



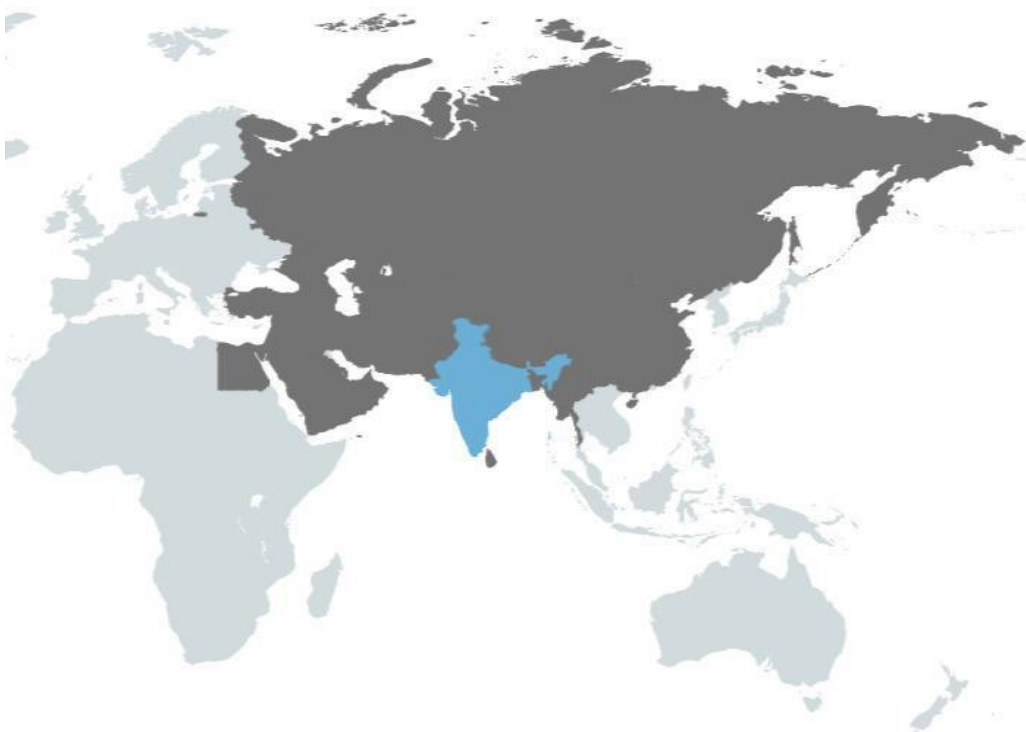
Delhi Policy Group

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 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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India's Neighbourhood: The Arc of Instability

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

AFGHANISTAN

A Humanitarian and Economic Crisis

Among the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, disturbing reports emerged during the month of desperate Afghan families selling their underage daughters into marriage in order to survive.¹ Deborah Lyons, the U.N.'s special representative for the country, warned that Afghanistan is "on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe" and its collapsing economy is heightening the risk of extremism. She said that the main cause is financial sanctions on the Taliban, which have led to the country's GDP [Gross Domestic Product] contracting by about 40 per cent.²

Prior to the Taliban seizing power, foreign aid accounted for around 45% of the country's GDP and funded 75% of the government's budget, including health and education services. Currently, Afghanistan's \$9.5 billion in foreign reserves are frozen in U.S. banks, and shipments of U.S. dollars have been stopped. According to an analysis by the U.N. Development Program, by the middle of next year, as much as 97% of the Afghan population could sink below the poverty line.³

The World Bank is finalising a proposal to deliver up to \$500 million from the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), which has a total of \$1.5 billion. The money will go mainly to addressing urgent health care needs in Afghanistan, where less than 7% of the population has been vaccinated against the coronavirus.⁴ However, problems connected to financial sanctions remain. A World Bank source said, "The proposal calls for the World Bank to transfer the money to the U.N. and other humanitarian agencies, without any oversight or reporting, but it says nothing about the financial sector, or how the money will get into the country."⁵

In a surprise move, the Taliban government announced a ban on the use of foreign currencies, a move that could cause more significant disruption to the economy. The country is heavily reliant on U.S. dollars for conducting trade, and according to a Bloomberg report, two-thirds of Afghan banks' deposits and

half of the country's national loans are in U.S. dollars. There is concern that there is not enough Afghan currency to sustain economic activity.⁶

Furthermore, there are also major apprehensions that the failing economy could drive more people into illegal opium production, with the Taliban looking the other way. Although the Taliban had vowed to crack down on the drug trade, the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime said in a report on November 16 that Afghanistan harvested 6,800 tons of opium in 2021, an increase of 8 per cent over the previous year.⁷ This is a matter of concern for neighbouring countries like India, which saw a seizure of nearly three tonnes of heroin originating from Afghanistan worth an estimated \$2.72 billion.⁸

Internal Stability and Spread of Terrorism

On November 27, Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund, the Taliban Prime Minister, delivered his first public speech since the Taliban came to power. He said, "We assure all the countries that we will not interfere in their internal affairs, and we want to have good economic relations with them." He requested the U.S. to release Afghanistan's central bank reserve to tide over the country's economic crisis. He went on to state that his government was inclusive and that "girls' education has resumed to a large extent, and there is hope that the education will be further facilitated."⁹

Despite these claims, the Taliban's actions on the ground continue to tell a different story. On November 10, the interim administration announced the establishment of a military tribunal to enforce Islamic law in Afghanistan. Enamullah Samangani, the group's deputy spokesman, said in a statement that the military tribunal would have the authority to interpret Shariah rulings, issue decrees relevant to Islamic civil laws and jurisprudence in high-level cases, and also register complaints, lawsuits, and petitions against Taliban officials and members of the police, army, and intelligence units.¹⁰

Continuing their restrictions on women, the Taliban government issued new guidelines for television channels banning Afghan women from appearing in television dramas.¹¹ This follows strictures already in place over women working and girls attending schools.

On November 25, more than 1,000 Afghan Shia Hazaras gathered in Kabul to pledge their support to the country's Taliban rulers. Senior Hazara leader and former lawmaker Jafar Mahdawi, who organised the gathering, said that since the Taliban seized power in August, the new rulers have put an end to the war, stopped corruption, and increased security. He also called for a more inclusive government and urged the new rulers to reopen schools for girls.¹²



Afghan Hazara people attend a gathering in which elders pledged support to the Taliban, November 25, 2021. Source: Dawn

While the Hazara gathering was a positive sign, it was also an indication that the community wants greater protection from the Taliban against the Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K) attacks that mainly target the Shiites. Whether such protection will be forthcoming is as yet uncertain. In early November, clashes between Taliban and Shiite fighters in the central province of Uruzgan killed at least 21 people. This highlights the danger that members of the Shiite minority targeted by the ISIS-K may take up arms in desperation due to a lack of action by the Taliban government.¹³

The Taliban's battle with the ISIS-K continued unabated. On November 2, five ISIS-K terrorists attacked Afghanistan's biggest military hospital. A suicide bomber hit the entrance of the 400-bed Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan hospital, followed by an assault by gunmen. The Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid claimed that 'special forces' had repulsed the attack within 15 minutes, but it left at least 19 people dead and more than 50 wounded.¹⁴

In a briefing to the U.N. Security Council, Deborah Lyons, UN special representative for Afghanistan, stated, "Another major negative development has been the Taliban's inability to stem the expansion of the ISIS-K. Once limited to a few provinces and Kabul, [ISIS-K] now seems to be present in nearly all provinces and increasingly active."¹⁵ Lyons added that in its response to ISIS-K, the Taliban "appears to rely heavily on extra-judicial detentions and killings."



Maulvi Hamdullah Mukhlis (Sitting at the Center), head of Taliban military operations in Kabul, killed in the ISKP attack on military hospital on November 2, 2021. Source: WION

There are reports that more than 1,300 additional Taliban fighters have been deployed to Nangahar province in the past month with orders to increase the tempo of operations against the ISIS-K. Taliban fighters have responded to ISIS-K attacks with killings, beheadings, and hanging bodies along main roads in Jalalabad. However, violence has not reduced, and there are apprehensions that the Taliban's brutal approach to restoring order could fan Islamic State recruitment efforts.¹⁶

The Difficult Search for a Common Regional Understanding

It would appear that the regional countries share a common perception on the spillover of the threats from Afghanistan and the contours of a way forward. The Delhi Declaration on Afghanistan, issued after the Third Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan was held on November 10 in New Delhi, outlines some of these issues:¹⁷

- Concern over the humanitarian and security situation in Afghanistan and the need for humanitarian assistance.
- Ensuring that Afghanistan's territory is not used for sheltering, training, planning or financing any terrorist acts.
- Collective cooperation against the menace of radicalisation, extremism, separatism and drug trafficking in the region.

- The necessity of forming an open and truly inclusive government and ensuring that the fundamental rights of women, children and minority communities are not violated.
- A central role for the United Nations in Afghanistan.

If we look at the statements issued after recent multilateral engagements held on Afghanistan – the extended Troika meeting at Islamabad on November 11, the Russia, India, China foreign ministers virtual meeting on November 26, and the EU-Central Asia ministerial meeting on November 22 – they all largely mirror the issues highlighted in the Delhi Declaration. Yet, despite this, a web of suspicions and hostilities prevent the adoption of a combined regional approach.

The Third Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan held in New Delhi was attended by National Security Advisers / Secretaries of the National Security Councils of India, Iran, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Russian, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. However, Pakistan's National Security Advisor Moeed Yusuf refused to attend the meeting, calling India a "poiler" which "can't be a peacemaker."¹⁸ China also declined the invitation citing "scheduling reasons."¹⁹ New Delhi responded to Pakistan's refusal to attend the meeting by saying, "It shows their attitude over Afghanistan issue if they did not come to such important meetings."²⁰



The Third Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan was held on 10 November 2021 in New Delhi in an expanded format. Source: MEA

Meanwhile, India's offer to provide 50,000 tonnes of wheat to Afghanistan is still awaiting clearance from Pakistan for transit by the land route to Kabul. More than a month after India made the offer to supply the wheat to

Afghanistan, following a meeting with the Taliban leaders on November 12, Prime Minister Imran Khan conveyed that "Pakistan would favourably consider the request by Afghan brothers for transportation of wheat offered by India through Pakistan on exceptional basis for humanitarian purposes."²¹

However, the shipment continued to be delayed over the modalities of transportation, with Islamabad insisting that wheat should be transported through Pakistani trucks under the banner of the U.N. Thereafter, Pakistan has conveyed that Afghan trucks can be used for transportation from the Wagah border to Torkham.²² This is a glaring example of how Pakistan's hostility towards India is impacting even humanitarian requirements of the Afghan people.

PAKISTAN

Surrender to Extremism

On November 8, Pakistan's Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry announced that a complete ceasefire had been reached between the government and the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The announcement came a month after Prime Minister Imran Khan had stated in an interview that the government was in talks with some TTP groups.²³ The TTP later clarified that both sides would observe a month-long ceasefire which could be extended with consensus. In addition, it was reported that the interior minister of Afghanistan's Taliban regime, Sirajuddin Haqqani, had played a mediating role between Pakistan and the TTP, a fact later confirmed by Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi.²⁴

The Dawn newspaper quoted government sources as saying that they are dealing with the TTP from a position of strength. Their logic is that due to the withdrawal of India from Afghanistan, the TTP has lost its main supplier of money and weapons, and with the Taliban's dependency on Pakistan, the former can be used to push the TTP towards a deal.²⁵ Not everyone in Pakistan agrees with this logic. One day after the ceasefire was announced, the Prime Minister appeared in the Pakistan Supreme Court for a hearing on the terrorist attack on the Army Public School, Peshawar, on December 16, 2014. Justice Qazi Muhammad Amin said that it was being reported that TTP was being invited for negotiations and asked, "Are we again going to surrender?"

Muhammad Amir Rana, a security analyst, feels that the "Pakistani state has already tested the TTP in several peace deals. Experience suggests that after every deal, the Pakistani Taliban gained more power to propagate their

narrative and to flex their muscles."²⁶ Author and political analyst Zahid Hussain termed the decision to talk to the TTP as being very damaging for Pakistan and that "such negotiations have never yielded peace in the past. Are we going to repeat the same mistakes?"²⁷

In negotiations with the Pakistan government, the TTP has reportedly made three demands that include allowing the opening of a political office in a third country, reversal of the Federal Administered Tribal Areas merger with Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, and introduction of the Islamic system in Pakistan.²⁸ Pakistani authorities have rejected these demands, but this only exposes the problems that exist in coming to an agreement with a group with whom six past peace agreements have ended in failure.²⁹

In another back down with an extremist group, the Pakistan government had agreed on a peace deal with the outlawed Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) after days of violent protests in October. It was subsequently revealed that while the Prime Minister had authorised the use of force against the TLP marchers, the military leadership had advised against this.³⁰ Under the terms of the agreement, the government would unfreeze the accounts and assets of the TLP and take steps to lift the ban on it.³¹



TLP chief Saad Rizvi showered with rose petals by his supporters following his release from jail, November 18, 2021, Source: Bol News

On November 18, the TLP chief Hafiz Saad Hussain Rizvi walked out of Kot Lakhpat jail in Lahore, where he had been held since April this year under the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA). Rizvi was released after the TLP was removed from the First Schedule of the ATA as a proscribed organisation and his name was taken off the list of proscribed individuals who are suspected of terrorism or sectarianism.³²

Encouraged by the Pakistan government's action, the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ) and the Shia Ulema Council (SUC) have demanded a lifting of the ban on Sipah-i-Sahaba and Tehrik-e-Jafria Pakistan (TJP), respectively. While Allama Aurangzeb Farooqi of the ASWJ threatened to "protest if the government fails to accept our demand," the SUC North Punjab President Allama Sibtain Haider Sabzwari wondered if the state only understands the language of violence.³³

Extremism is a hydra-headed monster and surrendering to it has numerous implications that go beyond the security realm. Buffeted by a governance, political and economic crisis, how Pakistan handles the wave of extremism in the country will define its immediate internal stability.

Situation along the India-Pakistan Border

With the ceasefire holding, an uneasy calm prevails along the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir. A few infiltration attempts from Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK) continue to be made, mainly in the Jammu sector. On November 26, the Indian army gunned down one of the most wanted guides during an infiltration bid in the Bhimbar Gali area. He was identified as Mohammad Arif, initially a resident of village Panjni in Poonch district, and who had migrated to PoJK in 1992. Arif was instrumental in facilitating infiltration by several militant groups in the twin border districts of Poonch and Rajouri.³⁴

In the past few months, there has been a resurgence of terror incidents in the Jammu region, which had been relatively peaceful in recent years. In August, the Director General of Police Dilbag Singh had said, "After the February 25 ceasefire agreement between the two DGMOs, infiltration had come down to zero, and there was no cross-border shelling either. However, unfortunately, terrorists have been infiltrating into India, especially from the Rajouri-Poonch sector".³⁵ Since then, this trend has continued, including an operation in the Poonch-Mendhar sector in October, during which the Indian Army lost 11 soldiers in a firefight with the terrorists.³⁶

After the onset of winter, infiltration becomes difficult across the snow-covered routes in Kashmir. Therefore, there is a likelihood of even greater terrorist activity in the Jammu region. It was reported that Ali Babar, a Pakistani national who the Indian Army captured during an infiltration bid on September 26, had admitted before the National Investigation Agency that over 200 terrorists are waiting at different 'launch pads' in PoJK to be pushed into Jammu and Kashmir before heavy snowfall begins in December.³⁷

On November 11, a high-level delegation of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) visited the Line of Control in PoJK, where they were reportedly given a comprehensive briefing on the prevailing security environment by the Pakistani military. This was primarily a propaganda exercise, with the OIC delegates duly mouthing the 'human rights violations by India' line.³⁸ Indian External Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Arindam Bagchi was sharp in his response, "We have said on many occasions previously that we see such visits to occupied Jammu and Kashmir as interference to our internal matters."³⁹

Pakistan-China Arms Trade

In a commissioning ceremony held in Shanghai, a Type 054A/P frigate named the PNS Tughril was delivered to the Pakistan Navy. This is the first of four Type 054 frigates being constructed by China for the Pakistan Navy.⁴⁰ The stealthy hull design of the Type 054A features sloped sides and reduced superstructure for minimising the radar cross-section. Designed primarily for anti-air warfare, the frigates are also equipped to conduct anti-surface and anti-submarine warfare missions.⁴¹ These will reportedly be the most advanced frigates with the Pakistan Navy.

Pakistan has also contracted for eight Type-039B Yuan Class Submarines from China. Four of these are to be built at China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation and four at the Karachi Shipyard & Engineering Works. To be completed by 2028, these inductions will almost double the size of Pakistan's submarine fleet.⁴² There are also reports that these submarines could launch the naval variant of the nuclear-capable Babur land attack cruise missile, which is under development.⁴³

Pakistan is becoming heavily dependent on arms from China. In the last five years, almost 75 per cent of Pakistan's arms imports have been from China.⁴⁴ Almost all frontline equipment now fielded by the Pakistan military is Chinese. This includes the JF-17 fighter aircraft, the Al Khalid and VT-4 tank, artillery

guns, air defence systems including the recently inducted HQ-9, strike drones, and all categories of missiles.

China has a strategic interest in arming Pakistan against India. Pakistan's conventional military capability is still not a match for India's, but arms transfers from China to Pakistan need to be closely monitored. The outgoing Indian Navy Chief, Admiral Karambir Singh, reflected this sentiment when he recently stated, "A lot of hardware is being exported to Pakistan from China, like ships and submarines. This will affect a lot the security dynamics here. We have to be prepared for this."⁴⁵

STANDOFF AT THE INDIA-CHINA LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL (LAC)

Deadlock Continues

The deadlock at the LAC continues with no further progress in the disengagement process. After the 13th Round of military-level talks held on October 10, there were strong statements by both sides blaming each other for the failure of the talks. Against this backdrop, the 23rd meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation & Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC) was held on November 18 and resulted in an agreement to "hold the next (14th) round of the Senior Commanders meeting at an early date to achieve the objective of complete disengagement from all the friction points along the LAC in the Western Sector in accordance with the existing bilateral agreements and protocols."⁴⁶ The dates of this Senior Commanders meeting are yet to be finalised.

Even if the disengagement process restarts, tensions along the border are likely to persist. A report in the Global Times noted that "although large-scale clashes are unlikely to occur in winter, small frictions may happen from time to time."⁴⁷ The Indian Chief of Defence Staff, General Bipin Rawat, speaking at the Times Now Conclave, stated, "Disengagement is likely and will happen. But de-escalation appears to be far-fetched because of the kind of infrastructure the Chinese have developed...it will take a long time."⁴⁸

General Rawat also called China the biggest security threat facing India. In response, the Chinese Defence Ministry Spokesman Sr. Col Wu Qian said, "Indian officials speculate on the so-called 'Chinese military threat' for no reason, which is a serious violation of the strategic guidance of the leaders of the two countries that China and India 'do not constitute a threat to each other', and incites geopolitical confrontation, is irresponsible and dangerous."⁴⁹ These statements reflected the structural divide behind ongoing tensions.

Infrastructure and Military Capability Developments

The Indian and Chinese militaries continue to build up infrastructure and enhance their military capability along the LAC. With little possibility of de-escalation in the near term, both armies are preparing for the oncoming harsh winter. It was reported that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has carried out a full rotation of its soldiers in the forward locations as part of its winter deployment. According to sources, most of these soldiers are in their early 20s to better handle the harsh climatic conditions.⁵⁰

There is similar activity on the Indian side, with specialised winter shelters being created and logistics put in place. On November 15, the Indian Air Force and Indian Army carried out a joint airlift exercise to augment winter stocking and strengthen the supply chains in the Northern sector. The related Ministry of Defence statement read, "The effort was a real-time demonstration of the inherent heavy-lift capability of the Indian Air Force, which has played a major role in ensuring the ability to quickly respond to any contingency during the past."⁵¹

According to Indian government sources, China has built at least eight key roads towards the LAC from the G219 highway, including roads from Kangxiwar to the Karakoram Pass in the north and other routes from the saltwater lake Tianshuihai towards the Galwan valley. There are roads connecting PLA posts both at the north and south banks of Pangong Tso, and further south, there are roads from Shiquanhe running towards Chumar. New Delhi has conveyed its concerns over the Chinese infrastructure development and a troop build-up in the region during the latest WMCC meeting.⁵²

A village built by China in the disputed area of Longju in Arunachal Pradesh was thrust into the limelight after it found a mention in the U.S. Department of Defense report to Congress on 'Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China.' The village is in an area that has been under PLA occupation since 1959, but its construction was carried out only one year ago.⁵³ Similar constructions are also being carried out in disputed areas along the Tibet-Bhutan border, and there are fears that this is being done to strengthen China's border claims.

To clarify the matter, the External Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Arindam Bagchi stated, "We have taken note of the U.S. Department of Defence' report to U.S. Congress which inter-alia also makes a reference to construction activities by Chinese side along the India-China border areas, particularly in the Eastern sector." He went on to say that "India has neither accepted such illegal occupation of our territory nor has it accepted the unjustified Chinese claims.

The government has always conveyed its strong protest to such activities through diplomatic means and will continue to do so in the future."⁵⁴

The LAC Standoff and Bilateral Ties

China has repeatedly attempted to convey that the situation at the LAC should not cause "unnecessary disruptions to bilateral relations."⁵⁵ This view has been soundly rejected by India. Two statements by the Foreign Secretary and the External Affairs Minister during the month made this clear.

In an interactive session with industry, Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla noted that several rounds of border talks have taken place and some issues resolved, but until the outstanding issues are resolved, India and China cannot be "in a normal relationship mode." He said that while trade and investment ties with China continue, there is a need to "evaluate whether we are overextended in terms of our supply chains, in terms of our investment tie-ups, in terms of the technology that we get." Shringla added that "we need to examine all of those very carefully to see that it is in keeping with our larger strategic and security interests."⁵⁶

The External Affairs Minister was even more forthright in his comments at the Hindustan Times Leadership Summit. Referring to China massing troops on the border, Dr. S. Jaishankar said, "in terms of bringing forces to the border, it is not an impression that we had or we thought we had an understanding. We had it in cold print in two agreements. So there is no ambiguity on that score...There were very, very clear-cut commitments not to mass forces on the border, and those commitments stand violated as of 2020 spring."⁵⁷

Further clarifying India's stand, Dr. Jaishankar said, "as we have made clear -- the state of the relationship, at the end of the day, will reflect the state of the border. You can't have a tense, high-friction border and have great relations in all other parts of life. It does not work that way. It is inevitable that this will sort of spill over, it has already spilt over into other domains, and the expectation that somehow we will contain it in a narrow sense and carry on with the rest of life, I think, is not a realistic one."

Taking a realistic view, India-China bilateral ties will remain strained until China shows greater accommodation and flexibility on the ongoing LAC standoff which has resulted from its military aggression.

Development Assistance, Connectivity and Non-Traditional Security Issues

by

Sanjay Pulipaka

India continued with its robust development assistance programmes in the immediate neighbourhood during the month. The Indian private sector has bagged major infrastructure projects, such as port terminals and transmission lines, in the region. Going forward, India needs to adopt a more coordinated public-private approach in developing connectivity projects in the neighbourhood. With COVID-19 incidence on the decline, there has been a gradual opening up of borders between India and its neighbours, which could be impacted by the "Omicron" variant.

The United Nations has recommended the graduation of Bangladesh and Nepal from the least developed country category. Meanwhile, widespread violence and the consequent proliferation of small weapons in Myanmar is spilling into Northeast India.

India's multilateral engagements during the month were dominated by the non-traditional security agenda such as climate change, cyber security and connectivity.

Nepal

Early in the month, Indian Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi and the PM of Nepal Sher Bahadur Deuba met on the sidelines of COP26 in Glasgow and discussed bilateral cooperation pertaining to 'vaccines, medicines and medical equipment'.⁵⁸ On November 10, continuing a long-standing tradition, Nepal Army Chief Prabhu Ram Sharma was conferred with the honorary rank of General of the Indian Army by the President of India.⁵⁹ The Nepal Army Chief interacted with India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr. S. Jaishankar to discuss security and defence cooperation between the two countries.⁶⁰

India continued with its robust development assistance projects in Nepal. In 2018, the Indian government had committed USD 150 million (USD 100 million as grant plus USD 50 million under a line of credit) for the post-earthquake reconstruction of 50,000 private houses.⁶¹ On November 15, it was announced that the reconstruction of these houses was completed under the Owner Driven Reconstruction Approach in association with the Government of Nepal,

UNDP and UNOPS.⁶² In the last week of November, schools built with India's development assistance "for primarily marginalised students in Nepal were inaugurated in Dharchula district." ⁶³

People-to-people interactions between the two countries also received a fillip during the month. On November 09, the bus service between Siliguri (West Bengal) and Kathmandu resumed for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.⁶⁴ On November 23, to facilitate easy movement of people across the borders, India and Nepal "signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to mutually recognise the vaccine certificate."⁶⁵ On the other hand, the Nepal government, responding to the Indian government's concerns, decided to not allow "people from third countries to travel to India by rail via the Kurtha-Jayanagar railroad."⁶⁶



President Ram Nath Kovind conferred the Honorary Rank of General of the Indian Army on General Prabhu Ram Sharma, Chief of the Army Staff, Nepali Army at a special Investiture Ceremony held at Rashtrapati Bhavan. Source: [@rashtrapatibhvn](https://twitter.com/rashtrapatibhvn)

There were reports that traders from Nepal are facing considerable delays "as the Chinese side is allowing only a limited number of containers to enter Nepal".⁶⁷ Nepal had placed an order for 40,000 metric tonnes of fertilisers from China, and only 15,000 tons were delivered in late November.⁶⁸ In the first week of November, the PLA handed over 300,000 vaccine doses, 100 units of oxygen concentrators and other medical equipment to the Nepal Army.⁶⁹

In mid-November, the US Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs, Donald Lu, visited Nepal and interacted with the senior political leadership, including the Prime Minister. During these interactions, he called on Nepal to ratify the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) project grant.⁷⁰ Since 2017, the MCC compact has not been ratified by various governments in Nepal, as there is a perception among some political parties that US projects undermine national sovereignty.⁷¹

With elections around the corner, shrill political rhetoric is increasing in Nepal. On November 26, the Chairman of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist), KP Sharma Oli, "pledged to take back the territories of Kalapani, Limpiyadhura and Lipulekh from India through dialogue if his party comes back to power."⁷² Reportedly, Nepal has sought permission to carry out census related work "in border villages - Tinkar and Changru."⁷³

Over the past few months, there have been numerous protests by the members of the legal fraternity in Nepal, including judges, demanding the resignation of the Chief Justice of the Nepal Supreme Court on charges of corruption and misuse of power.⁷⁴ During the month, office bearers of the Nepal Bar Association and some senior advocates met PM Deuba and provided reasons for the impeachment of the Chief Justice.⁷⁵ Moreover, there were allegations that a close relative of the Chief Justice was appointed as a minister by PM Deuba, raising questions regarding a unhealthy relationship between the Nepalese judiciary and political executive.⁷⁶

Bhutan

India and Bhutan agreed to open seven additional entry-exit points for trade.⁷⁷ Trade and industry organisations on both sides organised an India-Bhutan Buyer-Seller Meet from November 16-18. ⁷⁸ The total trade between the two countries has "more than doubled from USD 484 million in 2014-15 to USD 1083 million in 2020-21."⁷⁹

In the first week of November, Bhutan started exports of liquid oxygen and nitrogen from the newly inaugurated oxygen plant at Phuentsho Rabtenling industrial park in Samdrupjongkhar.⁸⁰ Interacting with the Consul General of Bhutan on November 19, the Chief Minister of Assam thanked Bhutan for oxygen supplies during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in India.⁸¹

China's territorial assertions against Bhutan are continuing. According to news reports, "China has built at least four new villages nearly three to four kilometres within disputed territory along the border with Bhutan."⁸²

Sri Lanka

In October, Sri Lanka had banned a shipment of Chinese organic fertilisers due to the presence of harmful bacteria. On November 02, the spokesperson of China's Foreign Ministry Wang noted that "China attaches great importance to the quality of its exports" and went on to add that the fertiliser exports "had passed tests of third-party agencies."⁸³ The ship carrying the consignment of Chinese organic fertilisers - the Hippo Spirit - refused to turn back with the consignment and remained in Sri Lankan waters.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, the Commercial High Court of Sri Lanka gave an injunction prohibiting the People's Bank from making any payments to the concerned Chinese firm till further investigations are complete.⁸⁵ Towards the end of November, the Sri Lankan Agriculture Minister reportedly stated that the Chinese firm is willing to take back the shipment and "if the talks are successful, we are willing to share 50 percent of the charges of the next shipment."⁸⁶



India delivers 100 tonnes of nano fertilizer to Sri Lanka. Source: [@ani_digital](#)

At the request of Colombo, the Indian government dispatched 100 tonnes of Nano Nitrogen fertiliser to Sri Lanka.⁸⁷ Recognising that a quick shift to organic farming has created new challenges for farmers, Sri Lanka has lifted the ban on the import of chemical fertilisers. Sri Lanka is also importing ammonium sulphate from India to meet the needs of farmers.⁸⁸

In addition to an agrarian crisis, the Sri Lankan economy is under stress, with inflation touching 9.9 percent.⁸⁹ Sri Lanka has shut down its only oil refinery for 50 days to save its fast-depleting foreign exchange.⁹⁰

The economic crisis is fuelling large scale demonstrations by the opposition parties. In a significant development, on November 10, Sri Lanka Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa announced that the drafting of a new constitution has made good progress and will be ready by the year-end.⁹¹ The debate on a new constitution will impact inter-ethnic relations in Sri Lanka, which will influence Delhi-Colombo relations as well.

Interactions between Indian and Sri Lankan leaders continued during the month. PM Modi and Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa had a brief interaction on the side-lines of COP26.⁹² On November 11, the India-Sri Lanka Parliamentary Friendship Group was formed, and Chamal Rajapaksa, State Minister of Home Affairs, was elected as the President of the Association.⁹³ The meeting was attended by over 100 Members of Parliament, including several ministers.⁹⁴ In the last week of November, Jeevan Thondaman, Sri Lanka's Minister of Estate Housing and Community Infrastructure, visited India and interacted with the Foreign Secretary of India.⁹⁵

Exchanges between defence forces also showed an upward trend during the month. On November 09, Indian Navy Chief Adm. Karambir Singh and Commander of Sri Lankan Navy V. Adm. Nishantha Ulugetenne discussed "modalities for further enhancing mutual support, interoperability, maritime cooperation on information sharing, training & other ongoing cooperation activities."⁹⁶ Towards the end of November, the Indian Navy, along with navies of Sri Lanka and Maldives, participated in the "first-ever Colombo Security Conclave (CSC) Focused Operation to enhance maritime security in the Indian Ocean region."⁹⁷ The exercises suggest that the three countries are keen to develop security cooperation.

The fertiliser dispute has not negatively impacted the Sri Lanka-China bilateral relationship. In an important development, the Sri Lankan government "decided to rope in China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) to construct the second phase of the Colombo Port's East Container Terminal (ECT)."⁹⁸ It is well known that Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) was to develop the ECT in

collaboration with India and Japan.⁹⁹ Analysts have noted that the CHEC involvement will be confined to engineering, procurement and construction (EPC), and the port management will be in the hands of the SLPA.¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, the contract to CHEC indicates consolidation of Chinese presence in Sri Lanka.

During the month, the Chinese Embassy in Sri Lanka tweeted that the "US continues to maintain about 750 military bases abroad."¹⁰¹ This was in response to a report by the US Department of Defence (DoD) which suggested that China may operationalise a naval base in Sri Lanka.¹⁰²

The February 2021 edition of the DPG India Strategic Review had noted that the Sri Lankan government had approved a Chinese energy project on three islands near the Jaffna peninsula, which was met with protests from Sri Lankan Tamil parties.¹⁰³ On December 01, the Chinese Embassy in Sri Lanka announced that "Sino Soar Hybrid Technology, suspended... [its efforts to] build Hybrid Energy system in 3 northern islands Flag of Sri Lanka due to 'security concern' from a third party."¹⁰⁴

The Maldives

On November 29, it was reported that the Maldives Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology had contracted Sino Soar Hybrid Technology "to establish solar power plants at 12 islands in Thaa Atoll."¹⁰⁵ A 35,000 square meters apron at the Velena International Airport (VIA) in the Maldives, built by Beijing Urban Construction Group (BUCG), was inaugurated in early November.¹⁰⁶

In a development with significant consequences for domestic politics, a three-member Supreme Court bench acquitted the former President of Maldives, Abdulla Yameen, on charges of money-laundering and embezzlement due to lack of sufficient evidence.¹⁰⁷ As a result, Abdulla Yameen, who was known for his pro-China policies, can now proactively participate in the political process.¹⁰⁸

The Maldives Foreign Service Act was ratified during the month, and it provides for a separate foreign service and defines an organisational framework to conduct external engagement.¹⁰⁹ The Maldives government launched a vigorous response to contain the 'India Out' campaign. Mariya Ahmed Didi, the defence minister of Maldives, paid a six-day visit to India in the last week of November.¹¹⁰ In her interactions with the media, she pointed out that while social media bots are carrying out the 'India Out' campaign, her compatriots do not support the campaign.¹¹¹ Earlier, after examining agreements between

Indian and Maldives defence forces, a Parliamentary Committee on National Security stated that the agreements do not contain any clauses of concern.¹¹² Responding to allegations that the relationship with India undermines national security and sovereignty, the Maldives' Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in a statement on November 17, noted that "false allegations regarding ties with one of the country's key bilateral partners, are misguided and unsubstantiated."¹¹³ The statement also termed India as the "closest ally and a trusted neighbour."¹¹⁴

In a related development, the Indian Navy Chief, Adm. Karambir Singh, announced that India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives will soon exchange intelligence to tackle terrorism and drug trafficking in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).¹¹⁵

With 211,062 visitors, Indian tourists accounted for almost 23 per cent of total tourist arrivals in the Maldives.¹¹⁶ The uptick in tourist arrivals has also resulted in improved economic performance.¹¹⁷

Bangladesh

During the month, the Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh handed over a multi-purpose community hall, life support ambulances and a multi-storeyed academic building in the northern districts of Dinajpur and Rangpur, as part of India's development assistance.¹¹⁸ In terms of infrastructure projects, a 400kV double circuit transmission line project from Barapukuria to Bogura (120km) will be built by Tata Projects and will be funded by EXIM Bank India under the Indian Line of Credit.¹¹⁹

Domestic law and order issues continue to impact the bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh. While in October there were attacks on Hindu places of worship, in the first week of November, there were reports that Buddhist places of worship were targeted in the Teknaf region in Bangladesh.¹²⁰ The attacks prompted protests by various Buddhist organisations in Tripura, India.¹²¹ Further, regulating the cross-border movement of people and goods has been a source of friction between the two countries. Two nationals of Bangladesh and an Indian national were killed by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) on the border in the Cooch-Bihar district. The shooting reportedly happened as 'self-defence' during an alleged scuffle between cattle smugglers and the BSF.¹²²

On November 22, speaking at the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi, India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh stated the bilateral relationship is expanding into "new and emerging areas like nuclear technology, IT, innovation and blue economy."¹²³

On November 24, the United Nations recommended the graduation of Bangladesh from the least developed country category and provided for a five-year preparatory period.¹²⁴ Congratulating Bangladesh for its economic achievements, India's Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal called for enhanced bilateral trade and promised that "India stands shoulder to shoulder with the country's leadership and people in their development journey."¹²⁵

Bangladesh has made impressive economic gains that may have a positive political spin-off for the ruling establishment. During the month, the PM Hasina led Awami League Party registered significant victories in the elections to rural councils.¹²⁶ These results put PM Hasina in a better position for the general elections scheduled for 2023.¹²⁷



"French President Emmanuel Macron and Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stand outside the Elysee Palace in Paris, France, November 9, 2021." Source: [Reuters](#)

Bangladesh is diversifying its defence partnerships. During discussions between PM Sheikh Hasina and UK PM Boris Johnson, on the sidelines of COP26 in Glasgow, Bangladesh agreed, in principle, to buy five naval ships from the UK.¹²⁸ During PM Hasina's visit to France on November 09, a Letter of Intent was concluded aimed at "stepping up cooperation in the area of defence equipment."¹²⁹ PM Hasina also called on French business persons to invest in Bangladesh.¹³⁰

There were reports during the month that some of the defence equipment (naval frigates and trainer aircraft) that Bangladesh had acquired from China may either be defective or poor in quality.¹³¹

Myanmar

In the recent past, there has been a dramatic increase in violence in the Chin State, Sagaing and Magwe regions of Myanmar. Armed clashes have been reported between the Chin Defense Force (CDF)/Chin National Front (CNF), which is aligned with National Unity Government (NUG), and the Tatmadaw. Reports indicate that there has been large-scale destruction of various townships in Chin and "thousands of people in the Sagaing Region were displaced due to intensification of the conflict."¹³² Concerned with the military build-up in Sagaing as well as Magway regions and growing violence in Chin State, on November 08 the European Union High Representative called for "an immediate cessation of all hostilities and the disproportionate use of force."¹³³ On November 10, the 15 members of the UN Security Council "expressed deep concern at the recent violence across Myanmar...[and] called for an immediate cessation of violence and to ensure the safety of civilians."¹³⁴

The prospect of a negotiated settlement between the Tatmadaw and the NLD looks increasingly bleak. While a military court's verdict is awaited on NLD leader Suu Kyi, who was arrested on corruption and electoral fraud charges,¹³⁵ new corruption cases were filed against her.¹³⁶ In the absence of a new breakthrough political initiative, violence will continue to mar the political process in the country.

Further, there are signs of growing coordination between ethnic armed forces and the people's defence forces; joint defence committees have been created.¹³⁷ The prospect of increased defections from the Tatmadaw and other security agencies is gaining momentum. Thus far, it is estimated that about 2,000 soldiers and police officers may have defected to join the civil disobedience movement.¹³⁸ A New York Times report notes that for the "first time in its 67-year history, the Myanmar Defense Services Academy, the country's equivalent of West Point, was not able to fill the seats for this year's freshman class."¹³⁹ Further, the Tatmadaw is suffering significant losses in sporadic armed violence with reportedly "1,300 soldiers killed and 463 injured in clashes with civilian resistance groups".¹⁴⁰ In late November, the Chief Minister for Sagaing Region was targeted twice within a week.¹⁴¹



ASEAN-China Special Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations. Source: [ASEAN](#)

A special summit to commemorate 30 years of the ASEAN-China Dialogue was held on November 22, 2021. Myanmar's military leadership was not invited to this important meeting of the ASEAN regional framework. Reportedly, Beijing made attempts to convince ASEAN member states to allow the participation of Myanmar in the commemorative summit deliberations. However, some of the Southeast Asian countries such as "Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei rejected China's bid to include Min Aung Hlaing in the China-ASEAN summit."¹⁴² As the summit meeting drew closer, there was a possibility that Myanmar's Ambassador to Beijing may participate in the Summit meeting. However, as the Malaysian foreign minister observed, "all nine ASEAN countries agreed with China that Myanmar's ambassador to Beijing will be Myanmar's representative at the Summit this morning... [however] we did not receive any final confirmation (from Myanmar), and so the Summit went ahead without Myanmar's attendance."¹⁴³ Reportedly, the Myanmar military was opposed to the regional organisation's attempts to define the contours of its participation in the regional framework.¹⁴⁴ ASEAN's response to developments in Myanmar may also have surprised China. By refusing to allow the Myanmar military a seat at the table, some Southeast Asian countries have demonstrated the limits to Chinese influence.

The growing violence in Myanmar has a spillover effect in India. For instance, on November 13, an Assam Rifles convoy was ambushed by the Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) in Manipur, which resulted in the death of seven persons, including a Colonel and his family members.¹⁴⁵ In addition, there have been

reports of "increased inflow of illegal Chinese-made weapons like AK-47 assault rifles, machine guns, anti-tank mines and grenades into Myanmar, which are also making their way to Indian insurgent groups."¹⁴⁶

Middle East: Energy and the Security Dynamic

The upward trajectory in India's relations with its extended western neighbours continued during the month. Specifically, India's engagement on energy issues with Middle Eastern partners acquired greater salience. During his visit to the UAE, India's Union Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas, Hardeep Singh Puri, inaugurated the India Pavilion at the Abu Dhabi International Petroleum Exhibition & Conference (ADIPEC) 2021.¹⁴⁷ He also interacted with the UAE's Minister of Energy as well as Minister of Industry & Advanced Technology.¹⁴⁸ Referring to high oil prices, he noted that "this is not a case of supplies not being available – there are 5 million barrels a day of (oil) supplies which have not been released for whatever reason."¹⁴⁹ With OPEC and its allies reluctant to increase production, there are growing concerns that a spike in oil prices may hamper the economic revival of many leading economies. The US, along with India, released stocks from their strategic oil reserves in an attempt to bring down global oil prices.¹⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Iran's Ambassador to India stated that Tehran has "no problem in exporting oil and gas, petrochemical and even non-oil goods" to India.¹⁵¹



EAM Jaishankar interacted with the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Source: [@DrSJaishankar](https://twitter.com/DrSJaishankar)

On November 10, in his interactions with the Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), India's EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar called for increased FDI from "sovereign wealth funds in GCC countries" and both leaders "decided to convene the next India-GCC Troika Political Dialogue at an early date."¹⁵² Subsequently, in mid-November, EAM Jaishankar, during his visit to the UAE, interacted with the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and called for deepening of strategic partnership between the two countries.¹⁵³ During an interaction at the India Pavilion at Dubai Expo 2020, EAM Jaishankar noted that "India, UAE, US, and Israel – also termed as West Asian Quad – will be meeting in the coming weeks."¹⁵⁴

On November 02, on the sidelines of COP26, the Indian Prime Minister interacted with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and discussed "expanding cooperation in areas of high-technology and innovation."¹⁵⁵ As a follow-up, on November 09, Israel's Directorate of Defense Research and Development (DDR&D) and India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) signed a Bilateral Innovation Agreement (BIA) "to promote innovation and accelerated R&D in startups and MSMEs of both countries for the development of dual-use technologies."¹⁵⁶ Indian Army Chief Gen. M. M. Naravane visited Israel from November 15 to 19, to strengthen bilateral defence ties. He interacted with "IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kohavi and visited the IDF's Ground Forces Headquarters."¹⁵⁷

India's defence diplomacy was also active with other countries in the region. In late November, India's Chief of Air Staff, V.R. Chaudhari, paid a 5-day visit to Egypt.¹⁵⁸

The construction of secret facilities at the Abu Dhabi port by China was reportedly halted after concern was expressed by the United States. A senior UAE diplomat clarified that his country "never had an agreement, plan, talks or intention to host a Chinese military base or outpost of any kind."¹⁵⁹ These developments suggest that China is eager to expand its military footprint in the Middle East.

The talks between Iran and major powers (China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom) regarding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) were resumed in Austria on November 29.¹⁶⁰ There is a perception that Iran is making maximalist demands by insisting that "talks should be all about the US lifting sanctions...with guarantees a future US government would not pull out of the deal."¹⁶¹

India and the United States

On November 08, at the India-US Defense Technology and Trade Initiative Industry Collaboration Forum (DICF) Virtual Expo, both sides resolved to "securing supply chains in critical sectors such as semiconductors."¹⁶² On November 09, at the 11th meeting of the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI), India and the US "firmed up an agreement for developing an air-launched unmanned aerial vehicle."¹⁶³

Katherine Tai, the US Trade Representative (USTR), visited India to promote bilateral trade and investment. On November 23, India and the United States held the Twelfth Ministerial level Trade Policy Forum (TPF) in New Delhi.¹⁶⁴ At the forum, Minister Piyush Goyal and USTR Katherine Tai "agreed that the TPF Working Groups on agriculture, non-agriculture goods, services, investment, and intellectual property should be re-activated in order to address issues of mutual concern on an ongoing basis."¹⁶⁵

On November 24, the USTR and India's Ministry of Finance reached an agreement on Digital Services Taxes (DST) issues.¹⁶⁶ The agreement mandates that both countries will not impose "new digital services taxes before the OECD tax deal is implemented by the end of 2023."¹⁶⁷ The USTR will, in return, terminate "its trade retaliation case against India."¹⁶⁸

India continued to face the prospect of US sanctions under Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for receiving deliveries of the S-400 missile system from Russia. In October, Senator Ted Cruz introduced legislation to exempt Quad countries "from the US sanctions that would undermine unity against China."¹⁶⁹ US Senators Mark Warner and John Cornyn have called on the Biden administration not to sanction India under the CAATSA. A US Congressional delegation, led by Senator John Cornyn, interacted with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on November 13.¹⁷⁰

Russia

India and Russia participated in multiple platforms to address regional security and economic issues. On November 10, India hosted a meeting of senior security officials on Afghanistan, which witnessed participation from Russia, Iran and the five Central Asian Republics.¹⁷¹ At the Meeting of the SCO Heads of Government Council on November 25, EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar reiterated India's commitment to deepen "the multilateral cooperation in the areas of climate change, security, trade and culture... [and called] for a reformed and invigorated multilateralism to reflect current realities."¹⁷² During the month, with India's backing, Russia became dialogue partner in the IORA.¹⁷³

EAM Jaishankar chaired the 18th Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Russia, India and China (RIC) on November 26.¹⁷⁴ In a Joint Communiqué, the Ministers reiterated that a "multi-polar and rebalanced world based on the sovereign equality of nations and respect for international law and reflecting contemporary realities requires strengthening and reforming of the multilateral system."¹⁷⁵ However, there is growing scepticism regarding the utility of the RIC forum given China's persistent territorial assertions on the Indian border and its unwillingness to recognise the multipolarity of Asia. On the other hand, during the month, the Russia-China partnership consolidated with joint air patrols, closer military ties and increased defence cooperation.¹⁷⁶ In November, Moscow and Beijing agreed to collaborate to build a multipurpose heavy helicopter.¹⁷⁷

Multilateralism

Four themes – climate change, digital security, connectivity and peacekeeping – dominated India's multilateral engagements during the month.

First, articulating India's national statement at the COP26 Summit in Glasgow on November 02, PM Modi pointed out that "despite having 17 per cent of the world's population, India's emissions amounted to only 5 per cent in total global emissions."¹⁷⁸ At the Summit, India committed to "meet 50 per cent of its energy requirements from renewable energy by 2030" and achieve Net Zero emissions by 2070.¹⁷⁹ The Indian PM also expressed India's full support for the 'Infrastructure for Resilient Island States' (IRIS).¹⁸⁰ Further, he launched the "One Sun, One World, One Grid" initiative, which seeks to reduce "the carbon footprint and cost of energy" by ensuring "clean energy from a world-wide grid" is always available.¹⁸¹

Second, at the Sydney Dialogue on November 18, PM Modi outlined the important digital transformations taking place in India, which include "building most extensive public information infrastructure... and investing in developing indigenous capabilities in telecom technology such as 5G and 6G."¹⁸² He also called on democracies to work together "to prevent manipulation of public opinions, to develop technical and governance standards and to create standards and norms for data governance."¹⁸³

Third, on November 25, addressing the 20th Meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of Government, EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar called for the inclusion of the "Chabahar port in the framework of International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)... [and reiterated] India's commitment to cooperate, plan, invest and build physical and digital connectivity in the SCO region."¹⁸⁴

And finally, the UN's Under Secretary General for Peace Operations, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, thanked India for its support to UN peacekeeping operations, acknowledging its capacity to provide qualified peacekeepers.¹⁸⁵ Speaking on Women, Peace and Security, India's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN stated that India had deployed about 3,000 women police officers in around 24 UN peacekeeping operations.¹⁸⁶

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India's Neighbourhood – The Arc of Instability

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