



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

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Author

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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@dpq.org.in. To subscribe, please [click here](#).

Cover Images:

On July 24, 2025, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Pakistani Chief of Army Staff Syed Asim Munir in Beijing. Source: [MOFA PRC](#)

Russia's Ambassador to Afghanistan Dmitry Zhirnov in meeting with the Taliban's Acting Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi on July 3, 2025, in Kabul. Source: [X@MoFA Afg](#)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Dr. Mohamed Muizzu, President of the Republic of Maldives jointly inaugurated the Ministry of Defence building in Male, Maldives on July 25 2025. Source: [Flickr/MEA](#)

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Contents

PAKISTAN	1
<i>India-Pakistan Ties</i>	1
<i>Deteriorating Internal Security</i>	2
<i>Defence Cooperation Initiatives</i>	3
AFGHANISTAN	5
<i>Foreign Relations</i>	5
<i>Human Rights and the Humanitarian Situation</i>	6
DEVELOPMENTS ON THE INDIA-CHINA LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL (LAC)	7
<i>Diplomatic Engagements</i>	7
<i>China's Mega Dam Project</i>	8
BANGLADESH	9
<i>Political Violence</i>	9
SRI LANKA	10
<i>Economic Recovery</i>	11
MALDIVES	12
<i>Prime Minister Modi's Visit</i>	12

India Strategic Review

by Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

PAKISTAN

India-Pakistan Ties

The ceasefire between India and Pakistan following Operation Sindoor is holding, but ties between the two countries remain frozen. The focus has now shifted to the Indus Water Treaty (IWT), which has been held in abeyance by India. On June 27, a Court of Arbitration under the aegis of the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague held that it is competent to arbitrate Pakistan's concerns over Kishenganga and Ratle hydroelectric power plants being constructed by India over the Indus River system. It added that the IWT does not provide for unilateral abeyance or suspension.¹

India has rejected the Hague ruling, stating that it "has never recognised the existence in law of this so-called Court of Arbitration" and that "until such time that the Treaty is in abeyance, India is no longer bound to perform any of its obligations under the Treaty."²

Meanwhile, India has decided to fast-track four hydropower projects that are under construction in Jammu and Kashmir. The power ministry is also evaluating a detailed project report for the Tulbul navigation project, also known as Wular barrage, which was stalled in 1987 during the initial stages of work due to objections from Pakistan.³

Pakistan utilised its rotating Presidency of the UN Security Council to organise an open debate on "Promoting International Peace through Multilateralism and Peaceful Settlement of Disputes" on July 22. Pakistan Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar presided over the discussion. In his address, Dar underscored that Kashmir's final status must be decided per UNSC resolutions and the Kashmiri people's wishes. He also raised concerns about India's unilateral suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty.⁴

In his remarks, India's permanent representative to the UN, P Harish, dismissed Pakistan's comments. He stated, "On the one hand, there is India, which is a mature democracy, a surging economy and a pluralistic and inclusive society. At the other extreme is Pakistan, steeped in fanaticism and terrorism, and a serial borrower from the IMF."

With both sides having adopted hardened positions, there is no likelihood of a thaw in bilateral relations.

Deteriorating Internal Security

The security situation in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan continues to deteriorate. According to data recorded by the South Asia Terrorism Portal, the month of July has seen the highest number of fatalities in terrorism related incidents in 2025.

An assistant commissioner and a tehsildar were among five people killed, while 11 others, including several security personnel, sustained injuries when a roadside bomb struck an official vehicle in Bajaur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, on July 2.⁵ Both the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack on social media.

On July 21, eight Frontier Corps soldiers were killed and 11 were injured when armed terrorists attacked their convoy in the Orakzai district, near the Afghan border.⁶ In an incident of political assassination, a leader of Awami National Party (ANP), Maulana Khan Zeb, was killed along with his guard in Khar, Bajaur, on July 10. A massive peace rally was organised in Bajaur to protest the rising lawlessness in the region. Speakers at the event criticised successive military operations conducted in Bajaur under different names over the years, claiming they had failed to restore peace.⁷

In Balochistan, the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) launched a series of coordinated attacks from July 9 to July 11 under the codename Operation Baam (which means "dawn" in Balochi). According to the BLF, Operation Baam represents a strategically synchronised offensive targeting military installations, police outposts, communication infrastructure, and administrative facilities.

At least 17 separate attacks were reported in the districts of Panjgur, Surab, Kech, and Kharan, marking one of the most significant insurgent operations in the province in recent years.⁸

Operation Baam raised concerns about the security of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which passes through Balochistan and is a crucial part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. This could potentially increase pressure from China on Pakistan to enhance security and might impact future investments in the region.

On July 11, armed assailants stopped two passenger buses in the Zhob and Loralai districts of Balochistan, abducting nine male passengers—reportedly from Punjab—before executing them. While no group claimed responsibility, Pakistani authorities pointed to the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) as the likely perpetrator.⁹ In a similar attack, three people were killed in Kalat on July 15, when gunmen opened fire on a passenger bus.¹⁰ On July 24, A powerful explosion ripped through the Quetta-Sibi rail section, damaging a bogey of the Quetta-bound Bolan Mail. This was the third attack on trains in Pakistan since March this year.¹¹

Following these incidents, all traffic from Punjab has been prohibited from entering Balochistan at night. In addition to the nighttime ban, all vehicles moving into Balochistan will be part of protected convoys and be equipped with CCTV cameras, GPS tracking systems, and emergency panic alarms.¹²

The situation in Balochistan has raised concerns about the security of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This could potentially increase pressure from China on Pakistan to enhance security and might impact future investments in the region. On July 22, Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif held a high-level meeting regarding security arrangements for Chinese citizens in Pakistan. He stressed that the protection of Chinese nationals was the top priority of the government and directed that measures be taken on a priority basis at all airports across the country to facilitate the arrival and departure of Chinese nationals.¹³

Defence Cooperation Initiatives

Bilateral visits by defence officials of China and Pakistan indicate increasing military cooperation between the two countries. On July 8, Lieutenant General

Wang Gang, Chief of Staff of the People's Liberation Army Air Force, arrived in Islamabad for consultations with the Pakistan Air Force (PAF). According to a statement from the Pakistani military, Wang received a detailed briefing on the PAF's modernised force structure and strategic initiatives and expressed "deep appreciation for the high state of operational readiness and the cutting-edge capabilities" of the PAF. Wang also praised the PAF's performance during a recent conflict with India, calling it a "textbook example of precision, discipline and courage in the face of unprovoked aggression" and commended the "decisive and measured response delivered by PAF pilots."¹⁴

Later in the month, Field Marshal Asim Munir, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, made a sudden trip to Beijing from July 24-27, reportedly cancelling planned visits to Colombo and Jakarta. The visit came in the wake of rising attacks on Chinese nationals and interests inside Pakistan, especially along CPEC routes and infrastructure. Munir held meetings with senior Chinese leadership, including Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Vice President Han Zheng, and Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, General Zhang Youxia.¹⁵

In unusually candid language, Wang Yi urged Pakistan to "make all-out efforts to ensure the safety of Chinese personnel, projects and institutions in Pakistan", underscoring Beijing's growing concern about internal security threats.¹⁶ The meetings also covered institutional military-to-military ties, joint counterterrorism mechanisms, and defence-industrial cooperation.

A Turkish delegation, including Foreign Minister Fida Hakan and Defence Minister Yasar Guler, visited Pakistan on July 9. Guler held a meeting with Pakistan Air Chief Marshal Zaheer Ahmed Baber Sidhu and discussed regional defence and security, as well as areas of cooperation in the defence industry, including aviation and drones.¹⁷ Turkey is a notable supplier of arms to Pakistan, including Bayraktar TB2, Akinci drones and Asisguard drones.

In early July, Air Chief Marshal Sidhu, Chief of the Pakistan Air Force, conducted the first official visit by a serving PAF chief to the United States in more than a decade. He met with top US leaders, including General David W. Allvin, Chief of Staff of the US Air Force, and Kelli L. Seybolt, the Deputy Under Secretary of the Air Force for International Affairs. The discussions focused on enhancing institutional interoperability, expanding joint training initiatives, and exploring technology exchanges.¹⁸

On July 26, Pakistan hosted a Regional Chiefs of Defence Staff Conference in Islamabad, under the theme "Strengthening Bonds, Securing Peace." Organised with participation from military leaders of the United States, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, this marked Pakistan's first such multilateral defence engagement. The meeting focused primarily on enhancing counterterrorism initiatives, developing joint training programs, and advancing military diplomacy among participating nations.¹⁹

AFGHANISTAN

Foreign Relations

A significant diplomatic development in July was Moscow's formal recognition of the Taliban government, making Russia the first country to do so. On July 3, Russia's Foreign Ministry accepted the credentials of the Taliban-appointed ambassador in Moscow – effectively granting official recognition to the "Islamic Emirate".²⁰

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement "We believe that the act of official recognition of the government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan will give impetus to the development of productive bilateral cooperation between our countries in various fields." The Afghan foreign ministry has called this a "brave decision" and an "example for others."

Moscow's calculus blends security and strategy: it views the Taliban as a bulwark against Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K), which claimed responsibility for the deadly 2024 Moscow concert bombing that killed 149 civilians. Russian officials have earlier lauded the Taliban as allies in the fight against terrorism. Moscow also expects to enhance bilateral cooperation in areas like trade, infrastructure, energy, and narcotics control.

China has welcomed Russia's decision to become the first country to recognise the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan officially. Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said, "As a traditional friendly neighbour of Afghanistan, the Chinese side has always believed that Afghanistan should not be excluded from the international community."²¹

Human Rights and the Humanitarian Situation

The World Food Programme (WFP) has warned that nearly 10 million people in Afghanistan could face hunger this summer, but due to a critical funding shortfall, it is only able to assist a fraction of them. In a video message posted on X, the UN agency said it only has enough resources to help one million people out of those in urgent need.²²

The situation is aggravated by a surge of returnees from Iran and Pakistan, straining limited resources. United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) chief Roza Otunbayeva has issued an urgent plea to the international community for aid in response to Afghanistan's escalating crisis. On July 15, the UNAMA reported that following her visit to the Islam Qala border crossing in Herat, Ms. Otunbayeva expressed concern over the overwhelming scale of returns, exceeding the capacity of both the Taliban and humanitarian organisations. She emphasised that the arrival of over 1.3 million returnees in a nation grappling with 70% poverty and persistent drought would exacerbate Afghanistan's already dire humanitarian situation. Currently, an estimated 30,000 Afghan migrants are being expelled from Iran each day, with many arriving at the border lacking essential provisions such as food, shelter, and medical attention.²³

Tajikistan has reportedly launched a campaign to arrest and forcibly deport Afghan refugees, including many who possess valid residency permits. Afghan refugees have reported that these deportations are taking place without regard for their legal status. Many individuals who hold official residency documents and permits are still being detained and sent back to Afghanistan by force, often without prior notice or legal recourse. Currently, over 13,000 Afghan nationals reside in Tajikistan. A significant portion of them is awaiting decisions on immigration cases, particularly resettlement opportunities through countries like Canada.²⁴

Thousands of Afghan nationals in the US now face deportation after the official termination of their Temporary Protected Status (TPS). The decision by the US Department of Homeland Security, enacted on July 14, affects approximately 12,000 Afghans currently residing in the United States, leaving them without protection from deportation and valid work authorisation.²⁵

On July 24, UNAMA and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights released a report on the human rights risks faced by deported refugees returning to Afghanistan. The report said that there were instances of torture, mistreatment and arbitrary arrest and detention against selected women, media workers and civil society members, as well as individuals affiliated with the former government.²⁶

Afghanistan's Taliban leadership faced unprecedented international legal censure over their treatment of women. On July 8, the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague issued arrest warrants for two top Taliban figures – Supreme Leader Haibatullah Akhundzada and Chief Justice Abdul Hakim Haqqani – charging them with crimes against humanity for gender-based persecution. ICC judges found reasonable grounds that Taliban authorities have systematically deprived girls and women of fundamental rights “by reason of their gender,” through bans on education, employment, freedom of movement, and other repressive measures. Notably, this is the first time the ICC has pursued gender persecution charges.²⁷

While human rights NGOs have hailed the move, the Taliban remain unmoved. The Taliban government's spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, said, “We neither recognise anything by the name of an international court nor do we consider ourselves bound by it.”²⁸

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

Diplomatic Engagements

In mid-July, External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar made his first visit to China in almost six years, coinciding with the SCO Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Tianjin. This trip marked a calibrated attempt to deepen dialogue following years of strained ties after the 2020 LAC military stand-off in Eastern Ladakh.

In his meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Dr Jaishankar emphasised that resolving friction along the India-China border and the ability to maintain peace are fundamental for mutual trust between the two nations.



Mutual respect, mutual interest and mutual sensitivity should be the basis for handling India-China relations.

Dr Jaishankar stated India and China should now look at de-escalation of the situation along the LAC after making “good progress” in normalising the bilateral ties in the past nine months. He urged Beijing to avoid restrictive trade measures that could impede momentum.²⁹

The 34th meeting of the “Working Mechanism for Consultation & Coordination” (WMCC) on border affairs was held in New Delhi on July 23. According to India’s Ministry of External Affairs, the two sides reviewed the situation in the India-China border areas and expressed satisfaction with the general prevalence of peace and tranquillity in the border areas, leading to gradual normalisation of bilateral relations. The two sides deliberated on various measures to advance effective border management. Notably, both sides are preparing for a high-level Special Representatives (SR) meeting on the boundary question later in 2025.³⁰

A cautious diplomatic thaw continues between the two countries, but the LAC is unlikely to return to pre-2020 normalcy until greater trust develops and new confidence-building measures are in place.

China’s Mega Dam Project

On July 18, Chinese Premier Li Qiang officiated over a ceremony marking the groundbreaking of a mega dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo River, calling it China’s “project of the century.” The dam will span the Tsangpo’s great bend, where the river drops 2 km in altitude through Himalayan gorges. The design entails five cascade hydropower stations, generating an estimated 300 million megawatt hours of electricity annually, far eclipsing the Three Gorges Dam’s output of 88.2 million megawatt hours.³¹

The dam gives China the ability to control and potentially manipulate water flows into India and Bangladesh, raising concerns over seasonal water withholding or release that could cause droughts or floods downstream. The absence of a formal water-sharing treaty with China has exacerbated Indian concerns, as Beijing has refused to share technical details or environmental assessments with downstream countries.



Indian officials and experts have warned of ecological degradation, increased flood risks, and the reduction of sediment flow, which could undermine soil fertility across the northeast. Chief Minister Pema Khandu of Arunachal Pradesh called it an existential threat to indigenous communities and warned that China could even use it as a “water bomb.”³²

Earlier this year, India had conveyed its concerns to the Chinese side over the mega hydel project. It urged China to ensure that the interests of downstream states of the Brahmaputra are “not harmed by activities in upstream areas.”³³ India has also accelerated its plans for the Upper Siang hydropower project in Arunachal Pradesh—a defensive counter to safeguard water interests and reduce dependence on Chinese upstream flows.³⁴

The dam will also have a serious impact on Bangladesh, as the Brahmaputra River system provides over 65 per cent of the country’s water. The Brahmaputra also forms one of the world’s largest sediment deltas in Bangladesh, before entering the Bay of Bengal, and directly supports millions who live on its banks.³⁵

BANGLADESH

Political Violence

On July 16, clashes erupted in Gopalganj – the hometown stronghold of ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina – when supporters of the outlawed Awami League tried to disrupt a rally by the youth-led National Citizen Party (NCP). The NCP, formed by student leaders of the 2024 anti-government uprising, was commemorating the first anniversary of that revolution with a “March to Rebuild the Nation” event.³⁶

In Gopalganj, hundreds of pro-Hasina activists armed with sticks attacked both rally-goers and police, setting vehicles ablaze. Security forces responded with live fire, leaving five people dead and over 50 injured. The government imposed a curfew in Gopalganj and deployed the army to restore order.

The incident shows that the Awami League – now banned since May 2025 – has not vanished quietly and the nation remains deeply divided. The interim government condemned the violence, with Bangladesh Chief Advisor

Muhammad Yunus calling the attack on a peaceful rally a “shameful violation of fundamental rights” and vowing to punish the perpetrators. Yet the opposition narratives diverge sharply: the Awami League blamed the authorities, alleging that all those shot were its supporters. Other parties like the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami also criticised the government's handling of security.³⁷

Much of the government's crackdown is against members of the Awami League. In the aftermath of the Gopalganj violence, police arbitrarily detained hundreds of alleged Awami League supporters and filed ten murder cases against over 8,400 mostly unnamed people.³⁸

Acrimony is also increasing between the BNP and Jamaat, with violent clashes reported between Chhatrashibir – the notorious student wing of Jamaat – and the BNP's student affiliate. As the election nears and both sides vie for political control, the differences could sharpen.

Under the rule of the interim government, religious hardliners have gained ground. The Hindu–Buddhist–Christian Unity Council said it had documented more than 2,400 incidents of violence since the ouster of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina in August last year. These incidents involve murders, rapes and gang rapes, vandalism of temples, homes, and businesses.³⁹

Women in Bangladesh are facing an Islamist backlash. A recently released draft report by the Women's Affairs Reform Commission, which proposed reforms including equal inheritance rights for women, has ignited fury among the Islamist hardliners across the country. Conservative groups and political parties, including Hefazat-e-Islam, Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, Khelafat Majlis, and several influential ulema, have denounced the report for allegedly violating Sharia principles, which prescribe that sons and daughters will each receive a 2:1 ratio of wealth.⁴⁰

As Bangladesh moves towards elections in 2026, political instability could increase unless violence and extremism are controlled. However, this task looks increasingly difficult.

SRI LANKA

Economic Recovery

Eighteen months after its sovereign default and popular uprising, Sri Lanka is inching toward economic recovery – a trend affirmed by the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) program review. On July 1, the IMF Executive Board completed the 4th review of Sri Lanka's \$3 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF) program, lauding Colombo's reform performance and authorising an immediate disbursement of \$350 million.⁴¹

Sri Lanka's foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows have more than doubled in the first six months of 2025, reaching \$507 million, a 101 per cent increase from the \$252 million recorded in the same period last year.⁴²

A recent Bloomberg Economics report forecasts that Sri Lanka's economy is poised for a significant rebound. The report projects a robust GDP growth of 5 per cent in 2024, followed by a 3.5 per cent expansion in 2025 and 2.9 per cent in 2026. The tourism sector, a vital component of the Sri Lankan economy, is experiencing a strong resurgence. The first half of 2025 saw a 16 per cent year-on-year increase in visitor arrivals, reaching 1.2 million and surpassing the pre-pandemic peak of 2018.⁴³

These developments coincide with the nearing completion of comprehensive debt restructuring, which includes agreements with major official creditors (notably China, India, Japan, and Paris Club members), refinanced domestic debt with longer maturities, and the issuance of governance-linked and macro-linked bonds. The IMF noted that restructuring accounts for one of the program's key achievements, reducing debt servicing pressure and enhancing fiscal sustainability.

However, there are also increased downside risks, such as global trade headwinds that could impact Sri Lanka's export and tourism-driven recovery. While inflation is low, it partly reflects suppressed demand and lower oil prices; an uptick in these prices could stress the poor. Sri Lanka's gains are contingent on continued reforms, disciplined fiscal management, and careful navigation of external risks. Failure to maintain momentum could destabilise Sri Lanka's hard-earned progress and necessitate deeper interventions in the future.

MALDIVES

Prime Minister Modi's Visit

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to the Maldives on July 25–26 marked a clear reversal in ties after the pro-China shift under President Mohamed Muizzu in 2023. Prime Minister Modi was accorded a ceremonial guest-of-honour role at the Maldives' 60th Independence Day celebrations in Malé. In a high-level bilateral meeting on July 25, Modi and Muizzu took stock of the progress in the implementation of the India-Maldives Joint Vision for a 'Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership'. The two leaders discussed cooperation in the fields of, infrastructure support, capacity building, climate action, health and called for further strengthening defence and maritime security cooperation.⁴⁴

India announced a \$565 million Line of Credit to fund infrastructure projects in line with Maldivian priorities and simultaneously pledged to reduce annual repayments on previous Indian credit lines—offering relief to a nation under debt stress. President Muizzu said the credit line from India would be used to strengthen the Maldives' security forces, as well as improve healthcare, housing, and education.⁴⁵ India and the Maldives are also in talks to finalise a Free Trade Agreement between the two countries.

The visit has served to reset bilateral ties and demonstrated India's influence in the region while buttressing the Maldives' capacity amid the country's economic struggles. The Maldives is also signalling a recalibrated foreign policy that places India as its most reliable partner.

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