



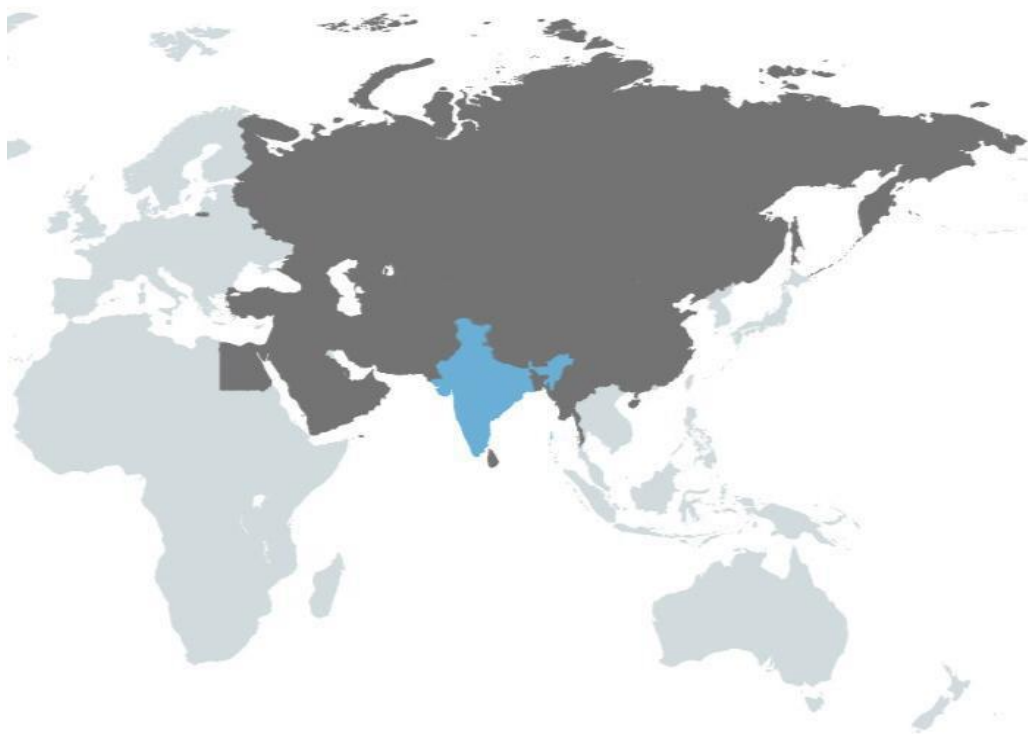
Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

FEBRUARY 2021



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DPG India Strategic Review

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DPG INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

The DPG India Strategic Review (ISR) is a monthly survey of key developments, trends and policies pertaining to India's immediate and continental neighbourhood. It is compiled by a research team which is led by Sanjay Pulipaka, Senior Fellow, and includes Research Associates Mohit Musaddi, Sanket Joshi, Shreyas Deshmukh and Anushka Nair. The ISR is based on open source official statements, reports and publications. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to Mohit Musaddi at mohit@dpg.org.in. To subscribe, please [click here](#).

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World map

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Overview

Sanjay Pulipaka and Mohit Musaddi

In February, India and China agreed to a disengagement plan to resolve the stand-off in Eastern Ladakh. A fortnight later, there was an agreement at the Director-General of Military Operations (DGMOs) level to observe a ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC) with effect from the midnight of February 24/25. While both developments were largely welcomed, scepticism persists. China and Pakistan are revisionist states with a tactical approach to such agreements, which does not inspire confidence. China's actions in Eastern Ladakh have negated a series of agreements pertaining to border management and confidence-building measures that have been put in place since 1993. Delhi has ample experience of agreements being undermined by Pakistan, both in letter and spirit, the Lahore peace process being the most glaring example. Moreover, the multiple, military-centric power structures in Pakistan tend to dilute the trust factor.

What this implies is that the security dynamics around Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh will remain under sustained two-front pressure. As the [Indian Army chief](#) General M. M. Naravane stated after the start of the disengagement process, "until that trust deficit is removed, we will be wary about the developments there".¹

India, China and the Disengagement Process

On February 11, the India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh announced in the Indian Parliament that there would be a "phased, co-ordinated and verifiable" disengagement at the north and south banks of the Pangong Tso. This followed a written pact between the two countries on the modalities of disengagement. China pulled back troops to the east of Finger 8, while India is holding positions at its post near Finger 3. There agreed disengagement on both sides of Pangong Tso was implemented smoothly. The Defence Minister made it clear that this process does not compromise India's position with respect to the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

During the month, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) acknowledged for the first time that there were four Chinese deaths during the Galwan clash in June last year.

The 10th China-India Corps Commander Level meeting was held on the Chinese side of the Moldo/Chushul border on February 21. The [joint press](#)

[release](#) noted that “the two sides positively appraised the smooth completion of disengagement of frontline troops in the Pangong Lake area” and that the disengagement has “provided a good basis for resolution of other remaining issues along the LAC in the Western Sector”.² India called on China to ensure that there is “[faster disengagement](#) at Gogra, Hot Springs and Demchok areas” as well.³

On February 26, India’s External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr. S. Jaishankar spoke to his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi and reviewed the [status of the disengagement](#) and the implementation of their ‘Moscow Agreement’ in September 2020 which had outlined a five point agenda for easing tensions.⁴ A [MEA press release](#) noted that the disengagement process has provided the basis for the resolution of remaining issues along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh.⁵

As India prepares to assume the Chairmanship of BRICS in 2021, China indicated that it will work with India and other members to “strengthen communication dialogue”. There were [reports](#) that President Xi Jinping may visit India in 2021 for the BRICS Summit.⁶ India [denied speculation](#) that it was relaxing curbs on Chinese investments.⁷

The United States: China and Climate Action

In a phone call on February 5 with Chinese diplomat Yang Jiechi, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said that the “United States will stand up for [human rights and democratic values](#) in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong”.⁸

President Biden ordered a “[review of supply chains](#) for critical materials – from semiconductors to pharmaceuticals and rare-earth minerals – to spur domestic production while strengthening ties with allies.”⁹

The US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, John Kerry, [remarked that](#) “India is actually a red-hot investment opportunity for its clean energy transition”.¹⁰ He also praised India for its leadership in the deployment of renewable energy and of the International Solar Alliance (ISA). Kerry added that the US intends to work “very, very closely” with the Indian leadership.¹¹ India is already in line to exceed its commitments under the [Paris Agreement](#), has the fastest-growing solar energy programme in the world, and has set a target of achieving 450 gigawatts of renewable energy by 2030.¹²

President Biden has indicated that the US will work with [like-minded partners](#) in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in response to the military coup in Myanmar.¹³

Transition in the Neighbourhood

Two of India's immediate neighbours have been undergoing political transitions. On February 1, the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) [staged a coup](#) and detained State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, members of the Election Commission and leaders of civil society organisations.¹⁴ The coup was attributed to alleged irregularities in the voting process during the Myanmar elections held in November 2020.¹⁵ The [Myanmar military](#) announced a one year state of emergency after which fresh elections will be held and power will be handed back to a civilian government.¹⁶ Meanwhile, citizens poured onto the streets in large numbers to protest against the military coup, and the [subsequent crackdown](#) by the military has resulted in at least 18 deaths and 30 civilian injuries.¹⁷ The US, the UK and Canada [imposed limited sanctions](#), including travel bans and freezing of assets, on some of the leaders of Tatmadaw.¹⁸ Indonesia's foreign minister travelled across Southeast Asian capitals to convene a [special ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting](#) on the issue.¹⁹ Overall, the military coup has all but reversed the country's democratic transition process of the last decade.

In Nepal, the December 2020 decision by Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli to dissolve the House of Representatives was [deemed unconstitutional](#) by the Supreme Court.²⁰ While this provided a glimmer of hope that the country may return to normalcy, the political crisis is far from over. The ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) has already been [split](#), with one faction headed by Oli and the other faction by senior leaders Prachanda and Madhav Kumar Nepal.²¹ An intense power struggle is in the offing, and there will likely be a no-confidence motion in the Nepal Parliament once it reconvenes in March 2021.

Meanwhile, stability in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Maldives has allowed Delhi to intensify its connectivity and development efforts in these countries. In February, EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar visited the Maldives, held discussions with the President, Speaker and Foreign Minister, and handed over an additional 100,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines. A USD50-million [line of credit](#) to facilitate maritime capacity building and another USD40-million line of credit for improving Maldives' sports infrastructure was announced.²² For Bangladesh, [India allocated](#) INR200 crore²³ (USD27.5 million approximately) for developmental assistance in its budget for the financial year (FY) 2021-22. Both Prime Minister Modi as well as EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar are [expected to travel](#) to Dhaka in March 2021.²⁴

There was a setback for India in Sri Lanka as the Rajapaksa government decided to cancel the India-Japan-Sri Lanka [tripartite agreement](#) for the development

of the East Container Terminal (ECT), reportedly due to domestic concerns.²⁵ Instead, it was reported that the West Container Terminal (WCT) has been offered to Delhi and Tokyo with an 85 per cent stake.²⁶ Meanwhile, China's gains in the island state continued, as Colombo approved a [Chinese project](#) to install renewable energy systems in three islands off the Jaffna Peninsula.²⁷ Sri Lanka is also reportedly seeking [USD 2.2 billion from Chinese banks](#) after its foreign exchange reserves plummeted to their lowest since September 2009.²⁸ Large borrowings from China in the past have led Sri Lanka to lease the strategically-important Hambantota Port to a Chinese company for 99 years in 2017.

In February, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan visited Sri Lanka. Significant outcomes included Pakistan's offer of a USD50-million line of [credit for defence purchases](#) to Sri Lanka, as well as agreement to "increase intelligence sharing and co-operation on other security issues, including anti-terrorism and anti-crime operations".²⁹

Pakistan and Afghanistan: Corridor of Instability

Pakistan continued to experience sectarian and ethnic violence during the month. On February 5, at least two people were killed and 28 injured in a grenade blast in [Pakistan's Balochistan province](#).³⁰ Pakistan's [economic woes](#) also continued even as it is expecting another tranche of USD500 million from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) after reportedly meeting all IMF conditionalities.³¹ Islamabad has already received USD1.4 billion in emergency funding to mitigate the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.³² Its sectarian violence and economic crisis are indicative of the deep structural challenges that confront Pakistan's polity and society. In the midst of these challenges, Pakistan tested its Ghaznavi missile on February 3 and scaled up efforts to complete the fencing of the Durand Line along its border with Afghanistan.

The on-ground situation in Afghanistan continued to be unstable. A [US congressional panel](#) urged the Biden administration to reconsider the May 1, 2021 deadline for the complete withdrawal of US troops, as this can result in a civil war situation in the country.³³ The panel also noted that the Taliban's adherence to principles such as reduced violence and promoting security should guide the withdrawal process, rather than rigid timelines.³⁴ Other NATO allies have also contended that it is too early to withdraw the remaining troops from Afghanistan. As discussions of the timing of troop withdrawals continued, the Taliban announced that they will target NATO troops after May 1. The coming months are crucial and intense diplomatic activity will be

required to ensure that the country does not collapse into a civil war situation, impacting regional security.

It is amidst this precarious security situation in Afghanistan, as well as growing sectarian violence and deepening economic crisis in Pakistan, that Delhi and Islamabad have [announced a ceasefire](#) from the midnight of February 24 along the LoC in Jammu and Kashmir.³⁵

India and the Middle East

India's relationships with countries in the extended neighbourhood of the Middle East continue to progress. Discussions pertaining to a possible India-UAE-Israel partnership continued during the month, with a suggestion for a new trilateral business relationship. While there is growing support for an India-Israel Free Trade Agreement (FTA), the UAE Crown Prince has also called for enhanced trade and investment relations with India. UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan [visited India](#) to scale up the bilateral relationship in a "changing world."³⁶ However, even though India's economic relationship with the Gulf is gaining momentum, the increase in crude oil prices has been a source of concern. Delhi has requested OPEC countries and other partners to scale-up production in order to contain the crude oil price rise.

In the coming months, India and Saudi Arabia will conduct their [first-ever military exercise](#), indicating consolidation of military-to-military ties after the Indian Army Chief's visit to the Kingdom last month.³⁷ Simultaneously, India continued to procure defence equipment, such as four high altitude long endurance (HALE) drones and 6,000 Negev light machine guns, from Israel. Prospects of foreign countries manufacturing defence equipment in India are also being explored, with the Israeli firm Smart Shooter being the latest to announce that it will soon manufacture in India.

While the bilateral relationship between India and the Gulf countries is progressing, regional dynamics and major powers are introducing new elements of uncertainty. The Biden administration has demonstrated an inclination to participate in talks on Iran's nuclear programme. However, as of now, there is [no agreement](#) between Iran, the EU and the US on the format of talks to resolve the impasse over the JCPOA.³⁸

Russia scales up military engagements

Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla visited Moscow from February 16-18 and observed that a multipolar world and a multipolar Asia is important for

both India and Russia. He called for greater [co-operation between India and Russia](#) in line with their “strong comprehensive bilateral co-operation”.³⁹ In his meeting with his Russian counterpart, Shringla is said to have also explored India-Russia “co-operation in multilateral forums” and international platforms.⁴⁰

Moscow has been scaling up its defence partnerships with India, as well as with India’s neighbourhood. While Russian weapons manufacturer Kalashnikov may manufacture its AK-203 rifles in India soon, Russian origin armoured vehicles have been seen during a military patrol in Myanmar. Moscow also participated in a 45-nation biannual military exercise, AMAN-2021, hosted by Pakistan and has [reportedly signed a deal](#) with Islamabad to supply “anti-tank weapons, air defence systems, and other small weapons”.⁴¹ Russia may be looking to diversify its weapons export markets, but it will have to factor in the implications for its relations with India.

Quad and Multilateral Engagements

India continued to scale up its commitments in the Indo-Pacific. At the [first meeting of the Quad](#) Foreign Ministers after the change in the US administration held on February 18, “[t]he Ministers emphasised their commitment to upholding a rules-based international order, underpinned by respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, the rule of law, transparency, freedom of navigation in the international seas and peaceful resolution of disputes”.⁴²

At the inaugural session of the World Sustainable Development Summit 2021, UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed referred to [India’s contribution](#) in energy security, climate action, and peacekeeping and noted that the international community could “count on India for its contribution to multilateralism as a force for good.”⁴³ India’s [vaccine diplomacy](#) continued through the month and received appreciation from various countries and multilateral agencies, including the WHO, for promoting vaccine equity.⁴⁴ India also announced a gift of approximately [200,000 vaccine doses](#) to UN peacekeepers.⁴⁵

India continued to engage with the regional framework SAARC. Addressing healthcare professionals from SAARC countries, the Indian Prime Minister called for creating a [special visa scheme](#) for medical professionals during emergencies as well as a regional platform for data compilation to study vaccine efficiency.⁴⁶

India and the Neighbourhood¹

Mohit Musaddi

There has been significant shift in the political landscape of Nepal and Myanmar. Political instability has been evident for some time in Nepal, but developments in Myanmar have been surprisingly rapid. These developments have diverted the attention of Kathmandu and Nay Pyi Taw from pressing concerns such as addressing the pandemic and the consequent economic crisis.

Nepal

On February 23, Nepal's Supreme Court observed that Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's move to dissolve the House of Representatives was [unconstitutional](#). It therefore overturned the decision and "asked the authorities to summon a meeting of Parliament within 13 days".⁴⁷ The Supreme Court [made the decision](#) based on the hearings involving arguments by more than 100 advocates regarding 13 writ petitions that concluded on February 19.⁴⁸

There has already been a [split](#) in the Nepal Communist Party (NCP), in which Prime Minister Oli leads one faction, whereas the other is led by senior leaders Pushpa Kumar Dahal (Prachanda) and Madhav Kumar Nepal.⁴⁹ Neither faction's legitimacy has yet been recognised by the Election Commission (EC). Meanwhile, at least seven people, including Oli, Prachanda, former chief justices and a former speaker of the House face [contempt of court charges](#) in the Supreme Court.⁵⁰

[International support](#) for either faction has been hard to come by. While India has said that "these are internal matters for Nepal to decide as per its democratic process", the US, UK and China have all been silent.⁵¹ Dahal had sought support from the international community and called upon democracies to "speak up against Oli's move".⁵² Meanwhile, Oli continues to play the [nationalist card](#) by stressing that India-Nepal relations "could turn cordial by only returning our [Nepal's] territory through dialogue" and that "we [Nepal] need to assert a claim on our territory at any cost".⁵³

The enhancement of connectivity between India and Nepal continued in February with the joint inauguration of a [108-kilometre road](#) that connects the Indian border at Laxmipur-Balara to Gadhahiya in Sarlahi district in Nepal.⁵⁴ The

¹ In the neighbourhood, this chapter will deal with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

road was constructed under India's High Impact Community Development Project (HICDP) utilising Indian grant assistance of Rs.44.48 million (USD613,000 approximately).⁵⁵ Delhi and Kathmandu have also signed a [Memorandum of Understanding \(MoU\)](#) "for the reconstruction of six secondary schools" in Nepal at a total cost of NPR518 million (USD4.5 million approximately).⁵⁶

Nepal was among the first countries to [receive one million doses](#) of the COVID-19 vaccines in January 2021 as a grant from India.⁵⁷ In February, Kathmandu purchased another one million doses from India and, on February 18, approved the emergency use of [China's Sinopharm](#) vaccine.⁵⁸ Nepal plans to eventually vaccinate at least 72 per cent of its 30 million population.⁵⁹



The Dahal-Nepal faction organised a mass rally on February 10 in Kathmandu to protest against KP Oli's decision to dissolve the House of Representatives. Source: The Kathmandu Post

Bangladesh

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a sharp decline in the global demand for clothing, disrupting Bangladesh's textile industry. In 2020, [textile exports](#) from Bangladesh fell by nearly 17 percent, while apparel exports declined by 5.83 percent.⁶⁰ Bangladesh's textile industry provides employment to about

four million workers and accounts for more than 80 percent of its total exports.⁶¹ The country, which is expected to graduate from the LDC (least developed countries) category by 2024, must diversify its exports to ensure sustainable economic growth.

With countries reorienting supply chains due to the pandemic, this may be Dhaka's best chance to attract investment and [emerge as a bridge](#) between South Asia and Southeast Asia.⁶² Japan, for example, has been incentivising its companies to [shift manufacturing out of China](#) and has added Bangladesh to its list of preferred destinations.⁶³ A 1,000-acre Special Economic Zone (SEZ) is upcoming in a district near Dhaka and is expected to bring USD20 billion into the country in Japanese investments.⁶⁴ However, to ensure genuine growth, Bangladesh must also tackle its problem of religious fundamentalism. In February, a Protestant church was reportedly [vandalised](#), and inaction by the local authorities has been a matter of concern to Bangladeshi Christians.⁶⁵

India's role in the development of Bangladesh has also been commendable. In February, India allowed movement of [27,000 tonnes of fertilisers](#) from Bangladesh to Nepal via the Rohanpur-Singhabad rail route.⁶⁶ PM Modi "laid the foundation stone" for [India's largest bridge](#) from Dhubri, Assam, to Phulbari, Meghalaya, over the Brahmaputra river. This bridge is expected to cut time and distance in Northeast India as well as to Bangladesh via Meghalaya, thereby increasing connectivity.⁶⁷ For development aid, the Government of India has allocated [Rs.200 crore](#) (USD 27.5 million approximately) to Bangladesh in its Union Budget for FY 2021-22.⁶⁸ India's EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar is expected to [travel to Bangladesh](#) in the first week of March to hold discussions with the senior leadership and prepare the groundwork for PM Modi's visit later in the month.⁶⁹

Sri Lanka

India's development assistance to Sri Lanka suffered a setback in February when the Rajapaksa government cancelled the tripartite agreement between India, Japan and Sri Lanka for the development of the East Container Terminal (ECT) and instead asked Delhi and Tokyo to develop the [West Container Terminal \(WCT\)](#) with an 85 per cent stake.⁷⁰ Currently, the matter is under discussion, and no formal decision has been made. There was speculation that China may have played a part in Colombo's decision to cancel the ECT agreement, but the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister refuted such suppositions. There have been [widespread agitations](#) by "port workers' trade unions opposing a foreign role" in the ECT.⁷¹

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka has approved a [Chinese energy project](#) “in three small islands off the Jaffna peninsula in the north, about 50 km off the Tamil Nadu coast”.⁷² However, it was reported that Sri Lanka has been considering [India's grant of USD12 million](#) to “install renewable energy systems” in these islands.⁷³ Sri Lanka's Tamil political parties have reportedly protested against Chinese involvement, citing security threats to the Tamil people and India.⁷⁴

In February, Sri Lanka signed a deal with the Serum Institute of India (SII) to purchase [10 million doses](#) of the AstraZeneca-developed COVID-19 vaccines.⁷⁵ Sri Lanka was one of the first countries to receive 500,000 doses of the vaccine as a gift from India in January 2021.

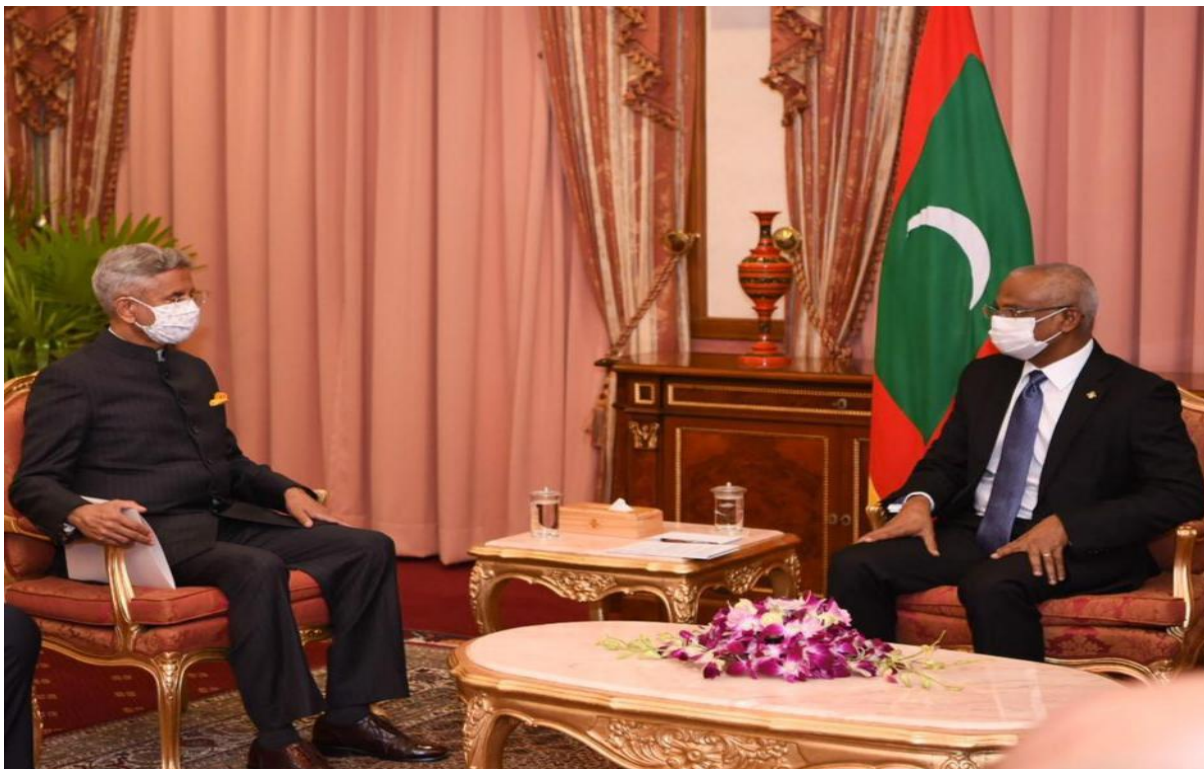
Pakistan Prime Minister [Imran Khan visited Sri Lanka](#) on February 23-24 and held discussions with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa on trade and investment, defence and education, among other issues.⁷⁶ Colombo and Islamabad signed five MoUs in related fields. PM Khan also said that he looked forward to [enhancing trade ties](#) with Sri Lanka through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).⁷⁷ PM Khan offered a USD [50 million defence credit line](#) facility for Sri Lanka.⁷⁸ However, Imran Khan was [not allowed to address the Sri Lankan Parliament](#) as was earlier expected.⁷⁹ The decision may have been taken by the Sri Lankan government keeping in mind Prime Minister Khan's tendency to bring up the Kashmir issue on inappropriate platforms. Sri Lanka's minority Muslim community used the visit to urge Colombo to [denounce its mandatory cremation policy](#) for COVID-19 victims.⁸⁰

Amnesty International released a [report on February 17](#) alleging that the Sri Lankan government has increased “crackdown on dissent”, curtailed “civil society freedom”, and has been “obstructing efforts to deliver justice for conflict-era crimes under international law”.⁸¹ Amnesty International has called on the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to implement the report's recommendation, including “robust monitoring and reporting on the human rights situation, and the collection and preservation of evidence for future prosecutions”.⁸² As the UNHRC session convenes in March, [Colombo's human rights record](#) will likely be probed. PM Imran Khan has reportedly assured that Pakistan will provide Sri Lanka with diplomatic support in exchange for Colombo's support to Pakistan on Jammu and Kashmir.⁸³ However, the Sri Lankan President has reportedly written to Prime Minister Modi instead, [seeking India's support](#).⁸⁴

The Maldives

India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar continued India's outreach to the neighbourhood with visits to the Maldives and Mauritius in February. He was [in the Maldives on February 20-21](#) and called on President Ibrahim Solih, Speaker Mohamed Nasheed and other political leaders. He also met with the Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Defence, Finance, Economic Development and Planning & Infrastructure.⁸⁵ He announced the Government of India's decision to hand over an [additional 100,000 doses](#) of the COVID vaccine as a grant and extended a Line of Credit (LoC) of USD40 million to improve Maldives' sports infrastructure.⁸⁶ India signed another [USD50 million LoC](#) with the Maldives to "facilitate maritime capability building" of the Maldives and signed an agreement to develop a Maldivian National Defence Coast Guard Harbour at Sifvaru.⁸⁷ The EAM reiterated that [India and the Maldives](#) are not only "partners in development" but also in "promoting peace and security in the region".⁸⁸

On February 11, the Reserve bank of India (RBI) announced that Exim bank would provide [USD400 million](#) for the Greater Male Connectivity Project (GMCP) under a line of credit.⁸⁹ The 6.7-kilometre GCMP will be the largest "civilian infrastructure project" in the country and will connect Male with three neighbouring islands.⁹⁰



EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar met with the President of Maldives Ibrahim Solih on February 21, 2021. Source: Twitter/@DrSJaishankar

Myanmar

On February 1, the Myanmar military [executed a coup](#) and detained State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint.⁹¹ The arrests were a reaction to the recent escalation in tensions between the government and the Tatmadaw after the latter accused the National League for Democracy (NLD) of voter fraud in the recently concluded general elections. The Tatmadaw also arrested officials from the Myanmar Union Election Commission (UEC) on February 10-11 to investigate its claims of "[electoral fraud](#)".⁹² It has announced an emergency for one year and has vowed to hold fresh parliamentary elections. However, political observers have termed the [emergency as unconstitutional](#) as only the President of Myanmar has the constitutional authority to declare it.⁹³

There has been strong international reaction, condemning the military for its actions. [President Biden has announced sanctions](#) "that will prevent Myanmar's generals from accepting US\$1 billion (1.4 trillion kyats) in assets in the US".⁹⁴ On February 18, the United Kingdom (UK) and Canada also [imposed sanctions on the Myanmar generals](#), including the Ministers of Defence and Home Affairs.⁹⁵ The Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has urged that the "rule of law and the [democratic process must be upheld](#)" and said that India is "monitoring the situation closely".⁹⁶ ASEAN leaders and Japan have also expressed concerns about the state of affairs in the country. The European Union is [considering additional sanctions](#) against the military as the EU already "has an arms embargo on Myanmar and has slapped asset freezes and visa bans on 14 officials" following the military crackdown on the Rohingya population.⁹⁷

Beijing's role in the coup has been widely scrutinised after China was viewed as supporting the military regime. Anti-coup demonstrations in front of the Chinese Embassy in Yangon have increased and there has also been [speculation that China](#) "dispatched IT technicians to help Myanmar military build a firewall" against social media, popular search engines and virtual private networks (VPNs).⁹⁸ The Chinese Embassy in Myanmar has denied all allegations. Beijing has been silent about the coup and has not condemned the military. Instead, Beijing has [blocked a UN Security Council statement](#) against the military, while the state media has referred to the coup as a "cabinet reshuffle".⁹⁹ Even Russia's representative at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) has reportedly termed the coup as a "[purely domestic affair](#) of the sovereign state".¹⁰⁰ Moscow enjoys a productive relationship with the Myanmar military and Russian-made armoured vehicles have been spotted on the streets after the coup.¹⁰¹

More than [100,000 people](#) have reportedly come out on the streets to vent their anger and “reject an army claim that it has majority support”.¹⁰² Trade unions, workers, students and even police officers have joined the [nation-wide protests](#) and several people have died as a result of the crackdown on the demonstrations.¹⁰³ Meanwhile, [the new military government](#) has “urged people to stop mass gatherings” and asked them to return to work.¹⁰⁴ There is concern that the use of force by the Tatmadaw may lead to the protests turning violent.

India’s development interests in Myanmar may also take a hit because of the coup. On February 15, EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar said that the [Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project](#) was in the “final stages” and hoped that India’s other development projects are not affected.¹⁰⁵



Demonstrators wave the NLD flag during a protest in Yangon against the coup.

Source: Al Jazeera/Associated Press

Bhutan

In India’s Annual Budget for Financial Year 2021-22, Bhutan received the maximum allocation of [Rs.3,004 crore \(USD 415 million approximately\)](#) as development assistance. Out of the Rs. 18,154 crore (USD 2.5 billion approximately) that has been allocated to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, Rs.7,148 crore (USD 985 million approximately) has been set aside as development aid to countries.¹⁰⁶

In an alleged conspiracy case to overthrow the Chief Operations Officer (COO) of the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) through a [corruption scandal](#), the police have “detained the senior-most judge of [Bhutan] Supreme Court, a top Army officer and a district court judge”.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

The political fallout and the growing contestation between democracy activists and the military in Myanmar will have long-term consequences for the security situation along India's eastern borders. Unlike Myanmar, the current political crisis in Nepal has thus far been about who has legitimacy to govern through democratic institutional frameworks. Nonetheless, sustained fragility is neither good for Nepal nor its neighbours. Despite few setbacks, India's relations with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Maldives continue to grow.



Protesters have blocked major roads in Yangon as thousands turn out every day in a show of public anger against the military coup. Source: Al Jazeera/Reuters

Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran

Shreyas Deshmukh

February 29 was the first anniversary of the signing of the 'Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan' between the Taliban and the US. Since then, the security situation in Afghanistan has reached a critical threshold. The new US administration and NATO allies have spent considerable time on evaluating strategy and have reached an initial conclusion that the remaining troops are not going to be withdrawn before May 1, which is the deadline according to the agreement.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan's neighbours have been assessing the situation and securing their borders. The role of Pakistan, which is a key player in the peace process, remains dubious. It is about to complete the fencing of the Durand Line, has conducted military exercises and multiple trials of missiles to signal its continuing deterrent and has launched an aggressive campaign in international fora on the Kashmir issue.

While dwelling on these developments, this paper will also take a brief look at the COVID situation in these countries and their vaccine diplomacy.

Brinkmanship in Afghanistan

According to the [survey report](#) published by the Afghan news agency, as on February 3, the Taliban controls 52 percent of the country's territory while 59 percent population lives in government control areas.¹⁰⁸ Since the US-Taliban Agreement of February 2020, the war in Afghanistan has intensified. However, during this period, no [American soldier](#) has lost his life, indicating the firm control of the Taliban leadership on its field commanders.¹⁰⁹

Taliban's strategy has been to reach out to various countries in order to gain recognition while dominating the battlefield. This twin dynamic continues. For instance, during a recent visit to Turkmenistan, the Taliban delegation headed by Mullah Baradar gave [assurance that it would protect](#) the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline and other infrastructure projects of national importance.¹¹⁰ The Taliban has made similar promises on several occasions in the past, but has continued to [attack infrastructure such as electricity grids](#) and bridges for geopolitical gains.¹¹¹ In January 2021, the foreign minister of Turkmenistan held an [international briefing](#) regarding newly inaugurated energy and connectivity projects with Afghanistan, including a power line, a 30-kilometre railway line and an international fibre-

optic communication system among others.¹¹² It is hard to believe that the Taliban will stick to its pledges as it prepares to launch another [spring offensive](#).¹¹³



Taliban deputy leader, Mullah Baradar in discussion with the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan in Ashgabat, February 6, 2021. Source: [Twitter/@ArianaNews_](#)

The strategy of 'tactical disposition'¹¹⁴ used by the Taliban has created a dilemma for US and NATO leaders. Speaking after the NATO Defence Ministers' Conference on February 18, in which the coalition was supposed to decide on the future of Afghanistan, Secretary-General [Jens Stoltenberg said](#), "We are faced with many dilemmas, and there are no easy options. If we stay beyond the first of May, we risk more violence, more attacks against our own troops... But if we leave, then we will also risk that the gains that we have made are lost."¹¹⁵

The US, in consultation with its Western allies, is hinting at delaying the [troops' withdrawal](#) due to the precarious situation and have blamed the Taliban for an increase in the level of violence.¹¹⁶ On the other hand, the Taliban has warned that it will not hesitate to target foreign troops after May 1, as their presence would be a breach of its agreement with the US. Germany has already given the

green light on February 24 for an extension of its military mission in Afghanistan until January 31, 2022.¹¹⁷

Wary of this uncertainty, the bordering states are assessing their positions and raising their guard, and simultaneously preparing to tap into the future opportunities if talks come to a peaceful conclusion. On February 18, Kabul hosted a conference for leaders and representatives of [intelligence organisations](#) from regional countries including the intelligence chiefs of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and Azerbaijan.¹¹⁸ Earlier, on February 14, the head of Tajikistan's State Committee for National Security had discussed [regional issues](#) and bilateral co-operation with his Afghan counterpart in Kabul.¹¹⁹

On February 9, India and Afghanistan signed a Memorandum of Understanding for [the construction](#) of the Lalandar [Shahtoot] Dam to fulfil the safe drinking water needs of Kabul City, provide irrigation water to nearby areas, and to provide electricity to the region.¹²⁰



Virtual signing ceremony of the MoU between India and Afghanistan for the construction of Shahtoot Dam in Afghanistan, February 9, 2021. Source: Ministry of External Affairs of India

While some countries, including India, have been supportive of the present dispensation in Afghanistan, the economic and security mismanagement in the country has halted progress in the peace talks and built pressure on the Afghan government. Further, there is growing demand from internal and external actors for establishing an interim government. Russian Special Envoy for Afghanistan [Zamir Kabulov](#) in an interview said that Moscow prefers that all parties to the conflict in Afghanistan agree on the establishment of an inclusive and transitional coalition government.¹²¹ Similarly, Pakistan's Ambassador to the US, [during a webinar](#) on February 19, stated that if the US planned to stay beyond May 1, they should consult with the Taliban, and if the peace process collapses because of this decision, the US will be seen as a bad negotiator.¹²²

At present, the Taliban surrounds [key Afghan cities](#) including their former capital Kandahar, where a fierce battle has continued for the last few months.¹²³ Continued fighting indicates the Taliban intention of establishing an Islamic government by replacing the current set-up, whether through the battlefield or as a result of peace negotiations. Western leaders will have to make some hard decisions to resolve this impending crisis.

Pakistan: Securing the Gains?

On February 13, the Supreme Court of Pakistan dismissed a land [dispute case](#) from Waziristan, where a party presented a proof of land agreement authorised by 'Emarat-i-Islami Taliban, Waziristan-wa-Afghanistan (Taliban)' stating "Pakistan is a sovereign country and the applicable law of Pakistan applies over every inch of its territory."¹²⁴

Pakistan has completed around 84 per cent of the fencing of a 2,600-km [border with Afghanistan](#).¹²⁵ The Pakistan Army has been assessing the situation on the other side of the Durand Line and might decide to increase the number of troops along the border areas to secure its gains in the Pashtun region. Several missile tests such as Shaheen-III on January 20¹²⁶, Fatah-I on January 7¹²⁷, Ghaznavi on February 3, and Babur on February 11 and [war Games](#) (second week of February) have been organised,¹²⁸ and training exercise conducted in the Thar desert. These could be part of signalling that Pakistani forces can maintain credible deterrence under all circumstances on both the eastern and northern borders. Pakistan will now hope for stability along its borders with India. The [Joint Statement](#) released after the Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) level discussion on February 25 adds that both sides have agreed to "strict observance of all agreements, understandings and cease firing along the Line of Control and all other sectors" with effect from the midnight of February 24/25, 2021.¹²⁹ It is likely that Islamabad does not want any instability on the Indian border for the time being. Furthermore, COAS General Bajwa also held consecutive meetings with the [incoming commander](#) of US CENTCOM General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr.¹³⁰ and Russian [Special Envoy](#) to Afghanistan, Mr. Zamir Kabulov,¹³¹ on February 19.

In recent months, Pakistan has intensified its diplomatic offensive against India on the Kashmir issue. On February 18, foreign envoys from Delhi visited [Jammu and Kashmir](#) for a first-hand assessment of the situation and reviewed the government's efforts to restore normalcy.¹³² On February 17, [Pakistani officials had conveyed](#) its account of developments in Kashmir to the envoys in Islamabad.¹³³ As India begins its two-year tenure at the UN Security Council, where it is [focusing on](#) 'effective response to the International Terrorism' and

'reforming multilateral systems'¹³⁴ and chairing the 'Taliban Sanction Committee', Pakistan with the help of China will try to maintain [maximum pressure](#) on India.¹³⁵

India-Iran

The visit of the Iranian defence minister to India on February 3 was the first of its kind in the last 40 years. He attended the Indian Ocean Region Defence Ministers' [Conclave](#) on the side lines of Aero India 2021.¹³⁶ The visit comes in the backdrop of visits by the Indian Defence Minister and External Affairs Minister to Tehran in September 2020.

There was conjecture that India may participate in the Iran-Russia Maritime Security Belt 2021 joint naval exercise in the northern Indian Ocean. The Iranian Spokesperson of the drill Admiral Gholamreza Tahani had said that the Indian Navy would participate with a select group of vessels. However, the Indian navy later released a [statement](#) clarifying that it is not participating in any such exercise and reports circulated earlier were false.¹³⁷

COVID Vaccine Diplomacy

While the security situation in Pakistan and Afghanistan continues to be a priority, the ongoing COVID pandemic is also a major issue as the virus has severely affected the economies of both countries. Afghanistan received the first 500,000 doses of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine [from India](#) on February 7.¹³⁸ The Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan has given emergency approval to vaccines from Russia and China; it has received its share from COVAX. The People's Liberation Army of China also [donated](#) 500,000 doses of the vaccine to the Pakistan Armed Forces, which later donated it to frontline health workers.¹³⁹

Islamabad and Kabul also participated in a [workshop](#) organised by India on "Covid-19 Management; Experiences, Good Practices, and Way Forward" on February 18. During his speech in the workshop, India Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggested "creating a special visa scheme for doctors and nurses, so that they can attend health emergencies, on the request of the receiving country and creating a regional platform for collating, compiling and studying data about the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines among our populations."¹⁴⁰

Defence Updates

- Pakistan conducted the training launch of a surface-to-surface Ghaznavi ballistic missile on February 3. The missile can deliver nuclear and conventional warheads up to a range of 290 kilometres. This training launch was the culminating point of the Annual Field Training Exercise of the Army Strategic Forces Command.¹⁴¹
- Pakistan conducted the training launch of the Babur IA cruise missile on February 11. The cruise missile has a range of 450 kilometres and can be launched from either a submarine or a land-based quad-launcher.¹⁴²
- The Pakistan Navy held the 7th exercise of the AMAN series, 'AMAN-21' from February 11-16. Navies from 45 countries participated in the exercise.¹⁴³
- Pakistan Navy Ships Alamgir and Aslat conducted the bilateral exercise 'Arabian Monsoon 2021' with ships of the Russian Federation Navy, Admiral Grigorovich, and Dmitriy Rogachov in the North Arabian Sea. Besides, Pakistan Navy Ship Zulfiquar also conducted a bilateral exercise 'Lion Star-II' with Sri Lankan Navy Ship Gajabahu. The Pakistan Navy's fixed and rotary wing aircraft and Pakistan Air Force fighters participated in these exercises. The exercises included anti-surface, anti-air warfare, manoeuvring, and communication serials.¹⁴⁴
- Pakistan's Special Service Group (SSG) conducted a three-week long bilateral exercise 'Ataturk-XI 2021' with the Turkish Special forces. The exercise was focused on counter-terrorism operations including cordon and search techniques, built-up area clearance drills with combat aviation support and hostage rescue.¹⁴⁵
- The Pakistan Army held month-long war games, codenamed 'Jidar-ul-Hadeed', at Chhor in the Thar Desert from January 28 to February 28. Troops assigned to the Karachi Corps participated in the drills. According to the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), the defensive manoeuvres were aimed at validating the concept of defence in deserts. The army has a Desert Warfare School at Chhor, which is 165km from Hyderabad (Pakistan).¹⁴⁶

India-West Asia

Sanket Joshi

In recent weeks, India's Vaccine Maitri programme has gathered momentum in the Middle East. Since January 2021, the made-in-India 'Covishield' vaccines have been supplied to countries such as the UAE, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, and Egypt.¹⁴⁷

Aero India 2021

Aero India, India's major exhibition for the aerospace industry was organised in Bengaluru (Karnataka) from February 3-5, 2021.¹⁴⁸ Israel's 'Rafael Advanced Defence Systems' unveiled a new addition to the air-to-surface munitions family – [SPICE 250ER](#) (Extended Range) – at this exhibition. This weapon system is an up-gradation of 'SPICE 2000' munitions currently being used by the Indian Air-Force.¹⁴⁹

On the arms procurement front, the Indian Army received the first consignment of [6,000 Israeli Negev Light Machine Guns](#) out of the 16,000 ordered last year under the Fast Track Procedure.¹⁵⁰ Further, the [Israeli firm 'Smart Shooter'](#), whose new-age fire-control system turns assault rifles into smart weapons, is looking to set up a manufacturing plant in India.¹⁵¹ In another development, the Indian Army has acquired four High Altitude Long Endurance (HALE) [Heron TP drones](#) on lease from Israel for USD 200 million.¹⁵² "These drones are likely to be used for surveillance along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh, where the disengagement process between Indian and Chinese troops has started after a protracted military standoff".¹⁵³

India-Israel-Palestine

In a significant development, the [International Criminal Court \(ICC\)](#) has ruled that "it has jurisdiction to probe war crimes charges against the Israelis with respect to their activities in the Palestinian territories of the West Bank, Gaza strip and East Jerusalem".¹⁵⁴ The United States expressed "[serious concerns about ICC's decision](#)" as it does not recognise Palestine as a sovereign state and is, therefore, "not qualified to obtain membership as state".¹⁵⁵ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly wrote to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on February 7 [asking India to "speak out against ICC's decision, and send a clear signal to the ICC to stop assault on justice and common sense"](#).¹⁵⁶ Delhi has reportedly conveyed to Tel Aviv that "since India is not a

signatory to the 'Rome Statute', the founding treaty of the ICC, it would not comment or take a position on any of the court's decisions or rulings".¹⁵⁷

US-Palestine relations are likely to witness a major change under the Biden administration. The acting US Ambassador to the United Nations has told the UN Security Council (UNSC) that the policy of the United States under the new administration "will be to support a mutually agreed [two-state solution](#), one in which Israel lives in peace and security alongside a viable Palestinian state".¹⁵⁸ In the UNSC, India has also re-iterated its support for the [Palestinian nation building](#) efforts.¹⁵⁹ Further India stated that, "normalisation of relations between Israel and some Arab states has the [potential to promote regional cooperation](#)... and can provide the necessary momentum for the resumption of direct negotiations between Israel and Palestine".¹⁶⁰

The perpetrators of the [improvised explosive device \(IED\)](#) blast in front of the Israeli Embassy in New Delhi on January 29 is still unknown. There have been unconfirmed reports suggesting Iran's involvement along with local actors.¹⁶¹ Sources in the Indian security establishment have stressed that the IED was a [military grade 'PETN', which has](#) been used by the groups such as Al-Qaeda in the past.¹⁶² EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar has assured his Israeli counterpart of India's support to "locate all those involved in the explosion".¹⁶³

India and the Gulf: A Robust Strategic Partnership

Dubai-based International Federation of the [Indo-Israel Chambers of Commerce](#) (IFIICC) is looking to facilitate India-Israel-UAE trilateral business relationships in the countries in which there is strong presence of the Indian and Israeli diaspora.¹⁶⁴ Meanwhile, India has classified [foreign portfolio investors](#) (FPI) from the UAE as eligible for taking up Category-I license, a move that could further boost investments from the Gulf to India.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, Israel's top business chamber, the Federation of Israeli Chambers of Commerce and Industry has extended its strong support for an [Israel-India free trade agreement](#) (FTA). Further, the [Federation of Indian Export Organisations](#) (FIEO) expects US sanctions on Iran to be lifted, which would boost the chances of India-Iran trade relations improving, thereby resulting in the possibility of up to USD3 billion of exports.¹⁶⁶ Meanwhile, in a [boost to the India-Oman partnership](#), Prime Minister Narendra Modi "spoke with Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said about India-Muscat strategic partnership and close co-operation during the COVID-19 pandemic".¹⁶⁷

On the energy front, "India has urged OPEC and allied oil producers to [ease production cuts](#) as higher crude prices are hitting oil demand in India and adding to inflationary pressure on the economy".¹⁶⁸ To that end, Saudi Arabia

is already planning to [increase oil production which](#) is indicative of growing confidence in oil price recovery".¹⁶⁹ On February 3, India and Saudi Arabia held the virtual inaugural Senior Official Meeting (SOM) of the Committee on Political, Security, Social and Cultural Cooperation (PSSC) under the aegis of the 'India-Saudi Arabia Agreement for Strategic Partnership Council'.¹⁷⁰

In a boost to [India-Bahrain energy co-operation](#), the joint working group on renewable energy held a virtual meeting on February 4.¹⁷¹ Both countries agreed to "forge deeper engagement in capacity building and focused cooperation between concerned government agencies and the private sector in the field of solar, wind and clean hydrogen".¹⁷² There are also reports that Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd. (BPCL) has plans to acquire Oman Oil Company's shares in the [Bina refinery project](#) in Madhya Pradesh for INR2400 crore (USD331 million approximately).¹⁷³

In terms of investments from the Gulf, [Indian edtech start-up 'Eupheus Learning'](#) has raised USD4.1 million from Kuwait-based firms.¹⁷⁴ Further, a [Shapoorji Pallonji group company](#) signed an order worth US 127.5 million (INR930 crore) for a solar power project in Egypt's Kom Ombo region.¹⁷⁵ In another development, [Indian short video app 'Josh'](#) has raised USD100 million from the Qatar Investment Authority and Glade Brook Capital Partners.¹⁷⁶ On February 1, Delhi and Doha also held [foreign office consultations](#) and reviewed the entire gamut of bilateral relations.¹⁷⁷

Humanitarian Assistance to Syria

India's humanitarian assistance to the region continued with Delhi gifting [2000 MT rice to the Syrian Government](#).¹⁷⁸ Earlier in July 2020, India had also gifted 10 MT of medicines to Syria as part of Covid-19 assistance. The bilateral engagement between Delhi and Damascus has continued apace even during a decade of internal conflict in Syria. India has also shown its willingness to play a 'constructive role' in the UNSC to [end the conflict in Syria](#).¹⁷⁹



India's humanitarian assistance of 2000 MT rice as gift for people of Syria arrives in Latakia, February 11, 2021. Source: Twitter/@eoidamascus

Regional Security

The Indian Army is likely to undertake [bilateral joint exercises with Saudi Arabia](#) in 2022.¹⁸⁰ On US-Saudi Arabia relations, President Biden announced the end of US support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen.¹⁸¹ Meanwhile, there has been a [major policy reversal from the Trump administration era in](#) US-Iran relations with the US willing to “attend a meeting of P5+1 and Iran to discuss the way forward on Iran's nuclear program”.¹⁸² The Biden administration also revoked former President Donald Trump's restoration of [UN sanctions on Iran](#).¹⁸³

A Disinfo Lab report has revealed a disinformation and propaganda campaign by [Pakistan and Turkey](#) and has alleged that US territory is being used to launch [information warfare against India](#).¹⁸⁴ Considering the growing strategic proximity between Islamabad and Ankara, Delhi is also keeping a close eye on the Joint [Turkey-Pakistan military exercises](#) in the region, including in areas bordering Afghanistan.¹⁸⁵

Regional Defence Procurement Update (As on February 23, 2021)

Country	Weapon System/Space Technology	Status and Cost
Egypt	Rolling Airframe Missiles (RAM) Block 2 Tactical Missiles and Related Equipment ¹⁸⁶	Deal approved by the US Department of State, Estimated Cost USD197 million
Israel and the United States	Arrow 4 Interceptor Missile ¹⁸⁷	System Development Announced
Jordan	F-16 Air Combat Training Centre and Related Equipment ¹⁸⁸	Deal approved by the US Department of State, Estimated Cost USD60 million
Iran	Zoljanah Satellite Launch Vehicle ¹⁸⁹	Iran for the first-time test-launched a combined satellite launch vehicle

Russia: Defence Footprint in India's Neighbourhood

Anushka Nair

India's Foreign Secretary (FS) Harsh Vardhan Shringla [travelled to Moscow](#) on February 16-18 for a series of bilateral meetings with high level officials from the Russian Foreign Ministry, including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Mogulov.¹⁹⁰ During the visit, the FS discussed a [wide range of issues](#) such as enhanced India-Russia co-ordination on various international platforms, closer co-operation on counter-terrorism, strengthening business/economic linkages with specific reference to liquefied natural gas (LNG), coking coal for Indian steel sector, and new technologies.¹⁹¹ The FS also delivered a lecture at the Russia Academy of Diplomacy and interacted with members from academia. A week earlier, the Russian Embassy in New Delhi had announced that India and Russia have finalised an ['air bubble' agreement](#), which came into effect on February 12, and will allow certain international passenger flights to enter the territories of the two countries.¹⁹²



Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla called on Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow on February 17, 2021. Source: Twitter/@IndEmbMoscow

India-Russia defence partnership has been progressing apace. Russian weapons manufacturer [Kalashnikov announced](#) in February that it will “launch production of AK-203 rifles” via the joint venture in India by 2021 with the Indian Defence Ministry.¹⁹³ The manufacturer also hoped that it will be a long-term trend and that others may follow soon.¹⁹⁴

Russia’s recent deal to [supply Orlan-10E drones](#) to Myanmar is an indication of Moscow’s desire to play a bigger role in the military drones market.¹⁹⁵ The drones are among items agreed upon in January 2021 as part of a larger deal between the defence ministries of the two countries for the supply of Pantsir-S1 air defence systems.¹⁹⁶ The recent coup in Myanmar was followed by patrols by [armoured vehicles](#) on the streets that have been imported from Russia by the Tatmadaw in recent years, but whose deliveries have not been officially documented.¹⁹⁷ Russia reportedly [remains supportive](#) of Myanmar’s military.¹⁹⁸

Russian Navy ships participated in a 45-nation biannual military exercise, AMAN 2021, hosted by Pakistan. The Russian Navy [dispatched vessels](#) from its Black Sea Fleet, frigate Admiral Grigorovich and patrol vessel Dmitriy Rogachev, accompanied by a tug boat, a naval helicopter, as well as marine and demining units.¹⁹⁹ While the evolving [Russia-Pakistan defence co-operation](#) may be a cause of concern for India, Russian officials recently attempted to allay Indian concerns, reiterating that all engagements with Pakistan are directed solely towards advancing the peace process in Afghanistan, and the role of the Taliban in the process.²⁰⁰

The navies of Russia and Iran participated in a [joint naval drill](#), the Iran-Russia Maritime Security Belt 2021, from February 17-18, covering an area of 17,000 square kilometres (6,500 square miles) in the northern Indian Ocean.²⁰¹ The Iranian spokesperson for the naval exercises had earlier said that the exercise was designed to allow other countries to join in at any point, adding that the Indian Navy had requested to join, and that the Chinese would also participate. The [Indian Navy clarified](#) a few days later that it would not, in fact, be a part of the exercise.²⁰²

Russia participated in IDEX 2021, the largest defence exhibition in the Middle East, held in Abu Dhabi from February 21 to February 25. It is set to be a model of the T-14 Armata, produced by a subsidiary of Russia’s Rostec State Corporation. The Armata is a new generation Russian tracked combat tank designed for manoeuvre warfare against any type of enemy tank and mechanised infantry units. The expo is a significant opportunity for Moscow, with the Middle East region accounting for nearly half of [Russian military](#) supplier Rosoboronexport’s products.²⁰³

President Putin said that Moscow plans to [foster ties with Tokyo](#), but within the limits of its constitution.²⁰⁴ The unsaid reference is to the ownership of the Southern Kuril Islands, named the Northern Territories in Japan, which have been an impediment in the signing of a peace treaty between the two nations after the end of World War II. The Russian Foreign Ministry has said in a number of statements that Moscow's sovereignty over the islands has been repeatedly communicated on multiple platforms, and is unquestionable.²⁰⁵

On the domestic front, on February 16, the Russian Parliament [passed a legislation](#) that imposed heavy penalties on organisations found to be promoting the interests of 'foreign states'.²⁰⁶ Cases such as these often emanate in Russia, with the most recent being the imposition of a fine of USD150,000 on the US state-run broadcaster Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) for alleged breaches by its network.²⁰⁷ The chairman of the Russian Parliament said that the laws were simply [retaliatory to equivalent measures](#) already in place in the United States.²⁰⁸

Russia and the United States appear to be continuing with their cautious, nearly hostile, approach to one another. During a telephone call on February 4, when the US Secretary of State sought to discuss the developments in the case of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, the Russian Foreign Minister [reportedly](#) drew his attention to matters closer to home, like the prosecution of rioters that stormed the Capitol in the aftermath of the US Presidential election.²⁰⁹ Both countries released statements, with the [State Department](#) emphasising America's commitment to protect its interests in the region, and the Russian Foreign Ministry reiterating that its domestic judicial system is not open to discussion or critique by foreign players.²¹⁰

On the other hand, Russia's ties with China are progressing smoothly. After refusing to join the United States' eight-country, NASA-led Artemis lunar exploration programme, Moscow's official space agency Roscosmos has reportedly "completed domestic proceedings to harmonise" the [MoU signed between Russian and China](#) on "co-operation to create the International Lunar Research Station". The Roscosmos head had previously likened America's Artemis programme to the NATO alliance.²¹¹ The Russia-China collaboration aims to operationalise its [International Lunar Research Station](#) (ILRS) early in the next decade, and attempt a human landing mission at the lunar south pole of the moon between 2036 and 2045.²¹²

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