levels of religious fundamentalism. This recent wave of communal violence has shifted the discussion back to identity issues. Second, there was growing clamour that Pakistan should make a formal apology for the 1971 genocide, with protests planned in various capitals of the world.⁸⁶ However, much of the discourse has now become focused on domestic communal violence.

Despite these challenges, India and Bangladesh are committed to consolidating the bilateral relationship. On October 23, Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla noted that “India-Bangladesh relations today are deeper than any other strategic partnership... It is a role model for relations between two neighbouring countries.”⁸⁷ Further, in the last week of October, the Chief of Naval Staff of Bangladesh, M. Shaheen Iqbal, visited India for discussions on “Coordinated Patrol along International Maritime Boundary Line, bilateral exercise BONGOSAGAR, and the conduct of naval training.”⁸⁸

Sri Lanka – Looming Economic Crisis

India and Sri Lanka witnessed significant high-level interactions during the month. A 100-member Sri Lankan delegation, along with Sri Lanka’s Cabinet Minister of Youth and Sports, Namal Rajapaksa, travelled by the first flight to land at Kushinagar International Airport on October 20.⁸⁹ The Indian PM interacted with Namal Rajapaksa and stressed the importance of consolidating the bilateral relationship.⁹⁰ Indian Army Chief General Manoj Mukund Naravane visited Sri Lanka on October 12 and both countries were also involved in a 12-day ‘Mitra Shakti’ military exercise from October 4-15.⁹¹



“8th edition of India-Sri Lanka bilateral joint exercise ‘Mitra Shakti’ to be conducted at Combat Training School, Ampara, Sri Lanka from 4-15 October.” Source: [India Today](#)

Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla visited Sri Lanka from October 2-5. In his interactions with the Indian foreign secretary, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa reportedly sought India's support in declaring the Indian Ocean as a “Zone of Peace.”⁹² The proposal for Indian Ocean as a “Zone of

Peace” was articulated by Sri Lanka in the 1970s as well. However, given the radically different geopolitical context prevailing today, Sri Lanka needs to clearly specify the principles that are to guide the latest iteration of its “Zone of Peace” proposal.

Growing Chinese presence in Sri Lanka has been a source of discomfiture for India. There is a concern in Delhi “over slowing down of Indian projects while those by China are rapidly progressing.”⁹³ Observers point out that various China backed projects such as Colombo Port City Project, Colombo International Container Terminal, Hambantota port/Industrial Park, and a tyre plant in Hambantota received proactive support from the Sri Lanka government. Therefore, it was not surprising that Foreign Secretary Shringla prioritised connectivity projects such as Jaffna to Chennai flights, ferry services between Karaikal and Kankesanthurai and Dhanushkodi and Talaimanar, and the Buddhist corridor.”⁹⁴ During his visit to Jaffna, the Foreign Secretary visited projects built with Indian assistance such as the Cultural Centre and Palaly airport.

Last month, India’s Adani group signed an agreement with Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) and John Keells Holdings to develop the Colombo Port’s Western Container Terminal.⁹⁵ The Adani group will have a 51% stake in the port project.⁹⁶ In the last week of October, group Chairman Gautam Adani interacted with Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to explore infrastructure partnerships.⁹⁷ The Adani group is reportedly interested in investing in Sri Lanka’s energy and wind sector.⁹⁸

Sri Lanka-China relations experienced some stress during the month. Sri Lanka has recently suspended the import of 99,000 metric tonnes of organic fertiliser from a Chinese firm, reportedly due to the presence of harmful bacteria.⁹⁹ Subsequently, the Commercial High Court of Sri Lanka, while issuing summons to the Chinese firm, barred the “People’s Bank from making any payments under a letter of credit.”¹⁰⁰ China blacklisted the People’s Bank for defaulting on the payment.¹⁰¹ On the request of the Sri Lanka government, India dispatched nano-fertilisers to meet Sri Lanka urgent agricultural requirements.

The fertiliser import issue with China took place in the context of a deepening economic crisis in the country. The Sri Lankan economy is dependent on tourism, tea and a few agricultural products.¹⁰² The pandemic has resulted in reduced tourist inflows. Sri Lanka attempted a quick shift from chemical fertilisers to organic fertilisers, which further exacerbated the country’s economic crisis. Sri Lanka’s Central Bank reportedly has scaled up printing

money to maintain stability in the economy and government expenditure, which has raised concerns regarding high inflation.¹⁰³ To overcome a severe foreign exchange crisis and pay for energy imports, Sri Lanka has sought a 500 million credit line from India.¹⁰⁴

Myanmar – A Humanitarian Crisis

Myanmar is in the throes of acute political and economic instability. Clashes between ethnic armed groups and Myanmar armed forces (Tatmadaw) have increased in intensity. During the month, Tatmadaw forces scaled up their presence in various ethnic areas close to “Kanpetlet and Hakha townships in Chin State; Kani and Monywa townships in the central Sagaing region; and Gangaw township in Magway.”¹⁰⁵ Subsequently, there were intense clashes between the Tatmadaw and the rebel forces, with allegations that the Myanmar military torched numerous villages.¹⁰⁶ Most of these regions are close to India’s north-eastern borders. Not surprisingly, there has been an increased inflow of refugees into India. The Mizoram Home Minister Lalchamliana, noted in early October that “12,121 people from Myanmar had crossed over [and] are taking shelter in various parts of the state.”¹⁰⁷

Pro-democracy activists continued with their protests in various parts of the country. For the first time since her detention in February 2021, Aung San Suu Kyi testified before a military court on October 26. Given growing concerns about her health, her testimony in the court came as a relief to her supporters. While senior civilian leaders and high-profile activists are still behind bars, the Myanmar military released over 5,000 prisoners in mid-October, which included many anti-coup protestors.¹⁰⁸ There was reportedly in response to growing international criticism.

During the month, Myanmar military faced diplomatic setbacks. ASEAN refrained from inviting the Commander-in-Chief of Tatmadaw to participate in its annual summit-level meeting held on October 26-28.¹⁰⁹ In the last week of October, US President Joe Biden sharply criticised the “horrific violence” in Myanmar, while US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan interacted with the representatives of the National Unity Government (NUG) and reiterated support for the pro-democracy movement.¹¹⁰ The Upper House of the French Parliament voted in favour of recognising the opposition NUG.¹¹¹

Overall, during the month, Myanmar witnessed growing resistance from ethnic armies and opposition groups, a deepening economic crisis, while the Tatmadaw had to contend with significant reverses in the international arena. United Nations officials expressed concern over the deepening of economic crisis, intensification of civil conflict and displacement of a large number of

people.¹¹² It is estimated that over 200,000 people have been subjected to forced migration since the coup in February 2021.¹¹³

India, Russia and the Regional Dynamic

India-Russia defence cooperation continues to be robust. Towards the end of October, “the Indian Navy’s latest frigate was launched in Russia’s Yantar Shipyard in Kaliningrad”.¹¹⁴ A US Congressional Research Service report of October 14 noted that India “will continue to rely on Russian weapons systems in the near and middle terms.”¹¹⁵

In addition to defence, Russia and India are making efforts to scale up their partnership in other sectors as well. In mid-October, Russia agreed to supply an additional 40 million tonnes of coal per year.¹¹⁶ The agreement also envisages that the two countries will work on “joint projects/commercial activities in coking coal, development of coking coal deposits and logistics development.”¹¹⁷ Another MoU between India and Russia will ensure long-term supply of DAP (Di-Ammonium Phosphate) fertilizer.¹¹⁸ The MOU was aimed at diversifying India’s imports and maintaining stable prices in fertiliser sector.¹¹⁹

The Sputnik Light COVID-19 vaccine is yet to receive emergency use authorisation but is being manufactured in India. To ensure that manufactured doses are used before their expiry date, the Indian government has approved export of 4 million Sputnik Light COVID-19 vaccine doses to Russia.¹²⁰

On regional security, while both Delhi and Moscow are concerned about the developments in Afghanistan, a deeper and faster engagement of the Taliban seems to be the preferred approach of Russia. The Russian statement issued after Moscow Format dialogue on Afghanistan with the Taliban did not reflect Delhi’s cautious approach.¹²¹ Indian officials reportedly interacted with the Taliban representatives on the side-lines of the Moscow Format dialogue on Afghanistan.¹²² There is, meanwhile, growing convergence between Russian and Chinese regional perspectives, which is causing concern in India. From October 17-23, the Russian and Chinese navies conducted their first joint patrol in the Western Pacific.¹²³

India and the United States: Expanding Partnership

Policy discourse during the month among US political and Congressional leaders urged closer partnership between India and the United States.¹²⁴ On October 26, Republican Senator John Cornyn and Democratic Senator Mark Warner called on the US President Joe Biden not to impose sanctions on India under CAATSA for its purchase of the S-400 system from Russia.¹²⁵

At the Eighth US-India Economic and Financial Partnership meeting between Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and US Treasury Secretary Janet L. Yellen held on October 14, the two sides discussed “banking and insurance sector reform, capital markets development, payment system modernisation, and data protection frameworks.”¹²⁶



Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and US Treasury Secretary Janet L. Yellen at the 8th ministerial meeting of the India-USA Economic and Financial Partnership.

Source: @[FinMinIndia](#)

On October 25, Indian pharmaceutical company Biological E and the United States International Development Finance Corporation reached a USD 50 million financial agreement which will enable the Biological E to expand vaccine production in India.¹²⁷

On October 1, India and the US agreed in principle to set up an Indo-US Industrial Security Joint Working Group, which will work towards aligning policies/procedures that allow “the defence industries to collaborate on cutting edge defence technologies.”¹²⁸ The Chief of Naval Operations of the US Navy visited India from October 11-15.¹²⁹ India also expressed an intent to join the “34-member Combined Maritime Force based in Bahrain, headed by an American Navy vice-admiral.”¹³⁰

In the first week of October, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman visited India to discuss “the situation in South Asia, including recent developments in Afghanistan, [and] the need to counter cross-border terrorism.”¹³¹

India and West Asia

On October 18, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the UAE’s Foreign Minister Sheik Abdullah Bin Zayed, Israel Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar held the first meeting of a new quadrilateral economic forum.¹³² The forum will focus on “trade, technology cooperation, big data and maritime security with the objective to generate synergies that go beyond the government level cooperation.”¹³³ The fact that a new forum has emerged involving Israel and an Arab country indicates tectonic political shifts that are currently under way in the Middle East. India's participation in the quadrilateral suggests that Delhi seeks to proactively participate in and shape the evolving dynamic in the region.

EAM Dr. Jaishankar visited Israel from October 17-21. Discussions during the visit focused on consolidating the bilateral strategic partnership and strengthening “collaboration in innovation and research, including boosting the ‘Make in India’ initiative.”¹³⁴ EAM Jaishankar also interacted with the local business community on innovation, digital, and green growth. The two countries agreed on the resumption of India-Israel free trade negotiations.¹³⁵

At the 15th meeting of the Joint Working Group on Defence Cooperation held on October 29, India and Israel agreed to establish a 10-year cooperation plan.¹³⁶ During the month, Indian Air Force’s Mirage 2000 squadron participated in the Blue Flag exercise held in Israel,¹³⁷ which also involves participation from the US, the UK, Italy, Greece, Germany, and France.¹³⁸

India is participating in Expo 2020 Dubai, which is being held from October 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022.¹³⁹ Inaugurating the Indian pavilion at the Dubai Expo, the Union Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal stated that the UAE is willing to “invest \$75 billion from their sovereign funds in India... this is

over and above what other businesspersons in the UAE may want to invest.”¹⁴⁰ The Dubai government signed an agreement to invest in infrastructure projects in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir to invest in infrastructure projects.¹⁴¹ India and the UAE are moving forward to conclude a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that will include early harvest scheme.¹⁴²

Multilateralism

Addressing the session on climate change and environment at the G-20 Summit, the Indian Prime Minister advanced three action points, “(1) G-20 countries must create a 'clean energy projects fund'; (2) network of research institutions to work on new technologies; (3) create global standards in the field of green hydrogen.”¹⁴³ He also addressed G-20 sessions on sustainable development, global economy and global health. Speaking at the Global Summit in Supply Chain Resilience on October 31, PM Modi stressed the importance of improving the global supply chains in terms of “Trusted Source, Transparency and Time-Frame.”¹⁴⁴

India continued its advocacy of reforming global institutions. Speaking at a UNSC debate on cooperation between the ‘UN and regional & subregional organisations’, EAM Dr. Jaishankar noted that while “African states constitute more than one-fourth of the UN membership, their continued denial of representation in the permanent category of membership, is a blot on the collective credibility of this Council.”¹⁴⁵



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with G-20 Leaders in Rome, October 12, 2021.

Source: [@MEAIndia](https://twitter.com/MEAIndia)

India resumed COVID-19 vaccine exports during the month, with the MEA spokesperson announcing that India has dispatched ten crore vaccine doses each to Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Iran.¹⁴⁶

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The Arc of Instability

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