



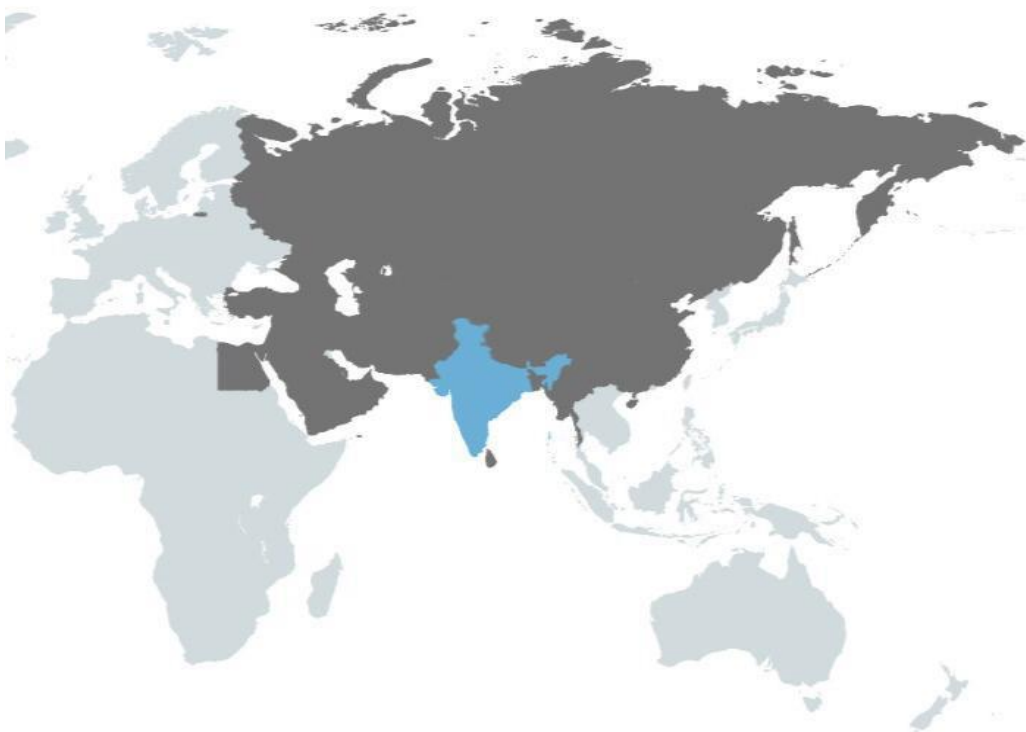
Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

JANUARY 2022



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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 Continuing Humanitarian Crisis

An unprecedented humanitarian crisis continues to grip Afghanistan as it enters 2022. According to the United Nations, Afghanistan could see near-universal poverty by mid-2022, with 97% of Afghans impoverished.¹ Other grim milestones for 2022 are the likelihood of 55% of the population facing acute food insecurity, including nearly 9 million people at emergency levels—one step before famine conditions, and the shutting down of 90% of the country's health clinics due to lack of funding.²

In a report released on January 19, the U.N. International Labour Organisation warned that by the mid-2022, job losses are expected to increase to nearly 700,000 - with direst predictions topping 900,000 - as a result of the crisis in Afghanistan and "restrictions on women's participation in the workplace".³ Women's employment levels are already extremely low by global standards, are estimated to have decreased by 16 per cent in the third quarter of 2021, and could further fall by between 21 per cent and 28 per cent by mid-2022.⁴

The only silver lining in this impending disaster is that global efforts towards providing humanitarian aid have been stepped up. In December 2021, the World Bank had released \$280 million from the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund to UNICEF and the World Food Programme.⁵ On January 11, the U.S. government announced a contribution of \$308 million in humanitarian assistance for the people of Afghanistan. This new funding has brought the total U.S. humanitarian aid in Afghanistan to nearly \$782 million since October 2020.⁶

In January 2022 the U.N. launched the world's largest humanitarian funding appeal of more than \$ 5 billion for Afghanistan. U.N. officials have warned that if insufficient action is taken now to support Afghanistan and regional response plans, "next year we'll be asking for \$10 billion".⁷

In its budget for 2022-23, India has allocated Rs 200 crore as aid to Afghanistan. This is in addition to the continuing supply of life-saving medicines and

COVID-19 vaccines.⁸ India's offer to supply 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat for Afghanistan as humanitarian assistance, to be transported overland through Pakistan, remains held up due to conditions imposed by Pakistan. To overcome this, in a telephone conversation held on January 8 between the Iranian foreign minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian and his Indian counterpart Dr. S Jaishankar, Tehran has offered to help India ship wheat and medicines to Afghanistan via Iran.⁹



India sends medicines to Afghanistan including Covid-19 vaccines.

Source: [Independent](#)

The suffering of the Afghan people certainly needs to be alleviated. However, it is also apparent that the Taliban are using this tragedy to gain a degree of recognition and legitimacy from the international community.

Legitimising the Taliban Government

On January 24, a Taliban delegation led by the acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi held talks with Western diplomats in Norway. The closed-door discussion with representatives of the United States, France, Britain, Germany, Italy, the European Union, and Norway, focused on Afghanistan's humanitarian situation and human rights.¹⁰

Amidst criticism that the talks would provide a degree of legitimacy to the Taliban, Western officials put forth their viewpoint. Thomas West, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan, tweeted, "As we seek to address humanitarian crisis together with allies, partners, and relief orgs, we will continue clear-eyed diplomacy with the Taliban regarding our concerns and our abiding interest in a stable, rights-respecting and inclusive Afghanistan."¹¹ Norwegian Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt stressed the talks would "not represent a legitimisation or recognition of the Taliban...but we must talk to the de facto authorities in the country. We cannot allow the political situation to lead to an even worse humanitarian disaster."¹²



Taliban delegation on a plane while departing for talks in Oslo, Norway, January 23, 2022.

Source: [Aljazeera](#)

The Taliban's view of the meeting was expressed by delegate Shafiullah Azam who told The Associated Press news agency that the meetings with Western officials were "a step to legitimise (the) Afghan government." He added that "this type of invitation and communication will help (the) European community, (the) U.S. or many other countries to erase the wrong picture of the Afghan government."¹³

On January 21, European Commission foreign affairs spokesman Peter Stano announced that the "EU has started to re-establish a minimal presence of international EU Delegation staff to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid

and monitor the humanitarian situation." He added, "Our minimal presence in Kabul must not in any way be seen as recognition. This has also been clearly communicated to the de facto authorities."¹⁴ This statement followed a Tweet by a Taliban spokesman that its officials had reached an understanding with the EU, which had "officially opened its embassy with a permanent presence in Kabul & practically commenced operations."¹⁵

Increasingly, countries around the world are struggling to find a way to deal with the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan without providing a degree of legitimacy to the government and maintaining pressure on the Taliban on human rights issues. Unfortunately, the Taliban appear to be winning the game of attrition.

In January, the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice put up posters around Kabul asking women to cover up. The poster, which includes an image of the face-covering burqa, reads, "According to Sharia law, Muslim women must wear the hijab."¹⁶ Although the Taliban spokesman stated that this is not a compulsory directive, it is part of a string of restrictions being increasingly imposed on women.

On January 19, Tamana Zaryabi Paryani and Parwana Ibrahimkhel were reportedly taken from their homes as part of a roundup of participants in recent demonstrations for women's rights. Moments before her arrest, Tamana Paryani posted a video identifying the men as Taliban and pleading for help. While the Taliban have denied any knowledge of the arrest, they have stated their right "to arrest and detain dissidents or those who break the law."¹⁷

In a recent U.N. report, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that there are "credible allegations" that more than 100 former members of the Afghan government, its security forces, and those who worked with international troops have been killed since the Taliban took over the country. Guterres noted that human rights defenders and media workers also continue "to come under attack, intimidation, harassment, arbitrary arrest, ill-treatment and killings."¹⁸

Unless the right balance is struck between humanitarian assistance and human rights in Afghanistan, the Taliban will continue imposing their brand of extremist ideology on the population and will perceive no pressure to change.

Afghanistan-Pakistan Ties

On January 29, Pakistan National Security Adviser (NSA), Moeed Yusuf, led a high-level delegation to Afghanistan. Yusuf called on the Acting Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdus Salam Hanafi and discussed the strengthening of

relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan to promote trade, transit and connectivity. Hanafi assured the Pakistan delegation that nobody would be allowed to use Afghan soil against its neighbours and other countries.¹⁹



Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan acting Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanafi hosts a lunch for the Pakistani delegation led by National Security Adviser (NSA) Moeed Yusuf.

Source: [Dawn](#)

Pakistan has been the staunchest supporter of the Taliban government, but the ties are not without strains. Two issues merit attention. The first is the non-recognition of the Durand Line as the international border between the two countries. Pakistan Army and Taliban forces had clashed on December 23 when the latter stopped the Pakistani military from erecting an "illegal" border fence along the eastern province of Nangarhar.²⁰

Mawllawi Sanaullah Sangin, Commander of the Taliban, told Afghanistan's Tolo News, "We (Taliban) will not allow the fencing anytime, in any form. Whatever they (Pakistan) did before, they did, but we will not allow it anymore. There will be no fencing anymore."²¹ Pakistan has already carried out more than 90 per cent of fencing work along the 2,670-km border and is determined to go ahead with the completion of this work.

The Taliban has now formed a joint ministerial committee "to resolve the problems along the Durand Line and address the security issues that may potentially occur in the future or have already happened in the past."²² Statements from Pakistani political leaders are also calling for the issue to be

resolved peacefully. Addressing a press conference in Islamabad on January 14, Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid expressed the hope that the remaining fencing would be completed "with the consent of our brothers".²³ While the problem appears temporarily settled, it has the potential to flare up in the future.

The second issue, which is the Taliban's support for the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), is of more serious concern. The month-long ceasefire between the TTP and the government came to an end on December 9, 2021. According to the agreement, both sides had accepted that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan would play the role of a mediator.²⁴ Now that the agreement has collapsed, Pakistan wants the Taliban government to take a more active role in putting a check on the TTP.

Briefing the National Assembly Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs on January 27, NSA Moeed Yusuf stated that organised terrorist networks were still operating on Afghan soil, which was being used against Pakistan. Yusuf was not "completely optimistic" about the Taliban government and that their coming to power "did not mean an end to all the problems in the region."²⁵

Earlier in the month, on January 9, The Express Tribune had carried a story where unnamed senior Pakistani officials had stated that tackling the TTP was a "test case" for the Taliban. One official explained that "It will be damaging for the Afghan Taliban if they fail to take into account Pakistan's concerns."²⁶ However, with the Taliban focused on fighting the Islamic State, it is unlikely that any substantial pressure would be applied on the TTP cadre that could result in their switching alliance to the Islamic State.

2021 has seen a 56 per cent increase in terror attacks in Pakistan as compared to 2020.²⁷ This trend is unlikely to change, and with the Taliban unwilling to crack down on the TTP, frictions could develop along Pakistan's western frontier.

PAKISTAN

Pakistan's National Security Policy

On January 14, 2022, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan unveiled the public version of the country's first-ever National Security Policy (NSP).²⁸ A detailed assessment of the NSP has been carried out in a Policy Brief published by the Delhi Policy Group.²⁹ This review will highlight some of the key aspects of the NSP to understand Pakistan's national security focus, particularly related to India.

The NSP states, "Rather than being set in an archaic guns versus butter debate, our national security thinking seeks to identify means of expanding economic resources such that Pakistan can simultaneously strengthen its traditional and non-traditional security." The focus on economics is reinforced in the section titled 'Securing Our Economic Future'. There is a realistic identification of the problems caused by the current account deficit and the social unrest and political instability that could be caused by the socio-economic inequality between the rich and the poor.

However, instead of credibly addressing these challenges, the NSP unrealistically praises "Pakistan's economic resilience" and "vibrant economy". It also makes much of "Pakistan's prized geo-economic location", which "provides a unique opportunity through north-south and east-west connectivity for South and Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa." It is assertions like these that make the NSP sound more aspirational than practical.

In reference to India, the NSP states that with a "regressive and dangerous ideology gripping the collective conscience in our immediate neighbourhood, the prospects of violent conflict have grown immensely." To counter India's conventional military superiority, the NSP states that "Nuclear deterrence occupies a critical role in the security calculus of South Asia...Pakistan's deterrence regime is vital for and aimed at regional peace." The destabilising and escalatory impact of Pakistan's nuclear weapons posture is completely ignored.

The NSP pronounces that it wishes to improve relations with India, but then launches into a bitter tirade about India's "rise of Hindutva-driven politics", "the political exploitation of a policy of belligerence towards Pakistan", and India's "attempts to impose one-sided solutions that can have far reaching negative consequences for regional stability." Jammu and Kashmir, where "Indian occupation forces continue to undertake human rights abuses and oppression", remains a "vital national security interest for Pakistan."

Pakistan's traditional security thinking has kept Jammu and Kashmir as the 'core' issue between the two countries, framed India as an existential threat, and seen itself as a bulwark against India's regional dominance. There is nothing in the NSP to suggest that this thinking among Pakistan's security establishment has changed. In a recent interview, Pakistan NSA Yusuf talked about India remaining "the real threat to Pakistan." He added that India has "blocked all avenues, because the conversation with us is not rational. It is about whether Pakistan deserves to or should be existing."³⁰

Pakistan's NSP was an opportunity to review some of its strategic policies and choices that have damaged Pakistan's standing as a responsible member of the international community and increased extremism in its society. But, unfortunately, the document reads more like a wish list than an implementable or forward looking policy to change Islamabad's preferences as a rentier security state with a collapsing economy and radicalising society.

A Surge in Baloch Insurgency

2022 has seen a surge in the insurgency in Balochistan. On January 20, a powerful bomb exploded in Lahore's famous Anarkali market, killing three people and injuring 33 others. A new insurgent group, Baloch Nationalist Army, claimed responsibility for the blast. The group was formed earlier in January when two minor groups – Balochistan Republican Army and United Baloch Army – merged and appointed Mureed Baloch as their spokesman.³¹

On the night of 25-26 January, ten Pakistani soldiers were killed after insurgents attacked a security forces post in Balochistan's Kech district. This was one of the deadliest attacks in recent times and was claimed by the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF).³² Two days after the Kech attack, three Levies Force personnel and a Bugti clan elder were killed and eight others injured in twin bomb blasts in the Sui area of Dera Bugti.³³



Destroyed security post following the attacks by insurgents in Nushki district of Balochistan.

Source: [Arab News](#)

On January 29, at least 17 people, including two policemen, were injured in a grenade attack in Dera Allahyar town of Balochistan's Jaffarabad district.³⁴ In a continuation of the violence, on February 2, Baloch insurgents simultaneously attacked two security forces' camps in Panjgur and Nushki districts, in which seven soldiers and 13 insurgents were killed. The military's media wing, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), claimed that "both attacks were successfully repulsed, inflicting heavy casualties on terrorists."³⁵

The BLF claimed responsibility for the attack, but the ISPR blamed India and Afghanistan, stating that "intelligence agencies have intercepted communications between terrorists and their handlers in Afghanistan and India." Interior Minister Sheikh Rasheed Ahmad also said that the TTP is in contact with its handlers in Afghanistan and India and had intensified attacks in Pakistan with the help of New Delhi.³⁶

Blaming India and Afghanistan is not going to resolve the Baloch insurgency. As an editorial in *The Dawn* points out, "to deal with Balochistan's insurgency as a law and order problem to be beaten down with lethal force is a myopic and self-defeating approach...it is no secret the resource-rich province has been ruthlessly exploited and its people deprived of their fundamental rights to protection of life and liberty, to freedom of speech and due process."³⁷

The problem in Balochistan not only has a security dimension but also impacts the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the development of Gwadar Port. With the TTP and Baloch insurgents intensifying their attacks, there could be an impact on internal security as well as economic costs.

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

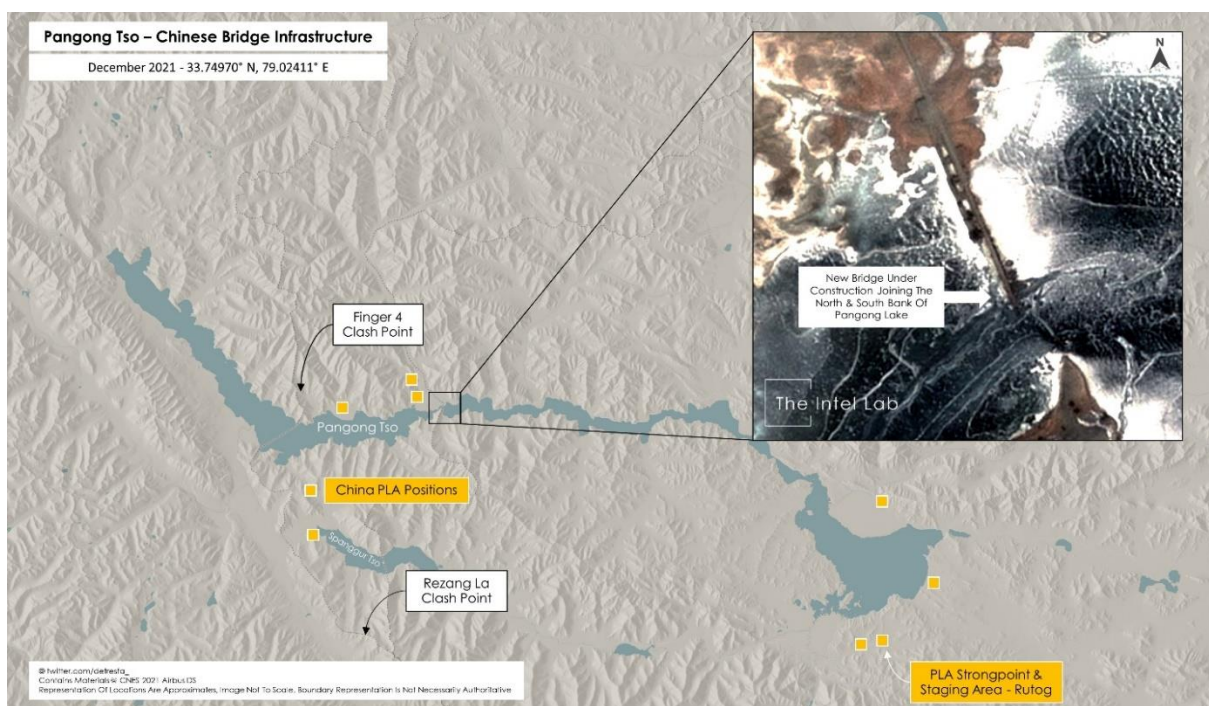
Military and Diplomatic Impasse

The 14th round of the India-China Corps Commander Level Meeting was held at Eastern Ladakh on January 12, 2022. The talks were focused on the disengagement in the Hot Springs area but failed to come to an agreement. The only positive outcome of the meeting, if it could be so stated, was that both sides issued a joint statement agreeing to "follow the guidance provided by the State Leaders and work for the resolution of the remaining issues at the earliest."³⁸

This was in contrast to the blame game that had followed the 13th round of the meeting, with both sides putting out separate statements. New Delhi had blamed Beijing for not being "agreeable to its constructive suggestions" as well as failing to provide any "forward-looking proposals". China's Western Theatre

Command spokesperson had responded, "instead of misjudging the situation, the Indian side should cherish the hard-won situation in China-India border areas".³⁹

Although the rhetoric has softened, there are few signs of an early resolution to the border standoff. Both sides continue to build infrastructure to strengthen their military capability along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). New satellite images have emerged of the construction of a bridge by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) connecting the north and south banks of the Pangong Tso.⁴⁰ The bridge is approximately 25 kilometres from the site of the 2020 standoff at Finger 4 and will provide access for the swift move of PLA soldiers across the Pangong Tso to react to contingencies on either bank.



A new bridge is under construction connecting the north & south bank of the lake, in turn enhancing road connectivity for [China's](#) troops in the area. Source: [Twitter/detresfa](#)

Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Arindam Bagchi clarified, "This bridge is being constructed in areas that have been under illegal occupation by China for around 60 years now...India has never accepted such illegal occupation." In an editorial, Global Times sought to pass off the construction of the bridge as part of the civilian infrastructure development. It stated that this misinterpretation of infrastructure buildup has "contributed to the continuing tensions between the two countries, undermining efforts to ease the tensions."⁴¹

China continually attempts to delink the situation at the LAC from the overall nature and quality of bilateral relations. India is firm in stating that relations

cannot be normalised unless the Chinese military actions of 2020 at the LAC are rolled back. A clear example of the link between the conflict at the LAC and its diplomatic fallout came in the Beijing Winter Olympics.

In November 2021, External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar had hosted a virtual Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral meeting that issued a joint statement in which "The Ministers expressed their support to China to host Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games."⁴² Global Times was quick to proclaim, "Despite its close ties with the US, India does not mean that it inclines to the US over all regional and international affairs. New Delhi is simply not a "natural ally" of Washington."⁴³

One day before the Winter Olympics opening ceremony, India announced a diplomatic boycott of the games, joining countries like the U.S., U.K., Canada, and Australia. The provocation came as PLA commander Qi Fabao was honored as one of the torchbearers for the Winter Olympics. Qi has been hailed a hero in China for his role in the deadly 2020 India-China clash at the Galwan valley.⁴⁴ MEA spokesperson Bagchi explained the Indian position, "It is indeed regrettable that the Chinese side has chosen to politicise an event like the Olympics... the Charge d'Affaires of the Embassy of India in Beijing will not be attending the opening or the closing ceremony of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics."⁴⁵

U.S. lawmakers applauded the Indian decision to boycott the games. Jim Risch, a member of the Senator Foreign Relations Committee, tweeted, "It's shameful that Beijing chose a torchbearer for the #Olympics2022 who's part of the military command that attacked India in 2020 and is implementing #genocide against Uyghurs."⁴⁶

The Winter games had already turned into a broader geopolitical contest between the U.S. and China. With India joining the western boycott, the diplomatic chill between New Delhi and Beijing will only intensify. Much as China would like to avoid, the ongoing tensions at the LAC will have reverberations beyond the border.

Siachen and Eastern Ladakh

In his annual press conference on the eve of Army Day 2022, the Chief of Army Staff General M.M. Narvane stated that India was not averse to the demilitarisation of the [Siachen] glacier, but the pre-condition for that is to accept AGPL [Actual Ground Position Line]. Pakistan has to accept what are their positions and what are ours, and both of us have to sign on the dotted line before any kind of disengagement takes place."⁴⁷ It was not clear if Narvane's

remarks, which surprised observers, were intended to signal a softening of India's stance.

The statement was immediately picked up in India and Pakistan with some speculation on whether discussions on Siachen demilitarisation, frozen since June 2012, could be revived. 13 rounds of talks have already taken place in the past, but the positions of the two sides on the contours of the agreement are widely divergent. India insists on marking the current positions that the Army holds on maps that are to be ratified by both sides. On the other hand, Pakistan feels that authenticating Indian positions will legitimise what it calls India's 'illegal act' of violating the 1972 Simla Agreement.

Today, the Siachen Sector cannot be viewed merely from the prism of an India-Pakistan bilateral issue. Towards the east, the Karakoram Range separates Siachen from the Depsang Plains in Eastern Ladakh, where a considerable strength of PLA forces is arrayed close to the LAC. Therefore, the tactical link between Siachen and the LAC in Eastern Ladakh cannot be ignored.

In January 2020, prior to the ongoing India-China crisis at the LAC, General Narvane had stated that Siachen is "one area where a formation is looking at both the western and the northern fronts. That is what makes it so strategically important. We must not lose sight that this is where collusivity [between China and Pakistan] can happen. Therefore, it is important to be on guard and keep that area in our possession."⁴⁸

In this context, India must keep its military attention on the Depsang Plains, where the PLA is stopping Indian patrols from accessing its traditional patrolling points along the LAC.⁴⁹ There has been some effort among defence 'sources' to term Depsang as a 'legacy' issue dating back to 2013.⁵⁰ Such statements must be avoided as any attempt to delink Depsang from the ongoing standoff could only weaken India's negotiating position on the disengagement of the PLA from this tactically important sector.

Indian Army's Vice Chief Lieutenant General Manoj Pande recently spoke about the need to be proactive in building a "credible deterrence".⁵¹ An essential element of this deterrence lies in our continuing to clearly communicate our resolve and intent, and standing firm on the demand for restoration of the status quo ante.

Economic Engagement, Connectivity and Non-Traditional Security Issues

by

Sanjay Pulipaka

Abstract

Three trends marked India's economic engagement with the immediate neighbourhood during the month. First, West Asia has been a bright spot, where business-to-business relations are growing. Second, the importance of robust border management processes in maintaining strong India-Bangladesh trade relations is becoming increasingly evident. Third, the Sri Lankan experience demonstrates that India is a first responder not only in the domain of HADR but also in responding to a financial crisis in the immediate neighbourhood.

In the geopolitical realm, an 'India Out' campaign mounted by the political opposition is attempting to push back the recent gains made by India in the Maldives. Further, Myanmar's prolonged political crisis has undermined India's connectivity initiatives in the region and has serious security implications for India's Northeast, necessitating closer attention to our borders with Myanmar to prevent a spillover of security threats, traditional and non-traditional.

Myanmar: A Prolonged Crisis

The prospect of a negotiated settlement to Myanmar's political crisis is increasingly looking bleak. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, former State Counsellor, was sentenced to four more years of imprisonment. She has already been sentenced in various cases, including breaching coronavirus regulations and possessing unlicensed walkie-talkies.⁵² Many other cases remain pending, such as obtaining/communicating secret information and violating anti-corruption laws, that will also entail imprisonment for significant periods.⁵³ This rigorous pursuit of cases suggests that the military does not see Suu Kyi as an essential stakeholder to be engaged in resolving the political crisis.

Further, there are reports that the Tatmadaw is deploying the air force in combat operations, even in civilian areas.⁵⁴ The Myanmar military is reportedly strengthening cyber security measures by outlawing Virtual Private Networks (VPNs).⁵⁵ Such a measure will constrain communication flows between Myanmar and the rest of the world. The Myanmar military's increased use of

heavy weapons in civilian areas and reluctance to engage with principal opponents point to a prolonged political stalemate.

The growing violence continues to push people into neighbouring countries. According to news reports, approximately 61 people were killed in December, and over 40,000 people were subjected to forced migration due to the ongoing conflict.⁵⁶ It is estimated that between January 5-20, approximately 2,000 people came over from the Chin state in Myanmar to Mizoram, India. Mizoram already hosts about 15,000 refugees from Myanmar.⁵⁷

Reports suggested that the military regime may also be working with some Indian insurgent groups,⁵⁸ who are said to be regrouping on the Myanmar-China border.⁵⁹ Assam Rifles have seized a massive consignment of explosives in Mizoram, near the Myanmar border.⁶⁰ The proliferation of small arms and insurgent groups have thus complicated the security dynamic in Northeast India. Early in the month, India's EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar, in a call with his Indonesian counterpart Retno Marsudi, exchanged views on Myanmar.⁶¹ Indonesia has been an important player in pushing ASEAN to take a proactive role in resolving the Myanmar crisis.



"Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen greets Myanmar's military ruler Min Aung Hlaing, left, in the first visit by a head of government since the army seized power." Source: [The Guardian](#)

ASEAN has refrained from inviting the Myanmar military leadership to its meetings in the recent past as they have failed to demonstrate significant progress on the political reconciliation process. Meanwhile, much to the

discomfiture of some of ASEAN members, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, who is the current chair of ASEAN, became the first head of the government to visit Myanmar since the military take-over.⁶² Through the visit, he hinted that it is essential to keep open the lines of communication between the military and other regional players.⁶³ This gave rise to concerns that the visit would legitimise the rule of the Myanmar military leadership. Malaysia's foreign minister openly stated that the Cambodian PM should have consulted the other ASEAN leaders before taking the Myanmar trip.⁶⁴ On January 14, in a video conference with his Cambodian counterpart, Singapore's Prime Minister noted that Myanmar has made no significant progress in implementing the ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus.⁶⁵ Implicit in the statement is the view that the Myanmar military leadership should not be invited to ASEAN summit meetings until it makes genuine progress on the political reconciliation process.

Emphasising support for the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus, a Joint Statement issued by the European Union, and the Foreign Ministers of Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, called for "immediate cessation of violence and for constructive dialogue."⁶⁶ The Joint Statement also noted that the "military regime bears responsibility for this crisis" and called for the ASEAN Special Envoy to be given "access to all parties in Myanmar, including pro-democracy groups."⁶⁷ Growing political instability, violence, international sanctions, and pressure from shareholders regarding the human rights situation have prompted multinational corporations such as Total Energies and Chevron to suspend their operations in Myanmar.⁶⁸

The flight of western companies may open up greater space for Chinese economic engagement in Myanmar. These developments indicate that the security and economic environment in India's eastern neighbourhood has deteriorated significantly.

Bangladesh – Managing the Border

India-Bangladesh trade relations continued their upward momentum during the month. Bangladesh exports to India are also increasing, and they "are expected to reach \$2 billion for the first time at the end of the current financial year."⁶⁹ Creation of new trade routes between the two countries will further improve these trade relations. India has reportedly offered to Bangladesh "the use of its inland waterways system up to Varanasi", which would help Dhaka to improve trade relations with Nepal as well.⁷⁰

While total trade between the two countries is around \$10 billion, Northeast India reportedly accounts for just one per cent of this total.⁷¹ During the month, there were reports that India is keen on connecting Tripura and Bangladesh

through a new trade route.⁷² To enhance trade between Northeast India and Bangladesh, a dedicated portal was launched in the second week of January.⁷³

Illegal cross border movement of people and goods has been a source of concern along the India Bangladesh border. According to reports, in 2021 India's Border Security Force (BSF) nabbed "141 Indian and 117 Bangladeshi smugglers and also rescued 8,125 cattle."⁷⁴ More recently, a BSF constable was reportedly killed by smugglers at Malda on the India-Bangladesh border.⁷⁵ During the month, in clashes between smugglers and Indian security personnel, 17 police personnel were injured.⁷⁶

To address these challenges, the Indian authorities have started to fill the gaps in India-Bangladesh border fencing. Anti-cut, anti-climb technologies and smart vigilance systems, including cameras along some vulnerable border sections, have been installed.⁷⁷ However, challenges such as riverine terrain, high-density population and lack of adjoining land on both sides of the border make it difficult to fence the border completely.⁷⁸ Further, there have been protests in the East Khasi Hills district (Meghalaya) over concerns that a village will be "cut off from the rest of the country, as... [the] border fence is being built 150 yards inside the Indian border."⁷⁹

There have been minor hiccups in the cross-border movement of goods. The BSF identified 82 truckers who had fake driving licenses at the Petrapole Integrated Check Post (ICP) on India-Bangladesh border.⁸⁰ Subsequently, the truckers went on strike for a few days, which impacted the movement of goods between the two countries through this ICP.⁸¹

China continued to expand its economic and trade activities in Bangladesh during the month. On January 9, Bangladesh signed a contract with a Chinese consortium to build a four-lane Expressway in Eastern Dhaka.⁸² Further, during the month, the Chinese-constructed Bangabandhu Bangladesh-China Friendship Exhibition Center (BBCFEC) hosted the Dhaka International Trade Fair (DITF). Bangladesh also seems to be moving towards energy dependence on China. Given the limited capacities of its domestic refineries, Dhaka has decided to source approximately 40 per cent of petroleum imports from China for the next six months.⁸³

Turkey has been scaling up its presence in South Asia in the recent past. On January 09, during Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu's visit to Bangladesh, both countries signed "a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on security cooperation, counterterrorism and tackling drug trafficking."⁸⁴ Turkey is also an important supplier of weapon systems to Bangladesh.⁸⁵ The

possible impact of increased interactions with Turkey on domestic politics, and more specifically on identity politics in Bangladesh, merits close attention.



"Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina addressing the graduation ceremony of the "DSCSC 2021-2022 Course" of Defence Services Command and Staff College (DSCSC) in Dhaka."

Source: [RisingBD](#)

Speaking at the Defence Services Command and Staff College (DSCSC), PM Sheikh Hasina noted that "the image of the nation has brightened by its success in curbing terrorism and militancy".⁸⁶ However, concerns regarding the rise of religious fundamentalism in the country continue to persist. On January 12, a musical event in Dhaka was vandalised by religious zealots, which prompted sharp condemnation from the intellectual community.⁸⁷

The Maldives – Shrill Rhetoric in the Archipelago

Early in the month, India's External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr. S. Jaishankar had a telephonic conversation with his Maldivian counterpart Abdulla Shahid to take stock of the bilateral relationship.⁸⁸ Subsequently, Foreign Minister (FM) Shahid "reaffirmed Maldives' commitment to upholding its 'India First' policy."⁸⁹ FM Shahid went on to add that "India is a country that had lent assistance during major crises faced."⁹⁰

However, opposition parties have continued with their 'India Out' protests. Former President Abdulla Yameen whipped up the anti-India sentiment by pointing out there will be "no Maldivian hospitality for Indian military forces in the Maldives."⁹¹ The opposition parties successfully spread erroneous

information regarding the presence of a large number of military personnel on the islands, which is false. There were reports that some Indian teachers in the Maldives were subjected to harassment.⁹² The Maldives' tourism economy and other sectors employ migrant labour from India, and there are concerns regarding their safety.⁹³

In response to these moves by the opposition, the Speaker of the Parliament, Mohamed Nasheed, urged the Parliament's National Security Committee to investigate the 'India Out' campaign, as it constituted a national security threat.⁹⁴ Specifically, he noted that "thousands of Maldivians reside in India... [and] the 'India Out' movement is causing a lot of difficulties for them."⁹⁵



"China Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Maldives Foreign Minister Shahid witnessing the signing of key agreements." Source: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Republic of Maldives](#)

Reportedly, some members of the ruling Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) are planning to pass legislation that criminalises "protests that affect the country's relations with other nations."⁹⁶ Such legislation will undermine India's interests, as it will serve as a propaganda point for opposition parties, who may claim that it will undermine the right to protest and is in response to pressure from India. Further, the legislation may also be used to suppress genuine protests against coercive economic practices by other countries, such as China. If the ruling party is indeed keen on such legislation, then it indicates that politics in the Maldives is deeply fractured, with very little space for rational

dialogue. There is also speculation that the 'India Out' campaign has received support from China.⁹⁷

On January 08, Chinese FM Wang Yi visited the Maldives and the two countries "signed cooperative agreements on mutual visa exemption, economic technology, infrastructure, seawater desalination, medicine and public health, among others."⁹⁸ In late January, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu also visited the Maldives, and it was announced that the two countries would strive to improve bilateral trade to \$100 million over the next two years.⁹⁹ Reportedly, Turkish firms are keen on making investments in the Maldives' tourism sector.¹⁰⁰

India's outreach to Sri Lanka

In the past few months, Sri Lanka has been experiencing a severe economic crisis, and India has stepped in with financial assistance. With the intent to help Sri Lanka tide over this crisis, on January 13, India "confirmed a \$400 million currency swap with Sri Lanka while deferring another \$500 million due for settlement to the Asian Clearing Union (ACU)."¹⁰¹ On January 15, India's EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar, in his interactions with Sri Lanka's Finance Minister Basil Rajapaksa, promised that India would continue to provide assistance to Colombo to overcome its financial difficulties.¹⁰² Subsequently, India has offered a "new Line of Credit (LOC) of USD 500 million to Sri Lanka for purchase of petroleum products."¹⁰³

The Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka pointed out that despite the pandemic, the movement of flights and visits of Indian business leaders to Sri Lanka indicate robust bilateral economic relations between the two countries.¹⁰⁴ In fact, the tourist arrivals from India accounted for 26.3 per cent of total tourist inflows into the country.¹⁰⁵ Toward the end of January, Sri Lanka's envoy to India stated that Colombo had identified eight sectors, namely communications, electricity grids, energy, information technology, ports, real estate, refineries, and tourism, to attract investments from India.¹⁰⁶ Specifically, he stressed the need to operationalise the cross-border electricity grid between the two countries.¹⁰⁷

In addition to financial assistance, the Indian government has continued its development assistance to the country. Sri Lanka launched an inter-city train service in early January with "AC Diesel Multiple Unit (DMU) supplied under an Indian credit line."¹⁰⁸ As part of the ongoing India Housing Project, on January 15, India also handed over 1,000 houses to locals in Kotagala.¹⁰⁹

The issue of fishermen transgressing into each other's territorial waters continues to cause problems in India-Sri Lanka relations. The decision of Sri Lankan authorities to auction boats of detained Indian fishermen have prompted protests in Tamil Nadu in India.¹¹⁰ However, on January 25, a Sri Lankan court ordered the release of 56 Indian fishermen under detention since December, 2021.¹¹¹

As part of a five-nation tour, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Sri Lanka on January 09. FM Wang Yi reportedly told Sri Lankan leaders "that no third party should interfere in relations between the two countries."¹¹² Interestingly, Wang Yi "proposed a forum on the development of Indian Ocean Island countries" and suggested the utilisation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement to restart FTA talks to scale up economic engagement between the two countries.¹¹³ During the visit, the Sri Lankan President reportedly requested that Chinese debt should be restructured and broached the possibility of a new loan.¹¹⁴ The experience of Sri Lanka demonstrates that reckless resort to Chinese financing has come at the cost of its domestic economic health.

Nepal

During the month, India continued with its focus on connectivity and infrastructure projects in Nepal. In the first week of January, India's union cabinet approved a MoU to construct a new road bridge over the Mahakali river to connect with Nepal.¹¹⁵ On January 06, EAM Dr Jaishankar held a telephonic conversation with his Nepali counterpart Narayan Khadka to discuss "the progress made in the implementation of development projects and post-earthquake reconstruction projects."¹¹⁶

During the month, India also continued with its outreach activities by conducting health camps and providing material assistance to disabled people.¹¹⁷ The Indian Embassy in Kathmandu announced that 75 development projects would be implemented during the year to coincide with 75 years of India's independence celebrations.¹¹⁸

The preliminary report of the national census was released during the month. Nepal's population was pegged at 29,192,480, and the annual growth of population was reportedly around 0.93 per cent, making it the lowest in the previous 80 years, which could be due to out-migration in search of employment.¹¹⁹ Nepal's Central Bureau of Statistics reportedly conducted an "informal survey" of the population in Kalapani, Limpiyadhura and Lipulekh based on estimates provided by the local security personnel. It is well known that Kathmandu claims these Indian territories as part of Nepal.

The territorial issue between the two countries flared up once again during the month. During an election rally in Uttarakhand, Indian Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi announced that his government had extended a road to Lipulekh.¹²⁰ This elicited a sharp reaction in Nepal, with leaders of various political parties calling on PM Sher Bahadur Deuba "to speak up on the boundary issue and clear its position on Lipulekh".¹²¹ The Nepal government reportedly reminded India to refrain from road construction activity around Lipulekh.¹²² Calling for dialogue, the India Embassy in Kathmandu stated that "the established inter-governmental mechanisms and channels are most appropriate for communication and dialogue."¹²³

During the month, there were protests against Chinese territorial encroachment and also against undue interference of Beijing in the domestic affairs of Nepal.¹²⁴ On January 13, the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu responded to the protests by stating that China "unswervingly adheres to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, respects Nepal's sovereignty and territorial integrity."¹²⁵

Interestingly, while China's alleged territorial encroachments are met with a subdued reaction from Kathmandu's political elite, the relationship with the US prompts animated discussions in Nepal. Getting parliamentary approval for the US Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) grant is proving to be a difficult and politically divisive exercise.¹²⁶ Some news reports have even suggested that the issue has contributed to fissures in the ruling coalition, threatening the stability of PM Deuba's government.¹²⁷

West Asia

India and Israel celebrated 30 years of the establishment of diplomatic relations during the month. While Israeli PM Naftali Bennet noted the deep friendship between the two countries,¹²⁸ PM Modi pointed out that India-Israel relations are more important in a fast-changing world.¹²⁹ In a joint article, the foreign ministers of India and Israel defined the partnership as "an ideal duo" in the realm of economic and trade cooperation.¹³⁰ During the month, the India-Israel Industrial R&D and Technological Innovation Fund (I4F) approved three joint R&D projects worth \$5.5 million.¹³¹ The I4F has identified agriculture and security, among others, as priority areas for collaborative projects.¹³² There is also a multilateral dimension to India's relationship with Israel in the Middle East. Israel's Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid, stated that the West Asia Quad, comprising India, Israel, the UAE and the US, would "work together on infrastructure, transport, ports, trains, maritime security, digital infrastructure, and clean energy" in the near future.¹³³

The recent uptick in India's economic relations with West Asia maintained its momentum during the month. Interacting with the media in Riyadh on January 01, the Indian ambassador to Saudi Arabia stressed the importance of scaling up cooperation in defence, energy, trade and pharmaceuticals sectors.¹³⁴ India's Tata Communications and Zain KSA have agreed to facilitate the digital transformation of various governmental organisations and firms in Saudi Arabia.¹³⁵

Similarly, UAE-India economic relations are becoming increasingly diversified. On January 06, the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir government signed six agreements "with Al Maya Group, MATU Investments LLC, GL Employment Brokerage LLC, Century Financial and Noon E-commerce, Emaar Group and Lulu International."¹³⁶ There were reports last month that sovereign wealth funds from UAE such as Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) and UAE's Mubadala Investment Co. are exploring possibilities of investments in energy units of Reliance Industries.¹³⁷ Further, to facilitate increased collaboration between India and UAE start-ups, a \$150-million India-UAE venture capital fund was launched at the EXPO2020 Dubai.



During Lieutenant Governor of Jammu and Kashmir Manoj Sinha's visit to Dubai on January 06, numerous agreements were signed with major UAE based firms. Source: [ANI](#)

At the same time, the security dynamic is negatively impacting Indian workers in the region. A drone attack by Yemen's Houthi rebels on three petroleum transport tankers in Abu Dhabi resulted in the death of two Indian workers. The Indian government is working for the release of seven Indian sailors who were taken hostage when the Houthi rebels seized their UAE flagged ship.¹³⁸

China has scaled up its strategic engagement with the Gulf countries. In a video conference with his Saudi counterpart, the Chinese defence minister called for increased coordination to "jointly oppose hegemonic and bullying practices... [and] to safeguard the interests of developing countries together."¹³⁹ Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud visited Beijing, and both sides agreed to deepen their comprehensive strategic partnership.¹⁴⁰ It is also being anticipated that in February, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman will visit China to participate in the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics.¹⁴¹ There has been an increase in oil supplies from Saudi Arabia to China, "with supplies up 3.1% over 2020."¹⁴²

China has also scaled up oil imports from Iran. According to reports, China has "offloaded nearly four million barrels of Iranian crude oil into state reserve tanks in the southern port city of Zhanjiang."¹⁴³ From January 18-20, Russia, Iran and China conducted joint naval exercises in the Gulf of Oman, which reportedly saw participation of two Chinese vessels, 11 Iranian vessels and three Russian ships.¹⁴⁴ For the moment, China has maintained a delicate balance in its relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia.

West Asia is witnessing many changes. The Gulf regimes are attempting to modernise and diversify their economic partnerships. China is deploying its economic prowess to build economic partnerships with various countries in the region. India is also scaling up its bilateral and multilateral engagement of the region.

Multilateralism

Reforming multilateral institutions and a more robust international action against terrorism have long been the dominant themes in India's multilateral engagement. Speaking at the World Economic Forum (WEF) Davos Summit, PM Modi called on the international community, particularly democratic countries, to ensure that the "multilateral organisations [are] ready to deal with the new world order and new challenges."¹⁴⁵

At the United Nations Security Council, India navigated the complex power-politics on the Ukrainian crisis by abstaining on a resolution brought forward by the US and its allies, while calling "for immediate de-escalation of tensions taking into account the legitimate security interests of all countries... [and urging] all parties to continue to engage through all diplomatic channels and to keep working towards the full implementation of the Minsk Package".¹⁴⁶

At UNSC meetings on the Middle East and Syria, India urged the international community not to neglect the "collective fight against terrorism."¹⁴⁷ Further,

speaking at the open debate on "Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict," the Indian representative urged the international community to "stand firm on its opposition to terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and reject any attempt to provide any justifications for terrorist acts."¹⁴⁸

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India's Neighbourhood – The Arc of Instability

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