



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

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INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

The ISR features an assessment of key developments, trends, and policies pertaining to India's immediate and continental neighbourhood, and is authored by Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.), Distinguished Fellow for Military Strategy. The research team includes Shreyas Deshmukh, Research Associate. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to Shreyas Deshmukh at shreyas@dpg.org.in. To subscribe, please [click here](#).

Cover Images:

Field Marshal Asim Munir, the Chief of the Pakistan Army, met with Admiral Brad Cooper, the new US CENTCOM Commander, in Tampa, Florida, USA, on August 10, 2025. Source: [Pakistan ISPR](#)

Bangladesh Government Chief Advisor Prof. Muhammad Yunus unveiled the 'July Declaration' on August 5, 2025. Source: [Khaborer Kagoj](#)

India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri was called on Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli on August 17, 2025. Source: [X/@IndiaInNepal](#)

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India Strategic Review

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

PAKISTAN

US-Pakistan Ties

On July 31, the US and Pakistan concluded a trade agreement cutting the tariff on Pakistani goods to 19%, down from a previously signalled 29%.¹ President Donald Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform, "We have just concluded a deal with the country of Pakistan, whereby Pakistan and the United States will work together on developing their massive oil reserves. We are in the process of choosing the oil company that will lead this partnership. Provocatively, he added, "Who knows, maybe they'll be selling oil to India someday!"²

President Trump's claim of "massive oil reserves" has baffled experts. Pakistan's proven recoverable conventional crude oil reserves, estimated to be between 234 million and 353 million barrels, place it around 50th in the world.³ However, the trade agreement does have wider diplomatic ramifications of improving ties between the two countries.

Following the deal, Pakistan's oil refiner, Cnergyico, announced that it would import 1 million barrels of US crude from Vitol in October, marking the country's first-ever purchase of American crude. According to Cnergyico, "This is a test spot cargo under our umbrella term agreement with Vitol. If commercially viable and available, we could consider importing at least one cargo per month".⁴

On August 11, the United States designated the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), labelling it a "foreign terrorist" organisation. In a statement, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said the move "demonstrates the Trump Administration's commitment to countering terrorism."⁵ The move comes a month after the US designated The Resistance Front (TRF), which Rubio described as an offshoot of Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a "foreign terrorist" organisation. The TRF was responsible for the Phalgam terror attack that killed 26 civilians in Kashmir.

On August 10, Field Marshal Asim Munir, Pakistan Army Chief, was on his second visit to the US in two months. According to the ISPR press release, Munir was present for the retirement ceremony of General Michael E. Kurilla, the departing Commander

of United States Central Command, and the change of command ceremony. He also had a meeting with General Dan Caine, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. While addressing the Pakistani diaspora at a dinner in Tampa, Florida, Field Marshal Munir said, "We are a nuclear nation; if we think we are going down, we'll take half the world down with us." Commenting on India holding the Indus Water Treaty in abeyance, he said, "We will wait for India to build a dam, and when it does so, *phir 10 missile sey faarigh kar dengey* [we will destroy it with 10 missiles]." ⁶

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs stated that the remarks "reinforce the well-held doubts about the integrity of nuclear command and control in a state where the military is hand-in-glove with terrorist groups. It is also regrettable that these remarks should have been made from the soil of a friendly third country." ⁷

Field Marshal Munir's second visit to the US in two months suggests a strengthening of the US-Pakistan defence partnership. While the US seeks to reassert its presence in the Af-Pak region, Pakistan is taking advantage of the situation to reclaim its role in the region's geopolitical dynamics.

Visit of China's Foreign Minister to Pakistan

On August 21, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi attended the Sixth Round of the China-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue in Islamabad, where he affirmed that China would continue to give precedence to Pakistan within its neighbourhood diplomacy and was prepared to develop an advanced iteration of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Wang Yi pointed out that China and Pakistan will stay committed to the "four always" principles, that include maintaining high-degree of mutual trust and mutual support; focus on development and win-win cooperation; safeguard security and improve people's livelihoods; and strengthen coordination and meet challenges together. ⁸

Beijing framed the next phase of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as an "upgraded Version 2.0" of CPEC with five thematic "corridors" (growth, livelihood, innovation, green, open) with a sectoral push on industry, agriculture and mining. There were explicit references to Gwadar Port and the Karakoram Highway. Beijing paired the investment pitch with pointed language on protecting Chinese personnel, projects and institutions. Islamabad, for its part, pledged "all measures" to ensure safety and to intensify counter-terrorism cooperation.

Wang Yi also held meetings with the Pakistani Prime Minister, the President and the Army Chief. In a meeting with Field Marshal Munir, Wang Yi praised the Pakistan Army as "the ballast of national stability and a staunch defender of China-Pakistan friendship and cooperation." China will continue to support Pakistan in safeguarding

its territorial integrity and national security and welcomes Pakistan to play a greater role in international affairs.⁹

Pakistan's military continues to procure advanced Chinese equipment. On August 2, the Pakistan Army inducted Chinese Z-10ME attack helicopters to reinforce its "integrated battlefield response". The Z-10ME can carry a wide variety of Chinese-produced munitions, including FS70B aerial blast fragmentation rockets, GR5 guided rockets, TY-90 air-to-air missiles and CM-502KG air-to-surface missiles. It can be configured to carry a total of 16 anti-tank missiles, or four seven-round rocket pods or two 19-round rocket pods.¹⁰

On August 15, the launch ceremony of the third Hangor-class submarine was held in Wuhan, China. Pakistan has signed an agreement with China Shipbuilding & Offshore International Company Ltd to acquire eight Hangor-class submarines. Under the contract, four submarines are being built in China, while the remaining four will be constructed in Pakistan at Karachi Shipyard and Engineering Works Ltd (KS&EW) under the Transfer of Technology program.¹¹

Internal Security Situation

On July 30, the Pakistan Army launched Operation Sarbakaf in Bajaur district (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), billed as a "precise, intelligence-based" campaign aimed at militants affiliated with Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Authorities imposed a multi-day curfew across 15 to 16 villages, and troops used helicopter gunships, artillery, and intelligence-based raids against militant hideouts.

Through August, the operation continued with on-off pauses, displacing thousands of residents who fled to safer areas. Some estimates put the number of displaced at approximately 100,000.¹² Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) has opposed the operation, with Imran Khan issuing a "clear message" to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur that the federal government must not be allowed to launch another military operation in the province and its tribal areas.¹³

Throughout August, Balochistan remained under Section 144, which bans peaceful assemblies, gatherings of more than five people, pillion riding, and prohibits the use of masks or mufflers in public.¹⁴ Additionally, mobile internet services were shut down throughout the province for almost the whole month. These measures are being defended on security grounds, but are deepening the alienation and mistrust between the local population and the state.

There has also been little visible impact on the security situation in the two provinces. On August 14, Pakistan's Independence Day, militants carried out 13 attacks against

police stations, checkpoints and patrols across seven districts in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, killing six officers.¹⁵ On August 10, at least five people were injured after an improvised explosive device blast targeted the Peshawar-bound Jaffar Express train in Mastung district of Balochistan province.¹⁶ This was the second attack on this train in three days.

AFGHANISTAN – FOUR YEARS OF TALIBAN RULE

Four years after Kabul fell, the Taliban have consolidated control, degraded large-scale insurgency, and enforced sweeping social control, especially on women and the media. Regionally, de facto acceptance is widening even without broad de jure recognition, essentially because neighbours prioritise border security, migration management, and counter-narcotics over human rights conditionality. Donor fatigue, natural disasters, and a flood of refugees from Pakistan and Iran have gravely exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in the country.

Foreign Policy and Regional Dynamics

In July 2025, Russia became the first state to formally recognise the Taliban government by accepting its ambassador's credentials, after delisting the Taliban from its terrorist roster in April. Moscow paired the move with offers of cooperation on security and drugs.¹⁷ Other countries have not followed suit, but acceptance of the Taliban government has undeniably deepened. China accredited a Taliban ambassador in 2023 and continues pragmatic engagement without formal recognition. Gulf and Central Asian states are likewise expanding functional ties. The net effect is a steady normalisation without the human rights concessions that many Western capitals seek.

India has taken a pragmatic approach of engaging with the Taliban, without conferring legitimacy. India's engagement has been anchored by substantial humanitarian assistance and growing economic cooperation. Beyond humanitarian aid, both sides have increasingly focused on trade facilitation through Iran's Chabahar Port, which India operates under a 10-year agreement. The Taliban has expressed a strong interest in utilising this corridor to reduce Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistani ports.

Afghanistan-Pakistan ties remain strained as Islamabad adopts a coercive approach pressuring Kabul over terrorist sanctuaries, episodic cross-border strikes, repeated closures at Torkham/Chaman that choke trade, and large-scale detentions and deportations of refugees. China, while expanding its cooperation with Kabul, also

serves to broker better relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan through the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral.¹⁸

Humanitarian Situation and the Economy

Afghanistan faces an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe with nearly half of the population (22.9 million out of 46 million people) requiring urgent humanitarian assistance. Child malnutrition has reached unprecedented levels, with 3.5 million children under five suffering from acute malnutrition, 10.3 per cent of whom are severely malnourished.¹⁹ Additionally, 1.2 million pregnant and breastfeeding mothers are malnourished.

A powerful earthquake struck eastern Afghanistan near the border with Pakistan late on Sunday, August 31, 2025, resulting in over 1,400 deaths and more than 3,100 injuries. In the last three years, Afghanistan has witnessed three major earthquakes, widespread floods, and severe droughts, compounding the humanitarian crisis.

In 2025, some 1.6 million Afghans have returned from Iran (1.3 million) and Pakistan (348,000), including 539,000 between July 1 and 26, stretching relief efforts at the border to breaking point and placing further pressure on basic service provision in already over-strained host communities.²⁰

Afghanistan's humanitarian plan is barely one-quarter funded in 2025, forcing hyper-prioritisation just as vulnerability deepens. The US has been the largest donor to the Afghanistan humanitarian response since 2013, but in April 2025, it decided to suspend all aid to Afghanistan. In addition to US funding cuts, other donors – including France, Sweden and the United Kingdom – have also reduced their official development assistance and humanitarian budgets.

Afghanistan's GDP is estimated to have grown 2.5 per cent in 2024, marking the second consecutive year of economic expansion. The recovery is primarily driven by the agriculture, mining, construction and commerce sectors, while manufacturing and services continue to face challenges due to an unfavourable business environment, persistent export barriers, and a reduction in foreign aid.²¹ Taliban's opium ban, though effective, has left a massive gap in rural incomes, heightening poverty, instability, and social distress among farming communities.

Governance by Exclusion

Afghanistan remains the only country that bars girls from secondary and higher education and severely curtails women's work and movement. Seventy-eight per cent of young Afghan women are not in education, employment or training. Only one in

four women is working or seeking work—one of the largest gender gaps globally. Women are completely excluded from formal political life in Afghanistan. In 2020, Afghan women held over 25 per cent of seats in Parliament and could run for president.²²

Minority communities in Afghanistan—most notably the Hazaras, Shias, Sikhs, Christians, and Ahmadiyya Muslims—have faced grave and worsening persecution under Taliban rule since 2021, culminating in 2025 with widespread abuses of human rights and a near-total collapse of religious freedom. The Hazara community, in particular, continues to experience targeted violence, forced displacement, loss of political representation, confiscation of land and humanitarian aid, and escalating gender-based attacks against women and girls. The Hazaras are also being attacked by the Islamic State of Khorasan Province, with the Taliban authorities failing to provide adequate protection.

Reporters Without Borders ranks Afghanistan 175 out of 180 countries in the 2025 World Press Freedom Index. Since the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, the media landscape has been decimated. In the space of three months, 43 per cent of Afghan media outlets disappeared. More than two-thirds of the 12,000 journalists in the country in 2021 have left the profession, and eight out of ten women journalists have had to stop working.²³

The 2024 Law on the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which now bans the broadcasting of images of living beings, has led to the closure of television channels in several provinces. This law also stipulates that a woman's voice must not be heard outside her home, prompting many media outlets to abandon all content focused on women. Some media space persists, but only within red lines set by the Taliban authorities.

DEVELOPMENTS ON THE INDIA-CHINA LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL (LAC)

Diplomatic Engagements

At the invitation of National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, China's Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi paid an official visit to India on 18-19 August. Apart from co-chairing the 24th round of the Special Representatives' (SRs) Dialogue on the Boundary Question between India and China with the NSA, Foreign Minister Wang Yi also held bilateral talks with External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar and called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The SRs' dialogue led to some concrete outcomes regarding the situation at the LAC.²⁴ The two sides have agreed to:

- Set up an Expert Group, under the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on the China-India border affairs (WMCC) framework, to explore boundary delimitation on appropriate Sectors.
- Set up a Working Group, under the WMCC framework, to advance effective border management in order to maintain peace and tranquillity in the border areas.
- Create General-Level Mechanisms in the Eastern and Middle Sectors, in addition to the existing General-Level Mechanism in the Western Sector and hold the next round of General-Level Mechanism meeting in the Western Sector at an early date.
- Use the border management mechanisms at diplomatic and military levels to carry forward the process of border management, and discuss de-escalation, beginning with the principles and modalities thereof.
- Sharing hydrological information on cross-border rivers during emergency situations based on humanitarian considerations.

In the meeting between Dr Jaishankar and Wang Yi, both sides agreed to resume direct flights between China and India at the earliest and facilitate visas for tourists, businesses, media, and other visitors.²⁵ Dr Jaishankar underlined India's concerns concerning the mega dam construction being undertaken by China in the lower reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra River), and urged the need for utmost transparency in this regard.²⁶

On August 31, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in Tianjin. Both sides referred to their relationship as partners, not rivals, affirmed the need to maintain peace and tranquillity at the border, and the need to expand cooperation. However, there was a difference in the framing of the border issue and its impact on ties. The Indian statement of the meeting underlined the importance of peace and tranquillity in the border areas for the continued development of bilateral relations.²⁷ China, however, stuck to its stance that the boundary question should not define the overall China-India relations.²⁸

There is a gradual thaw in India-China relations driven by an improvement in the situation at the LAC. All eyes will now be on the de-escalation process for the thinning out of additional forces that were deployed along the LAC following the 2020 crisis.

BANGLADESH

Anniversary of Regime Change

On August 5, marking the anniversary of the ouster of the Sheikh Hasina government, Professor Muhammad Yunus, the Chief Adviser to the Interim Government of Bangladesh, presented the 'July Declaration' during a public event. This document provides official state and constitutional recognition of the July 2024 mass uprising.²⁹ Professor Yunus also announced that elections would be held in Bangladesh before Ramadan in February 2026.

One year of the Yunus-led government has seen mixed results. On taking over power, Yunus pledged sweeping institutional reforms as the cornerstone of a "new Bangladesh." While a total of 11 reform commissions had been convened, systemic changes remained stalled by bureaucratic inertia and lack of political consensus.³⁰

The government's decision to ban the Awami League has been highly controversial, blurring the line between legitimate security measures and political repression. Such measures mirror the tactics used by the Awami League against opposition parties and have prompted human rights groups to warn that "authoritarian frameworks" remain intact beneath the interim government's reformist veneer.³¹

Even as the Awami League remains banned, religious hardliners have grown bolder. Islamist groups that were suppressed under Hasina (such as Hefazat-e-Islam and Jamaat-e-Islami) have reemerged in public life with the interim government lifting restrictions on them. The Hindu community has faced persistent attacks; at least 258 communal attacks were reported in the first half of 2025. Women have also been targeted, with Islamist leaders openly opposing the idea of women's equal rights.

The interim government's economic stewardship presents a mixed picture. While some stability measures have shown progress, fundamental economic challenges persist. Foreign reserves have stabilised at around \$20 billion, and remittance flows have increased. Inflation has declined from 12 per cent to 9 per cent. However, the GDP growth for fiscal year 2024-25 is projected at between 3 and 4 per cent, significantly lower than expected due to political instability and inflationary pressures. The interim government inherited a growing economy but has struggled to maintain investor confidence.

There has been a significant realignment of Bangladesh's foreign policy away from the India-centric tilt towards China and Pakistan. While Bangladesh could hope to gain more financial support from China, Yunus's approach clashes with deep structural dependencies on India that exist in energy security, connectivity, supply of key food

items, and issues of river waters. A short-term domestic gain from anti-India sentiment could prove costly for Bangladesh in the long run.

An unelected government carries both advantages and disadvantages. It can push a transformational agenda if it shuns ideology and focuses purely on national interests. This is not clearly visible in Yunus's actions.

SRI LANKA

Arrest of Wickremesinghe

On August 22, Former Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe was arrested on charges of misusing public funds during an international tour in 2023. The allegations centre on a 2023 trip to London, where the former president attended the PhD graduation of his wife, Professor Maithree Wickremesinghe, at the University of Wolverhampton. Investigators claim about 50,000 dollars in state funds were spent on airfare, accommodation, and related costs, despite the visit having no official purpose.³²

The move has jolted the country's political circles. Sri Lanka's prominent political leaders appeared at the court in a show of support for Wickremesinghe, including the former president Maithripala Sirisena as well as the parliamentarian Namal Rajapaksa, the son and heir apparent of former president Mahinda Rajapaksa.³³ Sajith Premadasa, presently the leader of the opposition and head of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, visited Wickremesinghe at the prison hospital where he was admitted soon after his arrest, as did former president Mahinda Rajapaksa.³⁴

Wickremesinghe was granted bail on August 26 on health grounds, but the debate around his arrest continues, with the charges against him appearing to be trivial and underwhelming. The arrest's immediate implications are institutional and procedural. It places the Attorney-General's Department, police, and courts under scrutiny. It will be read as a test of whether high office holders are genuinely subject to the law or whether prosecutions are being used as instruments of politics. The impact on domestic politics will come from how the process looks, not just what is alleged.

The controversy surrounding Wickremesinghe's arrest also has potential economic ramifications through political distraction and instability. There is concern that prolonged political turmoil could divert the government's attention from critical economic reforms and the challenging IMF bailout program that Wickremesinghe negotiated during the 2022 crisis.

The ultimate significance of Wickremesinghe's arrest will depend on whether it represents genuine systemic change or merely political theatre.

NEPAL

India-Nepal Relations

Vikram Misri, the Foreign Secretary of India, conducted an official visit to Nepal from August 17 to 18, during which he met with President Ramchandra Paudel, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Arzu Rana Deuba. Discussions were held on matters of physical connectivity, energy cooperation, digital connectivity and various aspects of development cooperation. Misri also handed over the formal invitation of the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, to Prime Minister Oli for an official visit to India at a mutually convenient date.³⁵ The Foreign Secretary also met with the Chief of Army Staff of Nepal, General Ashok Raj Sigdel, and presented defence supplies and equipment, including Light Strike Vehicles (LSVs).

During the visit of China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi to India from August 18 to 19, both countries have agreed to resume the trade route via Lipulekh Pass, which lies on the tri-junction of India, China and Nepal. In the past, Nepal has laid claims to Lipulekh, along with Kalapani and Limpiyadhura, as part of its territory, citing the 1816 Sugauli Treaty, which defines its border along the Kali River. Nepal argues that the pass lies east of the river.

Leaders of all political parties in the Nepal Parliament voiced a unified stance against the India-China agreement on the use of the Lipulekh trade route, reached without Nepal's consent.³⁶ On August 21, Nepal sent two separate diplomatic notes to India and China reaffirming its claim over Lipulekh and urging both neighbours to desist from any activity such as road construction or trade in the disputed area.³⁷

In a statement, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs affirmed that trade across the India-China border through Lipulekh Pass, which began in 1954 and continued for many years, was interrupted by COVID and other developments, and that both countries have now agreed to its resumption. It added that Nepal's claims are neither justified nor based on historical facts and evidence.³⁸

Prime Minister Oli raised the issue of Lipulekh Pass in his meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the SCO meeting on August 30. President Xi reportedly told Oli that while China has no objection to Nepal's claim over that territory, the issue should be resolved bilaterally with India.³⁹

The Lipulekh dispute could cast a shadow over Oli's forthcoming visit to India in September. However, both countries understand that the dispute is complex and unlikely to be resolved soon. There are incentives to compartmentalise this issue and move ahead on shared interests.

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