



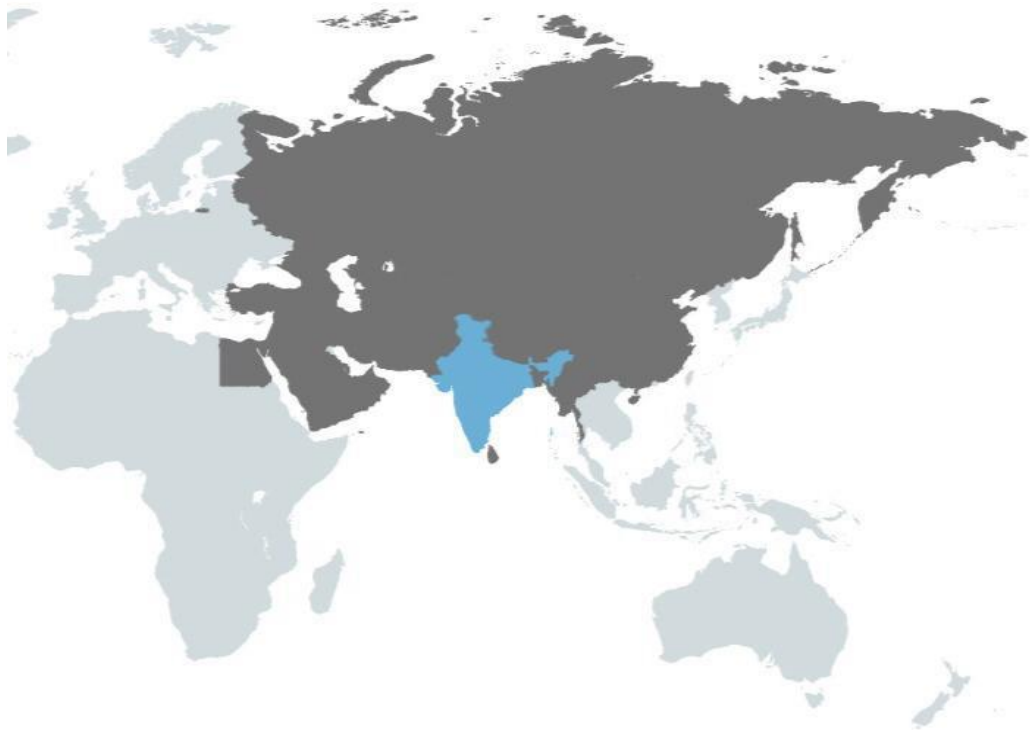
**Delhi Policy Group**

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



# INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

## MARCH 2022



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Delhi Policy Group  
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Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

## DPG India Strategic Review

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*The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Delhi Policy Group as an Institution.*

### 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 Ambassador Biren Nanda. The research team includes Shreyas Deshmukh and Sanket Joshi. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to Shreyas Deshmukh at [shreyas@dpg.org.in](mailto:shreyas@dpg.org.in). To subscribe, please [click here](#).

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# DPG India Strategic Review

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# India's Neighbourhood: The Arc of Instability

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

## AFGHANISTAN

### Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan and its Impact on the Humanitarian Crisis

Some optimism, expressed mainly in Western countries, that Taliban 2.0 would be different is fading. On March 20, just hours before schools were to reopen, the Taliban-run Bakhtar News Agency reported that girls above the 6th grade would not be able to attend schools until a uniform appropriate to Sharia and Afghan customs and culture could be designed.<sup>1</sup> Girls' education has attracted a lot of global attention as an indicator of the Taliban's attitude towards the rights of women, but the signs have not been encouraging.

In a series of further restrictions, the Taliban has ordered Afghanistan's Ariana Afghan Airlines and Kam Air to stop women from boarding flights unless they were escorted by a "mahram" or adult male relative. In addition, the Ministry of Vice has instructed that men and woman should not visit parks in Kabul on the same day. As a result, women are now permitted to visit parks only on Sundays, Mondays, and Tuesdays, while the remaining days are reserved for men.<sup>2</sup>

Women in Afghanistan are already banned from travelling more than 48 miles without a male guardian. However, the application of this guardianship rule is often at the whims of the Taliban local officials. There are reports that unaccompanied women are being denied medical care, particularly in rural areas.<sup>3</sup>

On February 27, the Taliban announced a ban on Afghans leaving the country, citing reports of thousands of Afghans "living in very bad conditions" abroad.<sup>4</sup> Even as citizens are not permitted to leave the country, the Taliban have launched a massive house-to-house search in Kabul and other Afghan cities in what is being called a "cleaning operation" to look for weapons and criminals.<sup>5</sup> However, the fear among the people is that those who worked with U.S. forces in any capacity could be targeted.

Fears of persecution and the financial crisis are forcing Afghans to flee the country. According to a recent report by the International Organization for Migration, nearly a million Afghans have left their homes between August and December last year.<sup>6</sup> As international media broadcasters have been taken off the air, information is hard to come by. The list of banned media houses includes the BBC, Voice of America, German Deutsche Welle, and China Global Television Network.<sup>7</sup>

The Human rights situation in Afghanistan could adversely impact efforts by the international community to ease the humanitarian crisis in the country. Taliban's ban on girls' education has prompted the U.S. to cancel meetings with the Taliban in Doha that were set to address key economic issues. A U.S. State Department spokesperson called the decision a "deeply disappointing and inexplicable reversal of commitments to the Afghan people, first and foremost, and also to the international community."

The World Bank has put four projects in Afghanistan worth \$600 million on hold. The projects, funded under the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, were being readied for implementation by United Nations agencies to support projects in agriculture, education, health, and livelihoods.<sup>8</sup>

On March 31, international donors pledged \$2.4 billion for humanitarian relief assistance to Afghanistan. However, this amount fell massively short of the \$4.4 billion sought by the United Nations as aid, mainly because of the anger among donors on the Taliban's regressive record on human rights.<sup>9</sup>

International humanitarian aid is to be channeled through United Nations agencies and NGOs. Recently, a directive from Prime Minister Mullah Hassan Akhund stated that humanitarian projects must be implemented in close coordination with government authorities.<sup>10</sup> This attempt by the Taliban to assert greater control over the NGOs could complicate efforts to provide aid as it faces the obstacle of international sanctions against Taliban leadership.

It appears that sanctions have not really forced the Taliban to change their regressive thinking towards women and minority rights or the need to bring in a more inclusive government. Therefore, countries providing aid will have to develop a nuanced strategy that balances the human rights situation in Afghanistan with the need for humanitarian relief.

### **Taliban Finding Greater Legitimacy**

Even though no country has recognised the Taliban government, it is gaining greater acceptance. On March 17, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)

voted to establish formal ties with Taliban-run Afghanistan. Without naming the Taliban, the UNSC approved a new one-year mandate for the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).<sup>11</sup>

The resolution orders UNAMA to “integrate gender mainstreaming” and also “promote gender equality, women’s and girls’ empowerment and the full protection of their human rights, including education, and the full, equal, meaningful and safe participation, engagement and leadership of women in all levels and stages of decision-making.”<sup>12</sup> The Taliban have welcomed the extension of the mandate of UNAMA, although only because it helps them obtain international aid.

On March 24, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi arrived in Kabul on a trip that had not been earlier announced. According to a statement from the Afghan foreign ministry spokesman, Wang discussed political and economic ties, including starting work in the mining sector and Afghanistan’s possible role in China’s Belt and Road infrastructure initiative. China also expressed a willingness to promote the extension of CPEC to Afghanistan, making the latter a bridge for regional connectivity.<sup>13</sup>

Shortly after Wang’s visit, a senior delegation from Russia landed in the Afghan capital under the leadership of Zamir Kabulov, President Vladimir Putin’s envoy for Afghanistan. The meeting focused on strengthening political, economic, transit, and regional relations as well as fighting drug trafficking from Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup>



China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi held talks with the Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, March 25, 2022. Source: MOFA PRC

China hosted a series of meetings on Afghanistan in the last week of March. The first meeting was between the foreign ministers of neighbouring countries of Afghanistan, which included China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Afghan acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi also attended the meeting. The joint statement issued at the end of the meeting called on the international community to provide humanitarian assistance and sought a "central role of Afghanistan in distributing and using humanitarian assistance."<sup>15</sup>

The second meeting was between the 'Extended Troika' comprising China, Russia, the U.S., and Pakistan. During the meeting, Wang Yi reportedly asked the U.S. to "take practical action on unfreezing Afghanistan's overseas assets and lifting unreasonable sanctions."<sup>16</sup>

With global attention on the Ukraine crisis and the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, the Taliban government appears to be acquiring greater legitimacy despite not having moved ahead to improve its human rights record.

## PAKISTAN

### India's Accidental Missile Launch into Pakistan

On March 10, Inter-Services Public Relations Director General (DG) Babar Iftikhar briefed the media on an Indian "high-speed flying object", most probably a missile, that had violated Pakistani airspace on March 9 and fallen near Mian Channu. The DG said that although the missile was unarmed, the incident showed India's "disregard for aviation safety and reflects very poorly on their technological prowess and procedural efficiency."<sup>17</sup>

The next day, the Indian Ministry of Defence issued a brief statement: "In the course of a routine maintenance, a technical malfunction led to the accidental firing of a missile. The Government of India has taken a serious view and ordered a high-level Court of Enquiry. It is learnt that the missile landed in an area of Pakistan. While the incident is deeply regrettable, it is also a matter of relief that there has been no loss of life due to the accident."<sup>18</sup>

The matter also came up in the Indian Parliament, where the Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh, informed the members that "A missile was unfortunately accidentally launched on March 9. The incident occurred during a routine inspection... I would like to inform the House that the government has taken serious note of the incident. A formal high-level inquiry has been ordered."<sup>19</sup>

Although India did not name the missile, it has been widely reported to be the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile jointly developed by Russia and India. The missile, which has a conventional warhead, was under the control of the Indian Air Force and was accidentally fired during an inspection.<sup>20</sup>

Apart from issues regarding security protocols and technical safeguards, the incident raises more important questions about strategic stability in South Asia. Bloomberg reported that Pakistan had prepared to launch a similar missile to strike India but held back because an initial assessment indicated something was amiss.<sup>21</sup> In an apparent communication failure, neither country activated the existing hotlines between the Director Generals of Military Operations and the Foreign Secretaries.

India and Pakistan have a series of nuclear confidence-building measures (CBMs) relating to the prohibition of attacks against nuclear installations (1988), pre-notification of flight testing of ballistic missiles (2005), and an agreement on reducing the risk from accidents relating to nuclear weapons (2012). The basis for many of these agreements is the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the two countries in 1999 that outlined various steps for developing measures for confidence building in the nuclear and conventional fields.<sup>22</sup>

Bilateral ties remain strained over Pakistan's support to terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir. As a result, regular diplomatic engagement to discuss CBMs is at a standstill. The incident involving the accidental launch of the BrahMos could perhaps spur the need to restart some limited but focused talks on nuclear CBMs.

### **Political Crisis in Pakistan**

On March 28, PML-N President Shahbaz Sharif, Pakistan's leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly, tabled a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Imran Khan in the lower house. The Opposition claims that Imran Khan has failed to deliver as a leader, citing high inflation, economic mismanagement, and misuse of state resources against political opponents.<sup>23</sup>

The Opposition has been gunning for Imran for some time. In September 2020, six political parties had agreed to launch an alliance named Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) to organise countrywide protests against the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government. The 26-point declaration included the "end of establishment's interference in politics, new free and fair elections after the formulation of election reforms with no role of armed forces and intelligence agencies."<sup>24</sup>





Security Personnel deployed in front Parliament House Building in Islamabad, April 3, 2022.

Source: Dawn

While the PDM had been organising rallies and attempting to pressure the Prime Minister, they had only met with limited success till such time as the Pakistan Army was seen to be backing Imran Khan. However, the situation changed in October 2021, with differences between the Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa and Imran Khan surfacing over the appointment of a new Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Chief.<sup>25</sup>

The Delhi Policy Group's India Strategic Review for October 2021 had pointed out that emerging fissures between the Army Chief and Imran Khan could lead to the ouster of the Prime Minister.<sup>26</sup> This has now come true. While the military says it is neutral in the current political crisis, many read this as the army withdrawing its support from Khan.

The rift between the military and Imran Khan goes beyond the appointment of the ISI Chief. There are also differences over Pakistan's foreign policy direction. Imran Khan's attempts to reduce Pakistan's engagement with the West are not in sync with several statements by General Bajwa indicating that he wants Pakistan firmly back in the U.S. camp.<sup>27</sup> There were also reports that the Pakistan Army had warned the Prime Minister about the timing of his recent visit to Russia that occurred on the day that Russia invaded Ukraine.<sup>28</sup>

A clear indication of differences in foreign policy came at the Islamabad Security Dialogue. In his inaugural speech on April 1, Imran Khan said that a

"powerful" country had been "angered" by his visit to Russia in February and had questioned his decision to go ahead with the tour amid Russia-Ukraine tensions.<sup>29</sup> Earlier, in an address to the nation, Imran had accused the U.S. of trying to oust him from power.<sup>30</sup>

A day later, General Bajwa, in his address at the Security Dialogue, struck a contradictory note on Russia and the U.S. Terming Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a great tragedy, Gen Bajwa expressed serious concern over the conflict and stated that "despite legitimate security concerns of Russia, its aggression against a smaller country cannot be condoned."<sup>31</sup> He also said: "We share a long and excellent strategic relationship with the U.S., which remains our largest export market" and that Pakistan has sought to broaden and expand relations with both China and the U.S. "without impacting our relations with [either]."<sup>32</sup>



Pakistan COAS Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa addressing the Islamabad Security Dialogue, April 2, 2022. Source: Radio Pakistan

Sensing that Pakistan Army had withdrawn its backing of Imran Khan, parties that supported the PTI government had been switching to the Opposition. Allies like the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan and the Balochistan Awami Party withdrew support from Imran Khan, reducing his government to a minority.<sup>33</sup>

There was high drama in the National Assembly on April 3, the day of the no-confidence vote. Shortly after the session began, Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry claimed that a foreign conspiracy was behind the move to oust the government and called on the deputy speaker to decide the constitutionality of

the no-trust move. Deputy Speaker Qasim Khan Suri then dismissed the no-trust motion against Imran Khan, terming it against Article 5 of the Constitution.<sup>34</sup>

Soon after the dismissal of the no-confidence motion, Pakistan President Arif Alvi dissolved the National Assembly on the advice of the Prime Minister, who, in a televised address, called for fresh elections.<sup>35</sup> Imran Khan's actions are bound to be challenged by the Opposition, and there will be a period of even greater political instability in the country. Meanwhile, Pakistan remains true to its record of not a single Prime Minister having completed a full tenure in office.

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

### **Stalemate in Eastern Ladakh**

The 15<sup>th</sup> round of Corps Commanders-level talks was held on March 11 on the Indian side of the LAC in Eastern Ladakh. Prior to the meeting, sources in the Indian military were hopeful that "both sides will now focus on achieving resolution on the balanced friction areas. Recent statements by both sides to find a mutually acceptable solution have been encouraging and positive in nature."<sup>36</sup>

Unfortunately, the 13-hour long talks failed to achieve any tangible results on further disengagement in Eastern Ladakh. The joint statement issued after the talks<sup>37</sup> stated that the "two sides carried forward their discussions from previous round held on January 12 for resolution of relevant issues along LAC in Western Sector." The talks were "in keeping with the guidance provided by the State leaders to work for the resolution of the remaining issues at the earliest." While both sides affirmed that "such a resolution would help restore peace & tranquility along the LAC in Western Sector & facilitate progress in bilateral relations," there was no agreement on further disengagement.

The last disengagement of troops had been carried out in the first week of August 2021 from the area of Gogra. After that, the following three rounds of Corps Commander-level meetings have failed to arrive at any consensus. It is becoming increasingly apparent that any breakthrough will only come as a result of political and diplomatic pressure on China.

### **India and China's Stated Positions on the Impact of the LAC Standoff**

The Indian side has made it very clear that the state of India-China bilateral relations depends on a resolution of the ongoing standoff in Eastern Ladakh triggered by China's military actions in April 2020.

Speaking at an event at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration on March 9, Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla stated: "Development of India-China relationship has to be based on 'three mutuals' - mutual respect, mutual sensitivity and mutual interest. We have made it clear to China that peace and tranquillity in the border areas is essential for the development of our relationship."<sup>38</sup>

In February, at the Munich Security Conference, the External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar had remarked: "For 45 years, there was peace, there was stable border management, there were no military casualties on the border from 1975. That changed because we had agreements with China not to bring military forces to the border (the Line of Actual Control or LAC) and the Chinese violated those agreements. Now, the state of the border will determine the state of the relationship. That's natural. So obviously, the relations with China right now are going through a very difficult phase."<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, China seeks to insulate the situation at the LAC from the broader bilateral ties. On March 7, at his annual press conference, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi admitted that India-China relations had "encountered setbacks in recent years." He went on to state that "China has long advocated managing differences through equal-footed consultations, actively seeking a fair and equitable settlement while not letting it affect or interfere with the bigger picture of bilateral cooperation."<sup>40</sup> The Indian side has already rejected this viewpoint.

Wang also brought up the issue of U.S. policy in the region. Criticising Washington for attempting to create an Asian NATO, Wang said that the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is becoming a byword for "bloc politics". He added: "The U.S. is staging a '5 (Five eyes) 4 (Quad) 3 (AUKUS) 2 (bilateral military alliances) posture' in the Asia Pacific. It is by no means a blessing but a sinister move."<sup>41</sup>

Echoing a similar sentiment, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister and a former Ambassador to India, Le Yucheng, remarked that the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy that puts together "closed and exclusive small circles or groups, and get[s] the region off course toward fragmentation and bloc-based division is as dangerous as the NATO strategy of eastward expansion in Europe. If allowed to go on unchecked, it would bring unimaginable consequences and ultimately push the Asia-Pacific over the edge of an abyss."<sup>42</sup>

China's opposition to the Quad is well known, but with the recent release of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, the establishment of the AUKUS, and the events in Ukraine, this opposition could sharpen. It is also likely that these events in the

Indo-Pacific would have their fallout on finding a resolution of the situation along the LAC. It was in this backdrop that Wang Yi visited India.

### Wang Yi's Visit to India

China's Foreign Minister flew into Delhi on March 24, following a visit to Pakistan and Afghanistan. There was no public announcement about the visit, and Dr. Jaishankar explained: "For whatever reason, the Chinese did not want this set of visits which Mr. Wang Yi did, to be announced earlier. So since we did not have a mutual agreement, we did not make our announcement."<sup>43</sup>

The atmosphere of the visit had already been vitiated by Wang's comments in Pakistan while attending a session of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). In his speech at the opening ceremony, Wang said: "On Kashmir, we have heard again today the calls of many of our Islamic friends. And China shares the same hope."<sup>44</sup>

India responded very sharply with MEA spokesperson Arindam Bagchi saying: "We reject the uncalled reference to India by the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi during his speech at the Opening Ceremony. Matters related to the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir are entirely the internal affairs of India. Other countries, including China, have no locus standi to comment. They should note that India refrains from the public judgment of their internal issues."<sup>45</sup>



EAM Dr S Jaishankar with Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in a bilateral meeting on March 25, 2022. Source: Twitter/DrSJaishankar

Wang Yi's request for a meeting with the Indian Prime Minister was politely declined, and he met the National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval, apart from holding talks with Dr. Jaishankar. According to a statement put out by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi put forward a three-point approach in the meeting with Doval.<sup>46</sup>

First, both sides should view bilateral relations from a long-term perspective, adhere to the strategic judgment made by the leaders of the two countries that "China and India pose no threat but offer development opportunities to each other", and place the differences on the boundary issue in a proper place in bilateral relations.

Second, both sides should view each other's development with a win-win mentality, and forge a sound interaction model, so as to achieve mutual benefit and win-win results at a higher level and in a wider range.

Third, both sides should participate in multilateral processes with a cooperative posture, step up communication and coordination, support each other, send more positive signals for upholding multilateralism, and inject more positive energy into improving global governance.

The Chinese statement also stated that "Doval appreciated China's profound thinking and constructive opinions on India-China relations, saying that India also believes that India and China, as partners rather than rivals, should not let the boundary issue affect the overall bilateral relations." However, this assertion is not borne out by the Indian side's assessment of the talks.

It is reported that Wang invited NSA Doval to visit China for the Special Representatives talks on border issues, but Doval plainly said that this could only happen after "immediate issues are resolved successfully." The immediate issues refer to disengagement and de-escalation at the LAC.<sup>47</sup>

Dr. Jaishankar was very forthright during the press conference held after his meeting with Wang Yi. He said: "I was very honest in my discussions with the Chinese Foreign Minister, especially in conveying our national sentiments... The frictions and tensions that arise from China's deployments since April 2020 cannot be reconciled with a normal relationship between two neighbours. Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke about China's desire for a return to normalcy, while also referring to the larger significance of our ties...but restoration of normalcy will obviously require a restoration of peace and tranquility."<sup>48</sup>

In response to a question, Dr. Jaishankar replied, "if you ask me, is our relationship normal today? My answer to you is no, it is not. And it cannot be normal, if the situation in the border areas is abnormal. And surely the presence of a large number of troops there, in contravention of agreements is abnormality."<sup>49</sup>

This exchange reveals the difficulties in arriving at a resolution to the ongoing situation at the LAC. It is unclear as to what Wang hoped to achieve by this visit if there is no change to China's posture along the LAC. As long as China continues to harp that "bilateral relations should not be pinned only on the border issue,"<sup>50</sup> there will be no meeting ground with India.

## Instability, Connectivity and Non-Traditional Security Issues

by

Amb. Biren Nanda

### BIMSTEC SUMMIT

The 5th BIMSTEC Summit was hosted in virtual mode by Sri Lanka, the current chair on March 30, 2022. The Summit's theme "Towards a Resilient Region. Prosperous Economies, Healthy People" was intended to capture the current priorities of member countries.

Major Achievements of the Summit, included the adoption of the "BIMSTEC Charter" and a "Master-Plan on Transport Connectivity," the latter developed in collaboration with the ADB. Three agreements were signed at the summit including an MLAT in Criminal Matters, an MoA to set up a "Technology Transfer Facility" hosted by Sri Lanka, and an MOU for cooperation between Diplomatic Academies.



BIMSTEC Virtual Summit 2022: Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the 7-nation BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) summit, led by Sri Lanka on March 30, 2022. Source: The Print

In his address<sup>51</sup> to leaders at the Summit, PM Modi lauded the institutionalization of the BIMSTEC through the adoption of the BIMSTEC Charter – BIMSTEC now has its own emblem and flag and an international



personality. He highlighted the decision to hold summit meetings every two years and annual meetings of Foreign Ministers, the proposal for the constitution of an 'Eminent Persons Group' to prepare a "vision document" for BIMSTEC and the adoption of the 'Master-plan on Connectivity'. He emphasized the need to make speedy progress on the finalization of a BIMSTEC FTA, to develop a legal framework for a 'Coastal Shipping Ecosystem' in the Bay of Bengal, to reactivate the 'BIMSTEC Center for Weather and Climate', and to strengthen the legal framework for combatting terrorism, transnational crime and non traditional threats. Prime Minister Modi also announced an ad hoc grant of US \$ 1 million for strengthening the capacity of the BIMSTEC Secretariat, and a US \$ 3 million grant to revive the 'BIMSTEC Center for Weather and Climate.'

BIMSTEC connects South Asia with Southeast Asia and serves as a platform for inter-regional cooperation. It accounts for 21% of the world population and a combined GDP of US \$ 2.5 trillion. BIMSTEC constitutes a significant building bloc for the eventual establishment of a Bay of Bengal Economic Community, linking the ecologies of the Himalayas with those of the Bay of Bengal.

## BBIN

Speaking at the inaugural session of a training module on "India's Neighborhood", at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration in Mussourie, Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla said that India and Nepal will soon be connected by two railway links while five railway links between India and Bangladesh, which existed before 1965, have been restored. He added that the Indian grid is already connected to Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. India supplies 1160 MW of power to Bangladesh, 700MW to Nepal and imports 1.8GW of power from Bhutan.

Bangladesh, India and Nepal have decided to move ahead on the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement (Bhutan is maintaining its opposition to the MVA) This was decided at a BBIN meeting of officials from the three countries held on March 7-8, 2022, in Delhi – the first to be held since the onset of the pandemic in February 2020. The officials also finalized the texts of two protocols on passenger and cargo movement with an "enabling" agreement. Bhutan sent an "observer team" led by an Embassy official to cover the meeting. Bhutan's position on the issue is that given the state of the county's current infrastructure, the top priority was to remain a carbon negative country, and therefore it would not be possible for Bhutan to join the MVA.

## COLOMBO SECURITY DIALOGUE

On March 10, 2022 India's NSA Ajit Doval, speaking at the fifth meeting of NSAs of the Colombo Security Conclave, said that the members of the grouping remain vulnerable to trafficking, organized crime, and maritime terrorism, particularly in the light of developments in Afghanistan. He described the meeting as an opportunity to "move forward in institutionalizing our cooperation with a concrete roadmap and a defined charter of objectives". He also recommended a meeting of the heads of coast guards and the creation of joint working groups on transnational organized crime, drug trafficking, cyber security and emerging technologies. India, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Mauritius are members of the Conclave and Bangladesh and Seychelles are Observers.

## SOUTH ASIA

### Bangladesh

Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Masud bin Momen visited India from February 23-25, 2022 and held talks with Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla<sup>52</sup>. Major areas identified for the two countries to work together on included economic and commercial ties, border management, counter terrorism, water sharing, connectivity and people to people contact. Momen requested India to facilitate early, safe and secure and sustainable repatriation of Rohingyas to Myanmar. Foreign Secretary Shringla welcomed the establishment of Bangladesh's new Deputy High Commission in Chennai and reiterated India's commitment to fast tracking projects undertaken by the lines of credit offered to Bangladesh. Noting that the COVID-19 situation had improved in the both countries, the two foreign secretaries discussed the resumption of bus and rail services between them.

Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla reviewed the progress of India-Bangladesh ties while speaking at an interaction with the Bangladesh delegation led by the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Shahriar Alam, at the 10<sup>th</sup> India-Bangladesh Friendship Dialogue organized by the India Foundation on February 21, 2022. He said that the effective management of the India-Bangladesh border was the key to facilitate economic ties and people to people contacts. Observing that two-way trade had crossed US \$ 2 billion, and progress had been made in enhancing connectivity, he called for more "focused and sustained efforts" in this direction.

US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland arrived in Dhaka on March 22, 2022, to lead the US delegation in the US – Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue. The topics that came up for discussion during the 90-

minute meeting included trade, investment, labor, human rights and governance, global threats including climate change, regional issues including the free and open Indo-Pacific Region and security cooperation. The US sanctions imposed on December 10, 2021, for human rights violations by Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion and several senior officers of the force also came up for discussion. Undersecretary Nuland called upon Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dr A K Abdul Momen during the visit.

The Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud visited Dhaka for political consultations with Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dr A. K. Abdul Momen on March 16, 2022. He also called upon Bangladesh Prime Minister Shiekh Hasina during the visit to Dhaka. Saudi Arabia is home to over two million Bangladeshi citizens, the largest source of oil imports, and has strongly supported the Rohingya cause in international forums. During the past few years, Riyadh has been requesting Dhaka to issue passports to 60,000 Rohingyas in Saudi Arabia. Potential areas of Saudi investment in Bangladesh identified during the discussions included energy (oil refineries and gas transmission), IT, agro-production, fertilizer production, renewable energy, aviation, port management and tourism and hospitality.

## **Bhutan**

Significant cost escalation and delays in the ongoing hydro- power projects in Bhutan have raised concerns as to whether Bhutan will be able to export electricity after commissioning the projects. This has also exerted pressure on Bhutan's national debt. Hydropower project debt constitutes 73% of the country's external debt. There are also concerns in Bhutan that while in India the power tariff rate is falling in Bhutan it is rising.

## **The Maldives**

EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar visited Maldives on March 27, 2022. While inaugurating the National College for Policing and Law Enforcement (MCPLE) in the Maldives' Addu City – one of the largest grant funded projects in the Maldives – in the presence of Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamad Solih, he lauded the bilateral partnership as one of great consequence and "a real force for stability" for the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

In addition to the inauguration of this academy, an MoU was signed between the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel National Police Academy (SVPNPA), and the Maldives Police Service.

The Maldives is a key maritime neighbor of India in the IOR and occupies a

special place in the Prime Minister Modi's vision of 'SAGAR' and the "Neighborhood First Policy."

Several projects being undertaken with Indian assistance in Addu City were also inaugurated on March 27, 2022. These included the ground breaking ceremony of a road construction project, the inauguration of a tourism zone and the 'Vilnu Drug Detoxification and Rehabilitation Centre'.

EAM Jaishankar characterized India's relationship with the Maldives as follows: "Our development partnership – which is transparent, and which is driven by the needs and priorities of the people and the government of Maldives – ranges upwards of \$2.6 billion in terms of grants, loans, budgetary support, capacity building and training assistance,"

India and the Maldives agreed on March 27, 2022, to mutually recognize the COVID-19 vaccine certificates issued by each other, a move that will facilitate easier travel between the two countries and give a boost to the tourism sector. Speaking at a joint press conference alongside Maldives Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid<sup>53</sup> after their talks, EAM Jaishankar also congratulated the Maldives for scripting a success story during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Maldives State Minister Khaleel met with US Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, Donald Lu on March 12, 2022, in Washington DC<sup>54</sup>. The two officials discussed the establishment of a resident US Embassy in Male, expanding cooperation in education and multilateral issues.

Maldives and the US signed the seventh amendment to their bilateral Development Objective Grant Agreement (DOAG). To date, the United States has provided Maldives US\$ 22.2 million in grant assistance under the DOAG. The seventh amendment commits an addition 3.2 million dollars to strengthen capacity to adapt to climate change, implement economic and democratic reforms and build a robust civil society.

## Nepal

In a significant and positive development for the future of Nepal's relations with the United States, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba of Nepal pulled off a coup of sorts, by sticking to the deadline of February 28 for the legislative passage of the MCC-Nepal Compact - as previously committed to the United States - and at the sametime saved his ruling coalition from breaking apart. The Compact had been pending before Parliament since July 2019. It was believed that the Chinese Government had been provoking the political opposition

to the agreement by arguing that it was part of the US Indo-Pacific Military Strategy. In fact, the Compact is aimed at assisting Nepal's energy and transportation sectors. It will finance the construction of 300 Km of high voltage transmission lines. The road maintenance project undertaken under the compact will lower transportation costs.

A Nepalese Government report<sup>55</sup> dated September 2021 accusing China of encroaching into Nepal's territory has been leaked. The report was apparently commissioned after an incident of trespass by the Chinese forces into Nepalese territory in Humla district. The report found that Chinese soldiers had threatened the Nepalese border police and restricted religious activities on the Nepalese side of the border in Lalungjong, while China was also building a fence around a border pillar in Kit Khola and attempting to construct a canal or a road on the Nepalese side of the border. The report is presently with the Nepalese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## Sri Lanka

External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr. S. Jaishankar visited Sri Lanka on March 28 and 29 for a bilateral visit and to participate in preparatory meetings for the BIMSTEC Summit. He met with Foreign Minister G.L.Pieris<sup>56</sup> on March 28, 2022, and discussed a number of issues including the economic recovery of the island nation, the development partnership between the two countries, mutual security, fishermen's issues, and coordination on international issues in multilateral forums.

Dr. S. Jaishankar conveyed to his host that the Indian system was working overtime to activate the recently finalized US \$ 1 billion Line of Credit for Sri Lanka. Apart from this, India has granted Sri Lanka a US \$ 400 million RBI currency swap and a US \$ 500 million loan deferment. He added that "recent bilateral agreements including those for private sector investment from India, had strengthened Sri Lanka's overall position". These include the joint development of the Trincomalee Oil Farms and the energy projects in the north and east to be set up by the NTPC and the Adani Group.



EAM Dr. S Jaishankar in discussion with President of Sri Lanka Gotabaya Rajapaksa, March 28, 2022. Source: Twitter/ DrSJaishankar

Dr. S. Jaishankar met with a delegation from the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) led by Mr R Sampanthan MP. The TNA briefed him on the latest developments in talks with the Sri Lankan Government. The issues discussed included the release of political prisoners, land utilization, missing persons, the implementation of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment and diaspora investment. Dr. Jaishankar welcomed these interactions and emphasized that the Government of India was consistently supportive of the realization of the aspirations of the Tamils of Sri Lanka for equality, justice, peace and dignity within the framework of a united Sri Lanka. The contribution of India's development partnership to the economic recovery of the North and East was also recognized at all the meetings.

India and Sri Lanka also agreed to set up a Maritime Rescue Coordination Center (MRCC) in Colombo. This initiative involves Bharat Electronics and a US \$ 6 million grant aid from India and will strengthen Defense Cooperation between the two countries.

EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar and Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa virtually inaugurated the Jaffna Cultural Center set up with grant aid from India. The two also witnessed the signing of an agreement supporting Buddhist culture and heritage.

India extended a line of credit worth US \$ 1 billion<sup>57</sup> to Sri Lanka on March 17, 2022, to enable Colombo to purchase food, medicines and other essential items to overcome its economic crisis. EAM Dr S Jaishankar, Finance Minister Dr Nirmala Sitharaman, and Sri Lanka Finance Minister Basil Rajapaksa were present at the signing ceremony. India has extended assistance worth US\$ 1.4 billion to Sri Lanka since January this year. Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse called on PM Modi during the visit. He briefed PM Modi on initiatives taken to boost economic cooperation between the two countries. PM Modi spoke about India's "Neighborhood First" policy and the "SAGAR" doctrine.

During bilateral talks between the two finance ministers, they set up short, medium and long-term goals for economic cooperation. Although India did not mention any specific conditions, several Indian projects have been given the green signal by the SLG in recent weeks. India is also requesting Sri Lanka to finalize two connectivity projects in Palaly and Kankesanthurai which will help the tourism industry. The two sides are also looking at resuming the ferry service between Thalaimannar in Sri Lanka and Rameshwaram in Tamil Nadu. India would also like the Jaffna International airport built with Indian assistance to resume flights. An MOU on the development of the Sankesanthurai harbor signed in 2018 has still to be implemented. On March 11, two Indian companies NTPC, and the Adani group, signed agreements to build power plants in Sri Lanka based on renewable energy sources.

India also wants Sri Lanka to implement in letter and spirit the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment of its Constitution on political devolution to the Tamil dominated north and east.

Sri Lanka has initiated the process of seeking financial support from the IMF on India's advice. Sri Lanka's Central Bank has tightened trade restrictions and floated the currency, effectively devaluing the Sri Lankan rupee.

## **SOUTH-EAST ASIA**

### **Cambodia**

Cambodia's Foreign Minister Prak Sokhon, announced to the media on March 9, 2022 that the US-ASEAN Summit which was proposed to be held in Washington DC on March 28 - 29, 2022 had been postponed<sup>58</sup> as some ASEAN leaders could not attend on the dates proposed. The US indicated on March 2, 2022, that it would follow the lead of the ASEAN by inviting a non-political representative from military ruled Myanmar to the US-ASEAN Summit. The Russia-Ukraine war, post pandemic economic recovery, the situation in

Myanmar and Indo-Pacific economic cooperation are likely to come up for discussion at the summit.

## Indonesia

The 2<sup>nd</sup> India-Indonesia Security Dialogue (IISD)<sup>59</sup> was held in Jakarta on March 17, 2022. The Dialogue was co-chaired by India's NSA Ajit K Doval, and Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, Mohammad Mehfud. Their talks covered current global and security issues, counter terrorism and violent extremism and enhancing maritime, defense and cyber security cooperation. An MOU for a Security Dialogue between the Indonesian Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal and Security Affairs and the NSCS of India was concluded.



India-Indonesia held 2<sup>nd</sup> Security Dialogue on March 17, 2022. Source: ANI

The crisis in Ukraine dominated discussions at a gathering of Finance Ministers from the world's G-20 economies that opened in Jakarta on February 17, 2022. President Joko Widodo of Indonesia urged G-20 nations to focus on collaboration to revive the global economy, which is still "shaken" from the pandemic. This, he said was not the time for rivalry.



Indonesia's decision to shift its capital from Jakarta to East Kalimantan has impacted the economic viability of the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project being undertaken by a consortium of Chinese companies. The project has already experienced delays and cost overruns (from a budgeted US \$ 5.5 billion to US\$ 7.9 billion).

Indonesia has 23.7% of the world's nickel ore reserves, and at 850,000 tonnes accounts for nearly a third of global output. In 2021 Chinese companies invested US \$ 4 billion in nickel mines located in Central Sulawesi, but are facing growing risks from an on-again, off-again export ban for the ore.

## Myanmar

ASEAN Special Envoy for Myanmar, Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn visited Myanmar from March 20 – 23, 2022. The visit aimed to create favorable conditions for an end to violence in Myanmar. Unlike his predecessor, the Foreign Minister of Brunei, he did not set any preconditions for the visit, with the agenda revolving around the 'five point of consensus' agreed to by the ASEAN leaders and the junta, including the immediate cessation of violence against civilians and a constructive dialogue involving all parties to the conflict.

## Laos

The China-Laos railway completed its hundredth day of operation on March 12, 2022<sup>60</sup>. During this period it carried 1.2 million tonnes of goods and 1.8 million passengers. The railway has significantly reduced transportation costs and transit time for shipments. According to a World Bank report the railway will reduce freight costs for shipments between Vientiane and Kunming by 40-50%.

China is strengthening energy cooperation with Laos, in order to address water and electricity shortages and to promote green development in both countries. China's National Energy Administration and the Ministry of Energy and Mines of Laos have signed an electricity agreement promoting grid interconnections between the two countries

## Australia

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, held a virtual summit on March 21, 2022<sup>61</sup>. The leaders reviewed progress made on various initiatives under the "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" between the two countries and committed to closer cooperation

in a number of areas including trade, critical minerals, migration and mobility, and education. Presently, the areas of bilateral cooperation include the COVID-19 pandemic, energy, science and technology, defense, cyber security, critical and strategic minerals, water resource management public administration and governance.

Expressing concern over the Russia-Ukraine conflict, India and Australia underlined the need for an immediate cessation of hostilities and stressed that the contemporary global order has been built on UN Charter, international law and respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. They agreed to be closely engaged on this issue and its broader implications for the Indo-Pacific.

The two leaders welcomed enhanced defense and maritime information sharing across the Indo-Pacific. They also underscored their commitment to the Quad and on advancing the Quad's agenda to promote regional stability and prosperity.

A number of documents were signed or announced after the Summit, including the establishment of annual summits, the establishment of an India-Australia young military officers exchange program, the return of artefacts by the Government of Australia, equalization of tax benefits for investments by sovereign and pension funds in either country, an MOU on a critical minerals project, a Letter of Intent regarding migration and mobility, a Letter of Arrangement for Mutual Recognition of Qualifications and an MOU of Cooperation between Prasar Bharti and the Special Broadcasting Service of Australia. The two countries also agreed to cooperate on funding for infrastructure and activities under the International Solar Alliance in the Pacific Island countries.

## WEST ASIA

### Saudi Arabia

On March 13, 2022, Iran temporarily suspended direct talks with Saudi Arabia without citing any reason. The announcement was made on the eve of the fifth round of talks hosted by Baghdad. The two countries severed diplomatic ties in 2016 after the Saudi Embassy in Tehran was stormed by protestors, following the execution of a prominent Shia religious leader by Saudi Arabia. Riyadh supported the "maximum pressure" campaign on Tehran, with harsh sanctions, initiated by President Donald Trump after his decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal. The two countries are also on the opposite sides of

the war in Yemen. However, the first round of secret talks between Riyadh and Tehran held in April 2020, had signaled a potential thaw.

## UAE

UAE Foreign Minister Shiekh Abdullah bin Zayed Ali Nahyan held talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow on March 17, 2022. The UAE FM told a Joint Press Conference "it is important to maintain the stability of energy and food markets".

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