



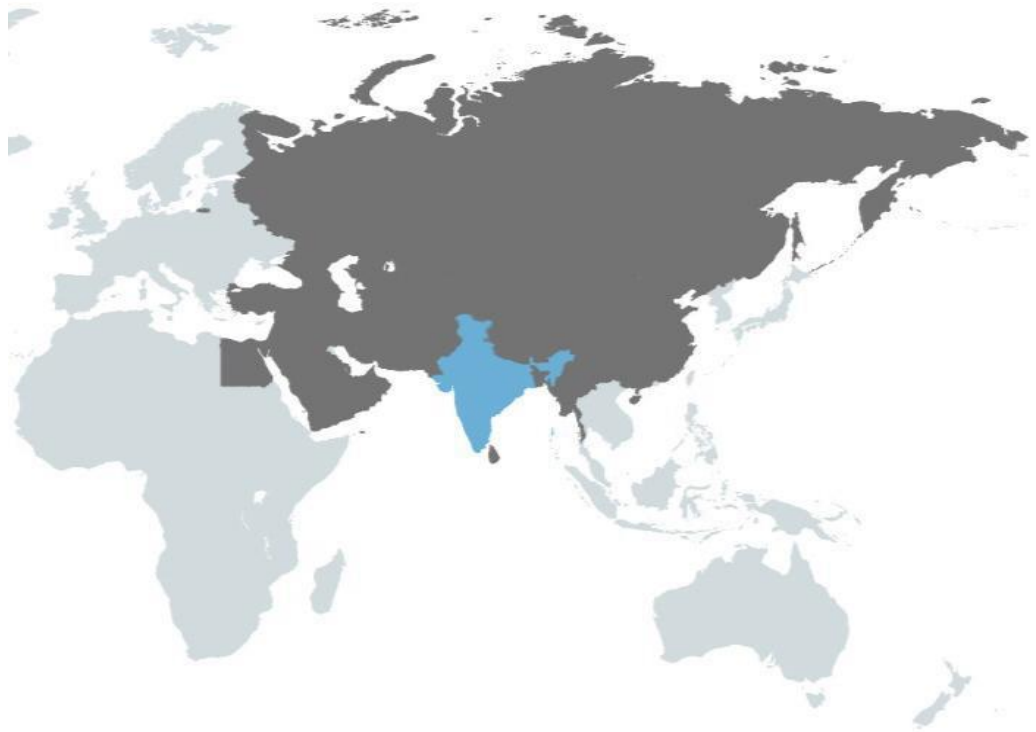
**Delhi Policy Group**

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



# INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

## SEPTEMBER 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

#### Economic and Humanitarian Crisis

The massive humanitarian crisis looks sure to worsen as the people of Afghanistan face another harsh winter season under Taliban rule. Millions of Afghans are on the brink of starvation, 19 million people are facing acute food insecurity, 25 million are in poverty, and 5.8 million people are in protracted internal displacement.<sup>1</sup>

According to a World Food Programme (WFP) report on the future outlook, the number of people expected to face acute food insecurity up to November has risen significantly. An additional 4.3 million people are now facing Crisis levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3), while over 2.4 million more are estimated in Emergency (IPC Phase 4) compared to the same period in 2021. The continuing drought in many parts of the country is projected to extend into a third-consecutive year – something that has not happened in the last 20 years.<sup>2</sup>

The devastating floods in Pakistan have exacerbated the food crisis. Much of the food assistance to Afghanistan passes through Pakistan, where the road network has been severely damaged due to floods. WFP Pakistan director Chris Kaye told reporters that the WFP procured over 320,000 metric tons of food last year to support operations in Afghanistan, but the floods in Pakistan have put a "huge dent" in the organization's capability to deliver that aid to intended recipients.<sup>3</sup>

Delivery of humanitarian assistance is also hindered by the economic situation in Afghanistan. The banking system has seized up, and ordinary people are unable to access their accounts. The World Bank has projected a decline in real GDP by one-third between the end of 2020 and the end of 2022. A recent survey by Save the Children estimated that half of Afghanistan's families had put children to work to keep food on the table.<sup>4</sup> These children are working in extremely harsh conditions in brick kilns and illegal gold mines.

After months of conversations, the U.S. announced that it would transfer \$3.5bn in Afghan central bank assets – half of the reserves seized after the Taliban

came into power - into a Swiss-based trust fund to be used "for the benefit of the people of Afghanistan."<sup>5</sup> U.S. State Department spokesperson Ned Price said, "This fund will protect and preserve the Afghan central bank reserves while making targeted disbursements to help stabilise Afghanistan's economy and ultimately support its people and work to alleviate the worst effects of the humanitarian crisis."

The Taliban Foreign Affairs Ministry denounced the U.S. announcement, calling it "unacceptable" and a "violation of international norms" and said, "If the reserves are disbursed without taking into consideration legitimate demands of the Afghans, the Islamic Emirate will be forced to impose fines against, and ban activities of, all individuals, institutions and companies that facilitate this illegal venture and seek to misuse the central bank reserves for humanitarian and other purposes."<sup>6</sup>

While the release of funds provides some hope to the Afghan people, there is also skepticism in some quarters. Omar Joya, an economist formerly with the World Bank and Afghanistan's central bank, stated that transferring the reserves would not help much with the ongoing economic crisis. "On the contrary, it will further support the Taliban leaders by easing fiscal pressures and providing them with windfall gains. Nothing will change for the poor."<sup>7</sup>

The U.S. decision to set up the Afghan Fund could also release pressure on the Taliban to do more to improve the human rights situation, particularly the treatment of women and girls. Schools for girls above Grade 6 remain shut, and a few that had opened in Paktia province in early September were closed within a few days.<sup>8</sup> As long as international aid continues to flow in, the Taliban find little reason to relent on women's rights.

### **Strains in Afghan-Pakistan Ties**

The initial euphoria in Pakistan over the Taliban victory is waning as tensions surface over several troubling issues. The first is the fencing being carried out by Pakistan along the Durand Line, a border that the Afghan government does not recognise. On September 13, there were fresh clashes between the Taliban and Pakistan Army in Paktia province. The Taliban accused the Pakistan Army of attempting to build an outpost near the Durand Line, which led to the firing.

On the other hand, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) stated that three Pakistani soldiers were killed in firing by "terrorists from inside Afghanistan" and condemned "the use of Afghan soil by terrorists for activities against Pakistan." Till May 1 this year, there have been around 40 clashes along the Durand Line, most of which pertain to the border dispute.<sup>9</sup>

The issue of terrorist groups in Afghanistan continues to plague bilateral relations. Pakistan accuses the Taliban of sheltering the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), who are responsible for most of the terrorist attacks in Pakistan. Despite an ongoing ceasefire between the Pakistan government and the TTP, the group has continued with its attacks, particularly in the area of North Waziristan.

There are also some reports that the TTP cadre are returning to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and engaging in large-scale extortion. Murad Saeed, a PTI leader representing Swat, recently criticised the Pakistani military for conducting inconclusive and opaque talks with the TTP, failing to prevent the return of TTP militants to the province, and not taking the threat posed by their return seriously.<sup>10</sup> The Pakistan military, however, continues to insist that the TTP has its bases in Afghanistan, where it returns after carrying out its attacks.

A war of words erupted between Pakistan and Afghanistan over the location of the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) chief Masood Azhar. On September 13, Geo News channel quoted an unnamed Pakistani official as saying that the Pakistani side has written a letter to the Taliban's foreign ministry asking authorities in Afghanistan to locate and arrest Azhar. The letter states that Pakistani authorities believe Azhar is "hiding somewhere in Afghanistan," most probably in Nangarhar province or Kunar province of Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup>

The Taliban government reacted sharply. Taliban Spokesperson Abdul Qahar Balkhi tweeted that the regime "rejects media reports asserting that Jaish-e-Mohammed group leader, Masood Azhar, has sought refuge in Afghanistan." Addressing Pakistan, Balkhi added, "We also call on all parties to refrain from such allegations lacking any proof and documentation. Such media allegations can adversely affect bilateral relations."<sup>12</sup>

In his remarks at the 77th United Nations General Assembly on September 23, Pakistan Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif said that "Pakistan shares the key concern of the international community regarding the threat posed by the major terrorist groups operating from Afghanistan especially ISIS-K and Tahreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, as well as al-Qaeda, ETIM and IMU."<sup>13</sup>

Sharif's comments sparked a fresh row with the Taliban demanding an unconditional apology from the Pakistan Prime minister. A top Taliban leader said, "Our personal friend Shahbaz Sharif told the whole world at the UN that Afghanistan is a safe haven for terrorists, that Afghanistan is a great threat to the world. This is nothing but humiliation. Pakistan should issue an unconditional apology."<sup>14</sup>



Pakistan's hopes that the Taliban would take directions from Islamabad are not materialising. The clash between Pakistani and Afghani fans at the Asia Cup cricket match in Sharjah, and the insulting social media war that followed is reflective of the current trends in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

### Internal Strife in Afghanistan

On September 5, the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing at the entrance of the Russian mission, which killed eight people, including two embassy staffers.<sup>15</sup> This followed an explosion in a mosque in Herat on September 2 that killed 18 people, including a leading pro-Taliban cleric, and injured at least 21 people. A car bomb exploded near the Wazir Akbar Khan mosque in Kabul after Friday prayers on September 23, killing at least seven people and leaving 41 injured.<sup>16</sup> On September 30, a suicide attack occurred at the Kaaj tutoring center in Dasht-e-Barchi, a western Kabul neighborhood home to the Afghan minority Shia Hazara community. The powerful blast killed at least 53 people, including 46 girls and women, and wounded more than 110 others.<sup>17</sup>



The wounded shifted to hospital aftermath suicide attack on tutoring center in Dasht-e-Barchi, September 30, 2022. Source: Hindustan Times

These attacks are meant to show that the Taliban is not in a position to provide security to either its citizens or foreign nationals. Moreover, in a huge embarrassment to the Taliban, the attack on the Russian mission came shortly after Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid declared that the ISIS-K had been

contained and specifically assured Russia that it faces no threat from Afghan territory.<sup>18</sup>

Even as the Taliban struggle to control the ISIS-K, they are locked into an insurgency in northeastern Afghanistan against the National Resistance Front (NRF). On September 13, the Taliban claimed that they had killed at least 40 NRF fighters. However, videos later emerged showing two groups of men from the NRF squatting on a hillside with their hands tied behind their backs before being shot with automatic rifles by Taliban fighters.<sup>19</sup>

Although the NRF has not achieved any significant success, they are holding the Taliban at bay. Local Taliban forces in Panjshir and Baghlan provinces come from a variety of different backgrounds and include local Tajik Taliban units from Panjshir Province and neighboring Badakhshan Province. It has been reported that the Tajik Taliban forces appear to be increasingly unwilling to fight the NRF. If more Pashtun Taliban fighters are inducted to fight the NRF, it could exacerbate the pre-existing inter-ethnic tensions and worsen cooperation between Pashtun and Tajik Taliban fighters.<sup>20</sup>

## PAKISTAN

### Pakistan Floods

Unusually heavy rains from mid-June to September resulted in the worst floods in Pakistan's history. While floodwaters are receding in many areas, large parts of Sindh and eastern Balochistan will likely remain underwater for several months. More than 1600 people have died in the floods that left one-third of the country submerged. Around 33 million people have been affected, of which more than 7.9 million have been displaced.

The number of damaged and destroyed houses exceeds 2 million, more than 1 million livestock have been lost, and 13,000 km of roads have been damaged. With the scale of damage, flood relief activities in Pakistan are likely to continue for the next two years.<sup>21</sup> The standing floodwater is resulting in an increase in water-borne diseases, unsanitary conditions, and rising malnutrition rates. Cases of watery diarrhoea, typhoid, and malaria are a growing concern, with many people living in unsanitary conditions in temporary shelters.<sup>22</sup>

The flood damages are estimated at \$30 billion, putting enormous pressure on an already fragile economy. Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves currently stand at about \$8.6 billion, only enough for about a month of imports. Islamabad owes around \$100 billion to external debtors, including China, to whom it owes \$30 billion.<sup>23</sup> The U.N. Development Programme has instructed



Pakistan's debtors to suspend or restructure repayments. While the U.S. has agreed to suspend service payments on \$132 million of Pakistan's debt, Beijing is yet to respond directly to the request.

Amidst the economic crisis, Pakistan's Finance Minister Miftah Ismail resigned after an alleged conversation between top ruling party leaders surfaced on social media. One of the audio clips featured a conversation between the ruling party's Vice President Maryam Nawaz and Premier Shehbaz Sharif about Ismail, wherein a voice thought to be of Maryam says Miftah Ismail "doesn't know what he is doing."<sup>24</sup>

Even as Pakistan was battling the floods, a 15-member team of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) quietly concluded a five-day visit to the country. The findings of the team will be discussed and reviewed in the next meeting of FATF, scheduled in Paris in October.<sup>25</sup> If Pakistan is found compliant with the FATF action plan, it could exit the grey list on which it was placed in June 2018.

## Political Developments

An arrest warrant was issued against Imran Khan on September 30 in a case filed against him for his controversial remarks against Additional District and Sessions Judge Zeba Chaudhry and police officers during a public rally in Islamabad. As the news spread, PTI workers started congregating at Imran's Bani Gala residence and also gathered in different cities of the country to warn the government against arresting their leader.<sup>26</sup>

Imran's rallies continue to gather huge crowds showing that he remains a dominant political force. He is putting pressure on the government on various issues, from the economy to national security, and calling for early general elections.

In a rally in Faisalabad, Imran accused the government of delaying fresh national elections to appoint "a new army chief of their own choice" to protect their alleged corrupt practices and ill-gotten wealth. The Pakistan Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, is due to retire in November. A spokesman for the armed forces said the military "is aghast at the defamatory and uncalled for statement" and the attempt "to discredit and undermine senior leadership of [the] Pakistan Army."<sup>27</sup>



Imran Khan addressing a rally in Charsadda, September 17, 2022. Source: Dawn

In late September, two audio messages surfaced on social media purportedly featuring Imran (when he was Prime Minister) and his party leaders discussing a cipher message received from Parep Washington (Cipher No. 1-0678 dated March 7, 2022). Imran had used this cipher as evidence of a foreign conspiracy to oust him from power. The ruling government has termed this as a violation of the Official Secret Act and decided to hold an inquiry into the audio leaks.<sup>28</sup>

On September 29, addressing a rally in Muzaffarabad, Imran accused the federal government of "secretly establishing relations" with India, allegedly, for its own "business interests" and in complete "disregard of the sacrifices" of the people of Kashmir. With this kind of pressure, it is evident that the ruling coalition government is in no position to move forward on engagement with India.

### India-Pakistan Ties

Pakistan continues to link bilateral ties to the Kashmir issue. Speaking at the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said, "We look for peace with all our neighbours, including India. Sustainable peace and stability in South Asia, however, remain contingent upon a just and lasting solution of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute." He added, "India's illegal and unilateral actions of 5 August 2019 to change the internationally recognized 'disputed' status of Jammu and Kashmir

and to alter the demographic structure of the occupied territory further undermined the prospects of peace and inflamed regional tensions."<sup>29</sup>

In the 'Right to Reply' session, Indian diplomat, First Secretary Mijito Vinito, hit back at the Pakistan Prime Minister, saying it was "regrettable" that he made false accusations against India. "A polity that claims it seeks peace with its neighbours would never sponsor cross border terrorism nor would it shelter planners of the horrific Mumbai terrorist attack, disclosing the existence only under pressure from the international community," Vinito said, adding, "Such a country would not make unjustified and untenable territorial claims against neighbours."<sup>30</sup>

India has voiced its "concern" over the resumption of a U.S. deal to upgrade the F-16 fleet of Pakistan. This development came after the U.S. government notified Congress of a proposed foreign military sale of \$450 million to Pakistan to sustain the Pakistan Air Force's F-16 programme. A notification sent to Congress said, "This proposed sale will support the foreign policy and national security objectives of the United States by allowing Pakistan to retain interoperability with U.S. and partner forces in ongoing counterterrorism efforts and in preparation for future contingency operations."<sup>31</sup>

In a telephone call to U.S. Defense Secretary LLOYD Austin, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh conveyed India's concern at the U.S. decision to provide the sustenance package for Pakistan's F-16 fleet. Following a bilateral meeting between External Affairs Minister Dr. S Jaishankar and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Washington DC, Blinken sought to justify the decision by saying, "Pakistan's programme bolsters its capability to fight terror and terrorist threats."<sup>32</sup>

India sees this as a weak justification. Dr. Jaishankar bluntly articulated India's position: "For someone to say I am doing this because it is all counterterrorism content, and when you are talking about something like the capability of an F-16, which everybody knows, and you know where they are deployed and their use, you are not fooling anybody by saying these things."

The ruling dispensation in Pakistan currently faces an economic and political crisis that will force it to look inwards and continue to play the Kashmir card to gain public sympathy. Therefore, it is unlikely that there can be any move forward in the short term on improving bilateral ties with India.

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

### Disengagement at Patrol Point 15

In a surprise announcement on September 8, India and China declared that they had started disengagement from Patrol Point 15 (PP 15). External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Arindam Bagchi explained the process, "The two sides have agreed to cease forward deployments in this area in a phased, coordinated and verified manner, resulting in the return of the troops of both sides to their respective areas." He added, "It has been agreed that all temporary structures and other allied infrastructure created in the area by both sides will be dismantled and mutually verified. The landforms in the area will be restored to the pre-standoff period by both sides."<sup>33</sup>

Bagchi said that the agreement ensures that the LAC in this area will be strictly observed and respected by both sides, and that there will be no unilateral change in the status quo. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning welcomed the disengagement at PP15 as "a positive development" but stated, "We don't accept the so-called status quo created by India's illegal crossing of the LAC."<sup>34</sup>



The satellite imagery indicates disengagement completed at PP 15 and landform restored, September 18, 2022. Source: NDTV

With this latest agreement, disengagement in Eastern Ladakh has now been completed at Galwan (PP14), Gogra-Hotsprings (PP 15 and 17), and the North and South Banks of Pangong Tso. The disengagement process at each of these places has involved the stepping back of troops and the creation of buffer zones within which neither side can patrol.



There has been criticism in India of the disengagement process on two counts. One, the buffer zones have been set up entirely on the Indian side of the LAC, and it is only Indian territory that has been lost.<sup>35</sup> Two, the Indian troops can no longer go to areas that they had been patrolling prior to May 2020. There is a need to assess these two issues objectively.

It cannot be stated with any certainty that the buffer zones are entirely on the Indian side because their geographical limits have not been publicly spelled out except on the North bank of Pangong Tso. The buffer zone on the North bank lies between the Indian and Chinese claims – Finger 8 and Finger 4, respectively - and both sides have had to accept an equal compromise to their LAC claims.

Regarding the restrictions on patrolling, it is true that Indian soldiers can no longer go up to their traditional patrol points. However, it is equally true that the Chinese soldiers cannot patrol up to their claim lines in the buffer zones. It can be debated whether this step-by-step approach to disengaging in one area after another is the best option, but as Dr. Jaishankar pointed out, the disengagement at PP 15 "is one problem less on the border."<sup>36</sup>

After PP 15, the focus will shift to Depsang and Demchok, the remaining two areas where the standoff continues. Any agreement on this depends mainly on China understanding India's position on the impact of the LAC standoff on bilateral relations.

### **China and India's Views on the LAC Standoff**

On September 27, the Chinese Embassy in India held a virtual event to celebrate the 73rd Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic of China, in which the Chinese Ambassador to India, Sun Weidong, delivered a keynote speech. Sun called 2022 the year in which "China-India relations have made new progress and shown positive momentum."

He went on to say, "The current border situation is overall stable. The phase of emergency response since the Galwan Valley incident has basically come to an end, and the border situation is now switching to normalised management and control. The Chinese side is willing to maintain dialogues via diplomatic and military channels with the Indian side, and together seek solution to the border issues in a peaceful manner through dialogue and consultation. It is hoped that the Indian side can properly handle issues related to China's core interests, including Taiwan question and Xizang-related issues."<sup>37</sup>

In an editorial, the Global Times blamed "India's domestic hardline voices against China" for putting "pressure on the government to oppose reconciliation with China." It went on to say, "Whenever relations between the two countries go wrong, radical forces gain the upper hand, and on the other, there have always been evil forces that do not want to see China and India get close...China's attitude is clear and firm, but New Delhi has paid a heavy cost in the past from pandering to and exploiting domestic nationalist sentiments. This is a strategic liability for New Delhi, and only by shaking it off can New Delhi advance further."<sup>38</sup>

China's view of how India sees the current LAC crisis appears to be flawed. India has repeatedly made it clear that the normalisation of the border is a prerequisite for normalisation of ties. Responding to Sun Weidong's statement that the situation on the India-China border is "overall stable", Dr. Jaishankar said, "I think if the spokesperson of a foreign ministry were to say something, I would urge you to see a comment from the spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry of the corresponding country." He added, "What I have said, to my mind, represents accurate policy assessment of where the state of our relations is. We continue to strive for a relationship with China, but one that is built on mutual sensitivity, mutual respect and mutual interest."<sup>39</sup>

The LAC tensions are also publicly spilling out in other areas. Last month, there was an unusual war of words triggered by the Chinese ambassador to Sri Lanka Qi Zhenhong's remarks on India for its objection to the docking of the ballistic missile and satellite tracking ship 'Yuan Wang 5' at Hambantota port. In response to an article by Zhenhong in a Chinese daily, the Indian High Commission in Colombo called out Zhenhong for his "violation of basic diplomatic etiquette" and stated that his views of Sri Lanka's "northern neighbour may be coloured by how his own country behaves."<sup>40</sup>

A proposal moved by the U.S. and co-sponsored by India to designate Sajid Mir (the main handler of the 26/11 Mumbai attacks) as a global terrorist was blocked in the U.N. Security Council by China. Speaking at the same venue, Dr. Jaishankar took a dig at China, stating that when it comes to sanctioning some of the world's most dreaded terrorists, impunity is being facilitated and politics providing cover to evade accountability.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the most significant indication of the state of bilateral ties came at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit in Uzbekistan. During the photo-op on September 16, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping stood side by side but did not exchange smiles or shake hands. The chill was evident.



## Instability, Connectivity and Non-Traditional Security Issues

by

Amb. Biren Nanda

### SOUTH ASIA

#### Bangladesh

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited India from September 5-8, 2022. During her visit, she met President Droupadi Murmu, Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar, Prime Minister Modi, External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar, and Minister of Development of North Eastern Region Shri G. Kishan Reddy.<sup>42</sup> The Prime Ministers of both countries held restricted meetings followed by delegation-level talks. In his press statement, Prime Minister Modi said, "India will continue to walk step by step with Bangladesh."<sup>43</sup> The visit was fruitful as both countries signed seven MOUs in the field of river water sharing, energy, railway connectivity, industrial research, and space technology.<sup>44</sup> Five rail and road connectivity projects were also unveiled.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, called on President Smt. Droupadi Murmu at Rashtrapati Bhavan, September 7, 2022. Source: MEA/flickr

Strengthening India-Bangladesh relations is central to securing the economic growth and security of the South Asian region. The recent intensification of geopolitical competition and conflict have threatened the energy and food

security of developing nations. India and Bangladesh are no exception. Therefore, the visit of PM Hasina at this juncture was important as both countries are dependent on each other on multiple fronts. India is seeking to extend the agreement to transport fuel to three of its south-eastern states - Tripura, Mizoram, and Manipur - through Bangladesh. The agreement is due to expire on November 30, 2022.<sup>45</sup> The India- Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline, is an extension of the refinery project and will be completed by end of this year.<sup>46</sup> To overcome the energy crisis in Bangladesh, the country is ramping up coal-fired power generation, and importing electricity from India.<sup>47</sup> Increased freight services between the two countries helped Bangladesh to import more Indian goods. In the first 10 months of the fiscal year 2021-22, the Bangladesh Railways brought in 29.92 lakh tonnes of goods from India.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, the Joint Statements point out that, India offered "free transit via its territory to Bangladesh", and "invited the Bangladesh business community for using its port infrastructure for transshipment to third countries".<sup>49</sup> Both countries are also finalizing a "Joint Feasibility Study" of the proposed 'Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement' to ease the burden of Bangladesh as it sheds the LDC status in 2026.<sup>50</sup> According to the media reports, in the wake of depleting foreign currency reserves of Bangladesh, the Indian Reserve Bank issued a circular calling upon Indian exporters to trade with Bangladesh in local currency.<sup>51</sup>

India had provided a USD 500 million defense Line of Credit (LoC) to Bangladesh in 2019, however, its implementation was delayed due to the Covid Pandemic amongst other reasons.<sup>52</sup> The issue may have come up in discussions during the visit of PM Hasina. On September 6, The Hindu reported that Dhaka shared a wish list of military platforms and systems that its armed forces would like to procure from India.<sup>53</sup>

An eight-member delegation from the Bangladesh Navy Operational Sea Training Group visited Headquarters Sea Training of the Indian Navy at Kochi to witness Operational Sea Training at Southern Naval Command on September 26. The visit reemphasized the importance of the Indian Navy as being the preferred training destination and for adopting evolving tactics and technologies.<sup>54</sup> While, 17 officers of the Indian armed forces, civil services, and foreign students of NDC visited the HQ of Bangladesh Army, Navy, Air Force, and Armed Forces Division where they interacted with senior leaders of the Armed Forces and were briefed at all service HQs.<sup>55</sup>

These developments indicate the overall upward trajectory of India-Bangladesh relations on all fronts.

## Bhutan

The King of Bhutan Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck visited India on September 14. During his visit, he held a meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and discussed issues related to strengthening relations between the two countries.<sup>56</sup> Following the visit, Bhutan ratified the 'International Solar Alliance Framework Agreement'.<sup>57</sup>

From September 21, 2022, onwards, the India-Bhutan border gates have reopened for tourists in Assam, after thirty months of closure due to the Covid Pandemic.<sup>58</sup>

## Nepal

The month of September has seen multiple bilateral visits exchanged between India and Nepal. Indian Chief of Army Staff Gen Manoj Pande visited Nepal on September 5-8.<sup>59</sup> During the visit, he held a meeting with PM Sher Bahadur Deuba and his Nepalese Counterpart. As a tradition of friendship between both armies, he has been conferred with the honorary rank of General of the Nepal Army. He also presented equipment along with light military vehicles to the Nepali Army for augmenting their technical capabilities.<sup>60</sup>



Indian COAS General Manoj Pande, presented equipment along with light vehicles to the Nepali Army for augmenting their technical capabilities, September 5, 2022.

Source: Twitter/ @IndiaNepal

On September 13-14 the Foreign Minister of Nepal Mr. Bharat Raj Paudyal visited India. In a secretary-level bilateral meeting, two Foreign Secretaries



discussed the issues related to boundary matters, energy cooperation, the trade and transit treaty and the construction of a liquefied petroleum gas pipeline from Motihari.<sup>61</sup>

However, the issue of recruitment of Nepali youth in the Indian Army under the 'Agnipath Scheme,' which currently remains stalled after reservations expressed by Nepal, may not have come under discussion as it was not mentioned in the press release. According to the Nepalese Foreign Ministry, the political decision on the issue will be taken by the next government as the elections are due in November.<sup>62</sup>

The 7th meeting of the 'Joint Standing Technical Committee of India and Nepal on Water Resources' was held on September 21-22, 2022, which was followed by the 9th meeting of the 'Joint Committee on Water Resources' on September 23, in Kathmandu.<sup>63</sup> In a meeting, both sides agreed to take forward the Sapta Kosi high dam project. The project is primarily aimed to control floods in southeast Nepal and northern Bihar and generating hydropower.

Meanwhile, Home Minister Amit Shah visited Fatehpur BOP on the Indo-Nepal border in Bihar and observed Pillar No. 151 and 152, further he reviewed various activities in border areas on September 24.<sup>64</sup> He also inaugurated border facilities for the SSB (Armed Border Force).

Indian Ambassador to Nepal and the Home Minister of Nepal jointly performed a groundbreaking ceremony for the construction of the 'Nepal Police Academy' on September 23, 2022.<sup>65</sup> The academy will be constructed under grant assistance from the Government of India at a cost of NRs. 1000 crores.

The sixth annual coordination meeting between the border guarding forces of India and Nepal concluded in Kathmandu on September 23.<sup>66</sup> Both sides discussed streamlining the mechanism to curb trans-border crimes. As recently on September 20, 2022, four persons were arrested by SSB near the Indo-Nepal border with heroin worth INR 1.65 crore.<sup>67</sup>

The head of the standing committee of the Chinese National People's Congress, Li Zhanshu visited Nepal on September 12-15. During his four day visit, he met the Nepalese President, the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. In a meeting with Li, President Bindhya Devi raised the issue of past agreements for building infrastructure with China, which had not materialized, including projects under the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>68</sup> According to the media reports, a controversy had arisen due to the participation of President Bidhya Devi in the 'Global Security Initiative' (GSI) meeting organized by the Chinese

Communist Party, despite reservations expressed by the PM and Foreign Minister. Nepal is not a member of GSI.<sup>69</sup>

## Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is coming out of a severe financial crisis, as the new government started restructuring the economy. The tourism industry is once again flourishing after a staff-level agreement for a USD 2.9 billion bailout package with IMF is concluded in September.<sup>70</sup> Minister of Tourism and Lands Mr. Harin Farnando visited India to publicize these developments as India is the largest tourist market for Sri Lanka.<sup>71</sup> India continued its support to Sri Lanka, and now it is moving from crisis management to a long-term project to bring financial stability to the country.<sup>72</sup> India has already invested USD 3.5 billion in such projects. Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan President communicated to his officials to not obstruct Indian-backed projects.<sup>73</sup> Sri Lankan High Commissioner to India, Milinda Moragoda in an interview said that his country is keen to upgrade the existing free trade agreement to get greater market access for goods, textiles, IT, and automobiles.<sup>74</sup> He also met Indian NSA Ajit Doval to take a comprehensive review of the status of relations between the two countries.<sup>75</sup>

At the 51<sup>st</sup> session of the UNHRC held this month, India raised concerns over the “lack of measurable progress” in finding political solutions to the Tamil issue in Sri Lanka.<sup>76</sup> This may ruffle some feathers in the Sri Lankan establishment.



Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi and Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe in Tokyo during the State Funeral of the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at Nippon Budokan in Tokyo, September 27, 2022. Source: MEA/flickr

On September 28, Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe in Tokyo, on the sidelines of the funeral of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. They discussed issues related to Sri Lanka's debt restructuring and the present economic crisis.<sup>77</sup>

## Maldives

On September 26, an Indian company JMC Projects Limited signed an agreement with the Maldives government to develop the Hanimaadhoo International Airport. The project will be funded under the concessional line of credit provided by India.<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, on September 5, the Union Cabinet of India approved an MoU on cooperation between the National Disaster Management Authorities of India and the Maldives.<sup>79</sup>

The Maldives has been granted the status of a dialogue partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization during the meeting of the Council Heads held in Samarkand, on September 15-16.<sup>80</sup>

## EAST ASIA

### Myanmar

In September, multiple concerns for India emanating from Myanmar were highlighted in the media. The issues such as smuggling of narcotics and exotic animal species, illegal immigration, and, linkages of Rohingya groups with Pakistan intelligence agencies came up front. On September 22, 2022, Mizoram police and personnel of Assam Rifles seized a huge stash of methamphetamine tablets worth Rs. 167.86 crores near the Myanmar border.<sup>81</sup> The Assam police on September 8, seized 40 rare and exotic animals from two West Bengal-bound vehicles.<sup>82</sup>

Responding to a petition filed by Myanmar nationals against the Ministry of Home Affairs regarding the issue of exit permits, the ministry has informed Delhi High Court that some of the illegal Rohingya migrants are in touch with Pakistan's ISI. The influx of illegal Rohingya migrants in the Eastern states poses a security threat to India.<sup>83</sup>

Many Indians who are lured into attractive job proposals by job entrapment rackets are held hostage in Myanmar. By the end of September, 2022, 100-150 Indians were still stranded while authorities managed to rescue 32.<sup>84</sup>

Therefore, in order to ensure border security and to facilitate trade, on September 20, 2022, India and Myanmar signed an MoU on a project



agreement for the construction of checkpoints in the Tamu, Sagaing Region. India has already built a checkpoint in Moreh.<sup>85</sup>

## Thailand

The 5<sup>th</sup> BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee Meeting was hosted by Thailand in Bangkok from September 13-15.<sup>86</sup> The committee is responsible for organizing activities and projects.<sup>87</sup> In a meeting, Thailand presented the "BIMSTEC Bangkok Vision 2030" which provides clear direction and priorities for collaboration to tackle emerging challenges. The meeting acknowledged Thailand's proposal to formulate the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks for short and long-term policy recommendations.<sup>88</sup>

## Singapore

The first India-Singapore Ministerial Roundtable was held on September 17. Ministers of foreign affairs, finance, and trade of both countries deliberated on new areas of collaboration to enhance economic cooperation.<sup>89</sup> The Singapore delegation was on a five-day visit to India. During their stay, the delegation met industry leaders from India and Singapore, and called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi.<sup>90</sup>

## ASEAN

The ASEAN-India Economic Ministers' Meeting was held in Siem Reap, Cambodia, on September 16, 2022. Smt. Anupriya Patel, Minister of State for Commerce and Industry represented India in the meeting while economic ministers from all 10 ASEAN countries were present. During the deliberations, member states reviewed economic relations with India and agreed to strengthen the supply chain by the launching of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) Upgrade Negotiations. The Ministers also activated the AITIGA Joint Committee to undertake the review of AITIGA expeditiously.<sup>91</sup>

## WEST ASIA

India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh held talks with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and Defense Minister Gen. Mohamed Zaki in Cairo on enhancing security cooperation. The two countries also signed a Memorandum of Understanding bolstering defense cooperation across all sectors of mutual interest including the conduct of military exercises, and joint manufacturing, transfer and localization of technology.<sup>92</sup>

Continuing the deepening of the India-UAE partnership, External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar and his Emirati counterpart Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan co-chaired the meeting of the 14<sup>th</sup> India-UAE Joint Commission. The two leaders assessed “significant progress made in multiple domains of cooperation” including trade, investments, energy, food security, healthcare, and climate action. They reiterated a commitment to achieve a goal of USD 100 billion over the next five years in bilateral trade as part of the ‘Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement’ (CEPA).<sup>93</sup> CEPA has already made a positive impact on bilateral trade.

The India-Saudi Arabia partnership was also boosted during External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar’s meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Jeddah on September 11.<sup>94</sup> Dr. Jaishankar co-chaired the Political, Security, Social, and Cultural Committee of the India-Saudi Partnership Council with his counterpart Faisal bin Farhan. The two leaders discussed contemporary global political and economic concerns and agreed to work closely with G20 and other multilateral organizations for “shared growth, prosperity, stability, security, and development”.

Further, India’s Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal during his two-day visit to Saudi Arabia co-chaired the Ministerial Meeting of the ‘Committee on Economy and Investments’ with Saudi Arabia’s Minister of Energy Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman, wherein the two countries identified over 40 areas of cooperation including agriculture and food security, energy, technology and IT and industry and infrastructure”.<sup>95</sup> They also discussed the “feasibility of institutionalizing Rupee-Riyal trade” and the “introduction of India’s Unified Payment Interface (UPI) and Rupay cards in Saudi Arabia”.

Continuing their outreach to West Asia, the Foreign Ministers of UAE, India, and France held a trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.<sup>96</sup> The ‘I2U2 Group’ (India, Israel, UAE, US) also reiterated its commitment to deepen its economic partnership.<sup>97</sup>

Highlighting Iran’s growing proximity with China and Russia, Tehran has signed a Memorandum of Obligations to become a permanent member of the SCO during the meeting of the Council Heads held this month.<sup>98</sup> In light of this, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian asserted that “Iran has entered a new stage of economic, commercial, transit and energy cooperation”.

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