



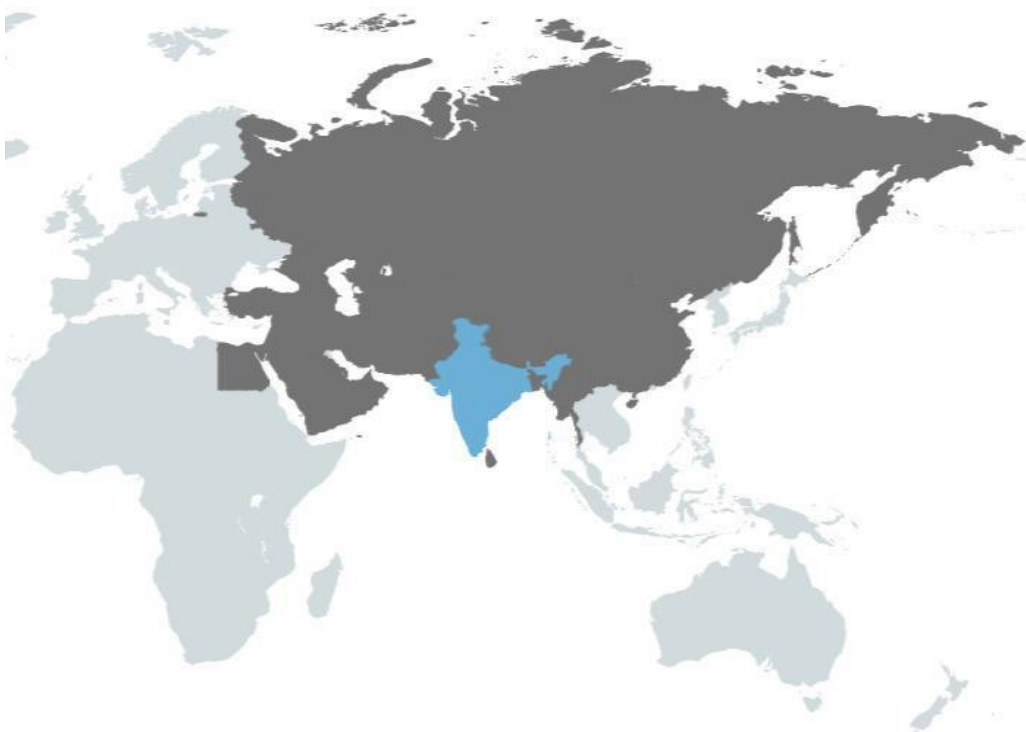
Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

APRIL 2022



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DPG India Strategic Review

Vol. III, Issue 4

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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 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. 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

Humanitarian Situation in Afghanistan

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, more than 24.4 million people in Afghanistan require humanitarian assistance to survive, including nine million who are in a state of emergency food insecurity.¹ On March 31, the U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres launched a High-level Pledging Event, 'Supporting the Humanitarian Response in Afghanistan.' In his address, he said that "People are already selling their children and their body parts, in order to feed their families. Afghanistan's economy has effectively collapsed."²

As against the U.N. appeal for \$4.4 billion, international donors pledged \$2.4 billion. This is certainly a significant amount but will not address the scale of the humanitarian crisis facing Afghanistan. The problem is exacerbated by the attention of the West toward the war in Ukraine. Even as U.S. President Joe Biden seeks Congress approval for \$ 33 billion for military, economic and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, the U.S. Government (Executive Order no. 14064) has renewed the blocking of Afghanistan central bank's foreign assets amounting to over US \$7 billion. The U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has called on the U.S. Government to take into serious consideration the growing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and to re-assess its decision to block the Afghanistan Bank's foreign assets.³ However, there is no indication that the U.S. will reassess its stand.

By the end of June, aid agencies estimate that 97% of the people in Afghanistan will be driven into extreme poverty unless immediate action is taken. A recent United Nations news report indicates that 95% of Afghans are not getting enough food. There are currently unprecedented levels of hunger and widespread food shortages across Afghanistan, with no signs of improvement.⁴

On April 3, the Taliban outlawed the cultivation of the opium poppy and other narcotics across Afghanistan. The country is the world's biggest opium producer, accounting for 85 percent of global production. According to the order announced by the Taliban Interior Ministry, "If anyone violates the

decree, the crop will be destroyed immediately, and the violator will be treated according to the Sharia law.”⁵

The UN Office on Drugs and Crimes Afghanistan Opium Survey 2021 reports that poppy is cultivated in 23 of the 34 districts of Afghanistan and the gross output of the Afghan illicit opiate economy is estimated to be \$1.8-\$2.7 billion.⁶ While the ban has been welcomed by the international community, it could seriously impact the income of small farmers who make five to six times more profit from opium poppy cultivation as compared to wheat or corn. With more than 95% of Afghans lacking enough food to eat, the ban could worsen the humanitarian crisis.

For now, the poppy farmers are reaping a windfall as the ban has resulted in a threefold increase in prices.⁷ Farmers currently working the fields in the provinces of Kandahar and Helmand say that despite the ban, Taliban officials have allowed them to continue cultivation for this season.⁸ The seriousness of the Taliban ban will be tested in the future.

Increasing Violence in Afghanistan

After a relative period of lull in terrorist activity within Afghanistan, the month of April saw a series of deadly attacks. On April 19, two bomb blasts at a boys' school in Kabul killed at least six people and wounded more than 20. The blasts occurred at the Abdul Rahim Shahid high school in the Shia-dominated west of the city.⁹



Medical staff move an injured person on a stretcher inside a hospital after two bomb blasts at a boys' school in a Shia Hazara neighbourhood in Kabul, April 19, 2022. Source: The Guardian

Two days later, four blasts rocked northern Afghanistan. The deadliest of these was in Mazar-i-Sharif at Seh Dokan, one of the biggest mosques used by the Hazara minority group, in which at least 31 people were killed, and 87 were wounded.¹⁰ One day later, on April 22, a bomb attack at a Sunni mosque in the city of Kunduz killed 33 people and injured 43 others, including children.¹¹

Although Taliban forces claimed to have arrested a suspected ISIS militant who planned the Mazar-i-Sharif Mosque attack, violence has continued. On April 28, two bomb blasts aboard different minibuses killed at least nine people in Mazar-i-Sharif. The targets were primarily Shiite passengers.¹²

On April 29, a blast tore through Friday worshippers at the Khalifa Sahib Mosque in Kabul killing more than 50 civilians. The attack came as people at the Sunni Mosque gathered after Friday prayers for a congregation known as Zikr – an act of remembrance practised by some Muslims but seen as heretical by several Sunni groups.¹³

While the attacks on the Shia/Hazara targets have been claimed by the Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K), the group has remained silent on the blasts at the Sunni mosques. However, this is primarily to avoid any condemnation by the majority community, and it is likely that these attacks have also been carried out by the ISIS-K.

In the past few months, the Taliban has been locked in a ruthless, no-holds-barred battle with the ISIS-K. In Nangarhar, there were reports that Taliban death squads are summarily executing ISIS-K suspects without trials.¹⁴ While many questions were raised on the Taliban's strategy, it had resulted in a significant reduction in ISIS-K attacks since November last year.¹⁵ The recent attacks in the month of Ramzan signal a resurgence of ISIS-K activities.

The spate of terror attacks by the ISIS-K is aimed at driving a sectarian conflict in Afghanistan and revealing the Taliban's inability to govern the country. There are other implications as well. Just as the TTP attacks have led to fissures emerging in relations with Pakistan, the ISIS-K targeting of the Shia community has raised deep concerns in Iran.

The Iranian permanent mission to the United Nations told Newsweek in a statement that "Iran is deeply concerned about the sharp rise in the number of terrorist activities in Afghanistan" due to "extremist forces embarking on racial and ethnic disparities in Afghanistan."¹⁶ For now, Iran is depending on the Taliban to safeguard the Shiite population. However, this could change if attacks continue and Iran is tempted to use proxy groups in Afghanistan, as it is doing in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

There are some reports that the ISIS-K has teamed up with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan IMU to destabilise some Central Asian neighbours. On April 19, the ISIS-K announced in a video that it had fired 10 rockets at a military base in Uzbekistan.¹⁷ While this incident was denied by the Uzbek government, there are concerns about the spillover of terrorism into the region. While most of the neighbours are maintaining a cautious stance, Pakistan appears to have lost patience and decided to hit back.

Tensions Escalate on the Pakistan-Afghanistan Border

Tensions along the Durand Line, the border separating Pakistan and Afghanistan, have been brewing since December last year when clashes broke out between the Pakistan Army and Taliban forces as the latter stopped the Pakistani military from erecting an "illegal" border fence along the eastern province of Nangarhar.¹⁸ Pakistan also accuses the Taliban of providing safe haven in Afghan territory to the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which has been carrying out attacks against the Pakistan Army.

A Taliban-sponsored ceasefire agreement between the TTP and the government collapsed in December 2021 and since then the TTP has ramped up attacks in Pakistan.¹⁹ Between 12 and 15 April, one officer and nine soldiers of the Pakistan army were killed in a series of terrorist attacks by the TTP in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.²⁰ On April 16, it was reported that the Pakistan military had carried out airstrikes in the eastern Afghanistan provinces of Kunar and Khost.²¹ Afghan officials claimed that 47 civilians, mostly women and children, had been killed in the air raids. Government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told journalists: "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan condemns in the strongest possible terms the bombardment and attack that has taken place from the Pakistan side on the soil of Afghanistan."²²

The Pakistan government has not commented on the airstrikes but on April 17, the Foreign Office issued a strongly worded statement asking the "sovereign government of Afghanistan to secure the Pak-Afghan border region and take stern action against the individuals involved in terrorist activities in Pakistan, in the interest of peace and progress of the two brotherly countries."²³ The statement added that "Terrorists are using Afghan soil with impunity to carry out activities inside Pakistan."

While there is no official word, officials speaking on the condition of anonymity claimed that military drones targeted TTP hideouts in Khost and Kunar provinces causing heavy casualties to the terrorist group.²⁴ This claim seems exaggerated, and it appears that civilian targets were hit. The UNICEF

Representative in Afghanistan has confirmed that at least 20 children had been killed in the attacks of April 16.²⁵



Demonstrators in Afghanistan's Khost province took to the streets to protest against Pakistani air raids along the border on April 16, 2022. Source: Al Jazeera

Despite the threat of facing military action, the TTP remains defiant and has warned Pakistan that their fighters are going to avenge the killing of innocent Afghans in airstrikes in the Khost and Kunar provinces of Afghanistan.²⁶ On April 23, one week after the airstrike, militants in Afghanistan fired heavy weapons across the border into a Pakistani military outpost, killing three personnel.²⁷

There is growing frustration within Pakistan over the increase in terrorist attacks and the failure of the Taliban to put a check on TTP activities. However, limited military action and verbal condemnation are unlikely to put sufficient pressure on the TTP. The Taliban takeover in Afghanistan has emboldened and strengthened the TTP who have also obtained sophisticated weaponry left behind during the withdrawal of U.S. forces.²⁸

With the Taliban unwilling to clamp down on the TTP, Pakistan may have little option but to continue targeting TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan. The Taliban has warned that military strikes could pave the "way for enmity between Afghanistan and Pakistan."²⁹ The Charge d'Affaires at Afghanistan's U.N.

mission lodged an official complaint with the Security Council over the airstrikes launched by Pakistan calling them an “aggression against territorial integrity” of Afghanistan.³⁰

While Pakistan remains an important partner for Afghanistan, the issue of terror activities from Afghan territory will put a significant strain on their bilateral ties and make both countries reassess the nature of their relationship.

PAKISTAN

A New Government in Pakistan

There was high drama on April 3, the day of a no-confidence vote against Imran Khan in the National Assembly. Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry claimed that a foreign conspiracy was behind the move to oust the government and the Deputy Speaker Qasim Khan Suri then dismissed the no-trust motion against Imran Khan, terming it against Article 5 of the Constitution.³¹ Shortly thereafter, Pakistan President Arif Alvi dissolved the National Assembly and called for fresh elections.³²

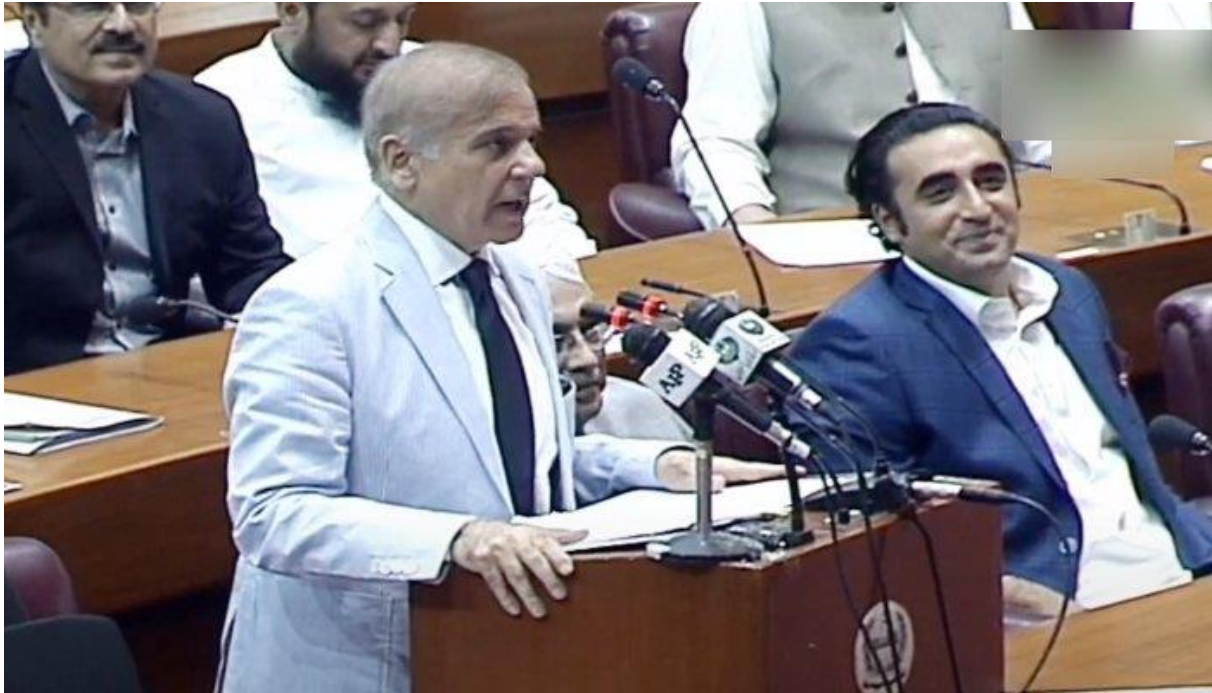
The matter then moved to the Pakistan Supreme Court, which ruled that both the deputy speaker's order disallowing the vote of no-confidence and the dissolution of the National Assembly, and the calling of early elections by the President, were unconstitutional. The judges restored the dissolved National Assembly and ordered the convening of a session on April 9 to conduct the vote of no-confidence.³³

In a televised address following the Supreme Court ruling, Imran Khan repeated his pet themes of foreign interference in the plot to remove him from power, and widespread corruption among the lawmakers. Khan alleged that it was the U.S. that wanted him removed due to his opposition to U.S. policies.³⁴ He praised India's "independent" foreign policy, saying no superpower had the courage to tell the neighbouring country to change its policy.³⁵

As was expected, opposition parties, whose ranks were strengthened by defections from the ruling PTI-led coalition, were able to secure 174 votes in the 342-member House. Imran Khan became the first sitting prime minister in the history of Pakistan to be removed from office through a no-confidence motion.

On April 11, Pakistan's opposition leader Shahbaz Sharif was elected the country's 23rd Prime Minister. A businessman and former chief minister of Pakistan's most populous Punjab province, Sharif has the reputation of being a

good administrator and an efficient ruler. However, many of his detractors accuse him of cronyism, environmental destruction, and corruption.³⁶



Newly elected Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif delivering his first speech at the National Assembly on April 11, 2022. Source: The News

Following several days of delay, Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's 34-member Cabinet was sworn in on April 19. Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz got 13 ministries, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari's Pakistan Peoples Party got nine, four went to Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl, and two to Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan. One Cabinet berth each was allocated to Balochistan Awami Party, Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid, and Jamhuri Watan Party.³⁷

The new government faces many challenges, the primary being the extremely fragile state of the Pakistan economy. Pakistan's current account deficit is projected at around 4% of GDP for the 2022 fiscal year while foreign reserves dropped to \$11.3 billion as of April 1, compared with \$16.2 billion less than a month earlier.³⁸ Pakistan has also sought an increase in the size and duration of its \$6 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) support package that had been agreed upon in 2019 but had been slowed down several times because of IMF conditions related to monetary policy and fiscal tightening measures.³⁹

The country remains deeply polarised. Pakistan President Arif Alvi refused to administer oaths to the federal cabinet members, leaving the duties to Senate chairman Sadiq Sanjrani.⁴⁰ PTI lawmakers viciously attacked the deputy speaker Dost Mohammad Mazari in the Punjab Assembly when he arrived to chair the session convened to elect the new chief minister.⁴¹ The Punjab

Governor, Omar Sarfraz Cheema, refused to administer the oath to the Chief Minister-elect Hamza Shehbaz. The matter was only resolved only after a two-week delay with the intervention of the Lahore High Court.⁴²

Another area that will be carefully watched is the trend of bilateral relations between India and Pakistan, which had worsened during Imran Khan's tenure.

Prospects of Improved India-Pakistan Relations

India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, congratulated Shehbaz Sharif on his election as the Prime Minister stating that "India desires peace and stability in a region free of terror, so that we can focus on our development challenges and ensure the well-being and prosperity of our people." Shehbaz thanked Modi and tweeted: "Pakistan desires peaceful & cooperative ties with India. Peaceful settlement of outstanding disputes including Jammu & Kashmir is indispensable. Pakistan's sacrifices in fighting terrorism are well-known. Let's secure peace and focus on socio-economic development of our people."⁴³

Can these words of the two leaders be translated into improving bilateral relations? Three factors will help make a realistic assessment. The first is that the current Pak government's term expires by August 2023, and it will be in the election mode after a few months. The priority for the new government will be to improve the state of the economy and show visible progress in that direction. The public sentiment in both countries is largely negative about each other, and in the coming election year in Pakistan, this factor could be hard to ignore.

Second, Kashmir still remains a stumbling block. While India has made it clear that Kashmir is purely an internal matter, Pakistan continues to bring this up as a core issue. In his maiden speech after coming to power, Shehbaz said: "We desire good relations with India but there cannot be lasting peace till an equitable resolution of the Kashmir issue."⁴⁴

After Prime Minister Modi visited Jammu and Kashmir on April 24, the Pakistan Foreign Office termed the visit as "yet another ploy to project fake normalcy" in the Valley. The statement said: "Since 5 August 2019, the international community has witnessed many such desperate attempts by India to divert attention from the actual underlying issues in Kashmir."⁴⁵ The Indian Ministry of External Affairs responded by stating that "Pakistan has no locus" to talk about the visit.⁴⁶ Unless Pakistan is willing to revisit its position on Kashmir, normalisation of relations is unlikely.

The third factor is the Pakistan Army's support to terror activities in India. Pakistan Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, has been talking about the

need for stable India-Pakistan relations and a focus on geoeconomics. The ceasefire along the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir has completed more than one year and is holding.

Despite these few positive indicators, distrust remains about the long-term intentions of the Pakistan Army. The first four months of 2022 have seen 62 militants killed in the Kashmir Valley since the beginning of the year as compared to 37 killed in the same period of 2021. 15 of the 62 killed were 'foreign' terrorists. In contrast, there were no foreign terrorists killed in the first four months of 2021.⁴⁷ Commenting on this data, a senior officer of India's security establishment said that Pakistan has been "pushing terrorists in the Valley since mid-2021. In fact, there is suspicion that most of the foreign terrorists being killed now infiltrated last year."

Each time there is a change in leadership in Pakistan, hopes are expressed of a turnaround in relations but progress towards normalisation remains elusive.

A Worsening Internal Security Situation

Apart from the increase in attacks by the TTP along the Durand Line, ISIS-K and Baloch insurgents have also stepped up their activity in Pakistan. According to data from the South Asian Terrorism Portal, in the first three and a half months of 2022, there have been 366 terrorism-related deaths in Pakistan, including 123 security force personnel.⁴⁸ This is more than half the total deaths reported in 2021.

On March 4, an ISIS-K suicide bomber struck a Shiite Mosque in Peshawar killing at least 64 people and wounding scores of others. This was the deadliest assault in nearly four years in Pakistan. A week later another ISIS-K suicide bomber struck along the route of President Arif Alvi's motorcade in the Sibi town of Baluchistan, claiming the lives of six security personnel and leaving 22 others, including 19 law enforcement officers, injured.⁴⁹

On April 26, a van carrying staff members was about to enter the Confucius Institute at the University of Karachi, when a woman standing nearby detonated a bomb that she was carrying in a bag. Among the four dead in the attack, three were Chinese nationals, including the director of the Confucius Institute.⁵⁰ The bomber was identified as Shari Baloch, a primary school teacher holding an M.Phil. degree, and a mother of two.⁵¹



Officials at the site of blast, Karachi University, April 26, 2022. Source: Dawn

The attack was claimed by the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), which said in an email: "Targeting director and officials of Confucius institute, the symbol of Chinese economic, cultural and political expansionism, was to give a clear message to China that its direct or indirect presence in Balochistan will not be tolerated." The BLA also claimed that hundreds of its "highly-trained male and female members" are ready to carry out "harsher" attacks in future.⁵²

Since the beginning of this year, Baloch insurgents have carried out several high-profile attacks including a bomb explosion at Lahore's Anarkali market and the killing of ten Pakistani soldiers in Balochistan's Kech district. However, the current targeting of Chinese citizens not only has security implications but could jeopardise ongoing projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The uptick in violence can be attributed to many reasons. The government has refused to deal strongly with extremist groups like the outlawed Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). This has provided space for sectarian conflict and for ISIS-K to take root. The Baloch insurgency has been kept alive due to resentment caused by the brutal methods adopted by the Pakistani security agencies. There are numerous reported cases of human rights violations including enforced disappearance, extra-judicial killings, and torture. Unless these underlying causes are addressed by the government, ongoing violence will extract both a political and economic cost.

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

The ongoing military impasse at the LAC in Ladakh is now entering its third year. A look at what has transpired in the last two years could perhaps provide some pointers to the prospects ahead.

Looking Back

The sudden Chinese military buildup in Eastern Ladakh and attempts to breach the LAC in May 2020 led to the bloodiest clash between the Indian Army and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) since the conflict at Nathu La in 1967. 20 Indian officers and soldiers and an unspecified number of PLA personnel lost their lives in the Galwan Valley clash on June 15, 2020. To counter the PLA buildup, the Indian Army mobilised approximately 50,000 additional troops into Ladakh.⁵³

In a swift offensive move in August 2020, the Indian Army occupied heights along the Kailash Range overlooking some important PLA positions. This military pressure, coupled with the meetings between the Indian and Chinese Foreign and Defence Ministers in Moscow in September 2020, led to a partial disengagement of the two armies along the north and south banks of the Pangong Tso in February 2021. In August 2021, both sides agreed to move back to their permanent bases at Gogra.

Thereafter, there has been no progress on further disengagement and three areas of contention remain in focus – Hot Springs, Depsang, and Demchok. India has been insisting on the restoration of the status quo ante, as it existed in April 2020. The newly appointed Army Chief General Manoj Pande has categorically stated: "Indian Army troops are holding important physical positions [along the LAC] and in all this, we are very clear that we will not permit any change in status quo and any loss of territory."⁵⁴

In the last two years, both sides have been rapidly carrying out infrastructure development to enhance operational readiness. With the construction of infrastructure to support the additional soldiers that were mobilised in 2020, the problems associated with sustaining large forces in the high-altitude areas have been mitigated. Thus, there is little pressure on both sides to scale down their deployments along the LAC.

Looking Ahead

The press release issued after the 15th round of the India-China Corps Commander Level Meeting held on March 11 stated that both sides had "agreed

to maintain dialogue via military and diplomatic channels to reach a mutually acceptable resolution of the remaining issues at the earliest.”⁵⁵ While the dialogue is continuing, the resolution is unlikely to come soon, even if there is some limited disengagement.

India and China view the LAC standoff from different perspectives. India has stated very clearly that the situation at the LAC has an adverse impact on the larger bilateral relations, while China continues to insist that overall relations must be insulated from what is happening at the LAC. If China continues to take this position, no meaningful resolution can be arrived at.

With the breakdown of existing Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) due to PLA actions, there is deep mistrust on the Indian side. Even if some disengagement takes place in the future, the LAC will continue to be manned with much larger strength as compared to pre-2020 force levels. More vigilant behaviour can be expected from forward-deployed troops to ensure the sanctity of the LAC.

As further meetings take place, there could be limited progress on withdrawal by the PLA at some friction points. However, it is unlikely that the LAC would see a return to the ‘peace and tranquillity’ that existed prior to China's aggression in Ladakh in 2020.

Instability, Connectivity and Non-Traditional Security Issues

by

Amb. Biren Nanda

SOUTH ASIA

Bangladesh

Addressing the “Global Business Summit” in Kolkata on April 19, Bangladesh Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi said that Dhaka wishes to wrap up the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with India within the next year. He added that Bangladesh would also be interested in a BIMSTEC Free Trade pact. Bangladesh will soon graduate from the status of an LDC as per UN norms, and will not be eligible for many trade benefits it currently enjoys as a LDC.

Rising prices of food and other commodities have become a subject of increasing concern in Bangladesh, with the Government linking this to instability in the global market.

Bangladesh's forex reserves have declined from a level of 8.31 months of imports in August 2021 to 6.44 months in February 2022. Bangladesh could face difficulties if this coverage capacity declines to 3-4 months. An economic slowdown in Europe is likely to impact Bangladesh's exports. The country's Central Bank is trying to limit the import of luxury goods and encourage expatriate Bangladeshis to invest in the government's dollar denominated bonds.

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

India's Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Hari Kumar paid a three day visit to the Maldives from April 18-20, 2022. He called on President of the Maldives Ibrahim Mohamad Solih, Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid the Defense Minister Mariya

Ahmed, and Chief of Defense Force (CDF) Major General Abdulla Shamaal. During the visit, he unveiled the first navigation chart jointly produced by India and the Maldives and handed over hydrography equipment to consolidate the capabilities of the Maldives National Defense Force.(MNDF)



In his first overseas visit after assuming the office of the Chief of Naval Staff (CNS), Admiral R Hari Kumar visited Maldives from 18 to 20 April 2022 where he was called on HE Mr Ibrahim Mohamad Solih, President of the Republic of Maldives. Source: Indian Navy

The Navy chief also visited MNDF maritime assets and complemented the MNDF and the Indian Navy for maintaining the seaworthiness of these assets. He presented a consignment of engineering equipment to the MNDF in order to strengthen its capacity for maintenance and repairs. India has submitted a "Detailed Project Report" for a new coast guard harbor and dockyard, which is under review by the Maldives' Defense Ministry. India is also assisting the Maldives in the maintenance and repair of the MNDF Coast Guard Fleet.

Nepal

Nepalese Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba paid an official visit to India from April 1-3, 2022. The two Prime Ministers reviewed the progress of bilateral relations across the political, economic, energy security and developmental domains. External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar, and NSA Shri Ajit Doval, called on Prime Minister Deuba.

The two Prime Ministers jointly inaugurated the 90 KM long 132 KVDC Solu Corridor Transmission line and substation built under an Indian line of credit. PM Deuba invited greater participation of Indian Companies in Nepal's hydropower development projects. PM Modi welcomed Nepal's decision to join the International Solar Alliance. The two Prime Ministers inaugurated the first cross border rail link between Jayanagar in India and Kurtha in Nepal and reviewed the progress of other cross border railway link projects currently being built with Indian grant assistance. Major projects being undertaken with Indian assistance include the National Police Academy and integrated check posts at Nepalgunj and Bhairahawa. India will reportedly inaugurate 75 development projects in Nepal this year. The extension of the Indian RuPay card to Nepal was jointly inaugurated by the two prime ministers during the visit.

India and Nepal have signed an enabling long-term agreement for the supply of fertilizers to Nepal, which is currently suffering from a fertilizer shortage. Under the agreement, Nepal will import 210,000 metric tonnes of fertilizer from India annually. The two countries are also working on building a tourism circuit that connects pilgrimage sites located in the two countries.

On the lingering border dispute in the Kalapani area of the border, PM Deuba sought its resolution through a bilateral mechanism, while India on its part urged Nepal not to "politicize" the issue.



Delegation level talks led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister of Nepal Sher Bahadur Deuba held on April 2, 2022. Source: flickr/MEAIndia

Meanwhile, China is pursuing a Nepal-China Railway Project (CNR) and has offered financial assistance for a feasibility study. A technical study of the proposed 121 Km railway was conducted by the China Railway First Survey and Design Institute (CRFSDI) in 2018. The CRO had estimated that the project would cost US\$ 4.7 billion and would take nine years to complete the Keyrong-Kathmandu rail link. This is roughly equivalent to Nepal's total government revenue in 2018. During the visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Nepal (March 25-27, 2022) the Nepalese PM reportedly indicated that Nepal was not interested in Chinese loans and requested for grant assistance.

Sri Lanka

On March 16, 2022, the Secretary to the Ministry of Defense in Sri Lanka and a representative of the Indian High Commission signed two Defense pacts related to the supply by India to Sri Lanka, "at no cost," of a floating dock facility and a Dornier reconnaissance aircraft.

Sri Lankan Foreign Minister G.L.Peiris told reporters on April 20, 2022, that India will provide an additional US\$ 500 million in financial assistance to Sri Lanka to buy fuel. He added that Bangladesh was also willing to postpone US\$450 million in currency swap repayments.

India and Sri Lanka have resumed talks on linking their electricity grids.

SOUTH-EAST ASIA

ASEAN

India is in discussions with ASEAN countries for initiating a review of the India-ASEAN FTA to seek greater market access for domestic products.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai and Myanmar Foreign Minister U Wunna Maung Lwin on April 1, 2022 and Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi on April 2, 2022 in Tunxi, Anhui Province of China. The meetings involved discussions on bilateral issues, coordination over hotspots including Ukraine, and clearing the air on media allegations about China's role in the postponement of the US-ASEAN Summit. Wang and Marsudi also discussed the G-20 Summit. Marsudi reportedly conveyed that Indonesia would hold the G-20 Summit impartially and resist calls to exclude Russia.

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 postponed⁵⁶ 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 Indonesian and the US militaries are expanding their annual bilateral exercises to include 14 countries. Troops from the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Canada will join "Garuda Shield 2022" from August 1-14, 2022.

Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines are considering the expansion of the Sulu Trilateral patrols. On March 28, 2022, the three countries held an in-person TCA Ministerial- the first since the pandemic began. A press release issued by the Indonesian Defense Ministry stated that all sides had agreed to speed up the implementation of the trilateral maritime exercises in areas of mutual concern; to strengthen intelligence sharing; to facilitate future TCA intelligence operations; and to expedite the deployment of trilateral maritime patrol liaison officers to designated maritime command centers in the three countries.

On April 19, 2022, US Treasury Secretary, Janet Yellen told the visiting Indonesian Finance Minister, Sri Mulyani Indrawati, during a meeting in Washington DC that there could be "no business as usual" for Russia in the global economy given its invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, she assured the Indonesian Finance Minister that the US would continue to work with Indonesia to advance G-20 preparations, including addressing the negative impact of Russia's invasion on the global economy. Meanwhile there are reports that the Indonesian State Energy firm Pertamina is mulling the purchase of Russian oil to take advantage of the declining prices of Russian crude.

Singapore

The Indian Chief of Army Staff (COAS) , General Manoj Mukul Naravane paid an official visit to Singapore from April 4-6, 2022. During his call on Singapore

Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen on April 5, 2022, both sides reaffirmed the strong and long-standing Defense relationship between the two countries. They also discussed regional geopolitical developments. COAS also held talks with Singapore's Chief of Army, Brig Gen David Neo. Gen Navarane visited the infantry gunnery school and tactical simulator at the Pasir Laba Camp and the Changi Regional HADR Coordination Centre and Information Fusion Office at the Changi Naval base. Finally, he delivered an address on "India's Strategic Perspective" at the Goh Keng Swee Command. General Navarane's visit underscored the strong and longstanding bilateral Defense Relations between Singapore and India.



COAS General MM Naravane visited the Regional HADR Coordination Centre & Information Fusion Centre at Singapore where he was briefed about the Coordination of a Multi-Nation HADR Response Mechanism & measures to enhance Maritime Security, April 6, 2022.

Source: Twitter/@adgpi

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsein Loong paid an eight-day working visit to the US from March 26 to April 2, 2022. He called on President Biden on March 29, 2022. The two leaders pledged themselves to uphold a "rules-based order" that they said was under unprecedented attack. They condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine – Singapore is the only Southeast Asian nation to impose sanctions on Russia since the invasion- and stressed the importance of the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. They upheld the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity and the right of nations to determine their

future free from violence and intimidation. Biden and Lee expressed their concern on the situation in Myanmar and called for the urgent implementation of the "ASEAN five point consensus" and Myanmar's return to its path of democratic transition. Lee also met with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen.

On April 11, 2022, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsein Loong warned the US against isolating China over the war in Ukraine by framing it as a battle between democracies and autocracies, which would complicate an already fraught relationship between the US and China. "You have to be very careful not to define the problem in Ukraine in such a way that automatically China is on the wrong side of the table," Lee said in comments published by his office on April 10, 2022.

Myanmar

Noeleen Heyzer, the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy on Myanmar met with the Cambodian Foreign Minister and ASEAN's Special Envoy to Myanmar, Prak Sokhonn in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on March 30, 2022. The Cambodian FM briefed Heyzer on his visit to Myanmar from March 20-23, 2022. The visit was aimed at creating favorable conditions for the end of the violence in Myanmar, encouraging dialogue amongst the parties concerned and coordinating the delivery of humanitarian aid. He told Heyzer that he planned a consultative meeting on humanitarian assistance to Myanmar, and shared his assessment that different political actors in Myanmar were not ready for talks and were determined to continue their struggle.

On March 25, 2022, the United States announced new sanctions against Myanmar for atrocities against civilians since the military coup. The measures came days after the US concluded that Myanmar's military had committed genocide against the mostly Muslim Rohingya minority. The sanctions apply to two generals and all ranks of the 666th light infantry division, which has been accused of carrying out a massacre against civilians in December 2021.

With BIMSTEC countries inviting Myanmar to participate in the BIMSTEC Summit – its first Summit in four years – the United States issued a demarche to India urging the grouping to isolate Myanmar diplomatically and follow the ASEAN model of only "non-political" involvement. During the BIMSTEC Summit held on March 30, 2022, all countries were represented by heads of Government except Myanmar which was represented at the level of Foreign Minister.

Thailand

The sixth round of Foreign Office Consultations between India and Thailand was held on April 21, 2022, in New Delhi. The issues discussed during the meeting included political relations, defense and security, economic and commercial, cultural, science and technology, tourism, post COVID economic recovery and people-to-people ties. The two sides agreed to improve connectivity, including the early operationalization of the India- Myanmar- Thailand Trilateral Highway project and greater port linkages.

WEST ASIA

Saudi Arabia

India and France for the first time held wide ranging discussions on major issues – including the political, security, economic and trade dimensions - related to the West Asia and North Africa regions. Both sides agreed to further strengthen their cooperation in the region and to continue the discussions periodically.

MULTILATERAL

Speaking at a UNSC meeting on April 4, India's Permanent Representative to the UN, T. S. Tirumurti, called reports coming out of Bucha deeply disturbing and said that India unequivocally condemned civilian killings and supported the call for an independent investigation. He also called for safe passage for humanitarian and medical supplies, and said that the Russia Ukraine conflict had caused an increase in food and energy costs, which had adverse consequences for developing countries.

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