



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](#).

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On January 8, a meeting was held in Dubai between Vikram Misri, India's Foreign Secretary, and Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, Afghanistan's Acting Foreign Minister. Source: [IEA MOFA](#)

Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Disanayake along with China's President Xi Jinping receiving the guard of honor in Beijing on January 15. Source: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC](#)

Bilateral talks were held in New Delhi on January 3 between India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar and Maldives' Foreign Minister Abdulla Khaleel. Source: [X/@DrSJaishankar](#)

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India Strategic Review

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

AFGHANISTAN

Human Rights and Humanitarian Situation

National and foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Afghanistan are facing closure for employing women following new rules enforcing a 2-year-old decree that restricted the work of female NGO staff. In an official letter addressed to the organisations, the Taliban-run Ministry of Economy said on December 29, 2024 that failure to implement the measures would mean that "all activities of the offending organisation will be suspended and the work license they received from this ministry will be revoked." The order enforces a decree from December 2022 that barred national and international NGOs in Afghanistan from employing women.¹

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, has expressed alarm over the decision to revoke the licences of NGOs employing women, stating that with more than half the population living in poverty, this measure will directly impact the ability of the population to receive humanitarian aid. He urged the authorities in Afghanistan to revoke this deeply discriminating decree.²

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has published a report stating that 22.9 million people will require humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan in 2025. This includes 21 million people lacking adequate water and sanitation, 14.8 million facing acute food insecurity, 14.3 million with limited access to healthcare, and 7.8 million women and children requiring nutrition assistance.³

Jan Egeland, the secretary-general of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), said women and girls were bearing the brunt of dwindling financial support for NGOs and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. The NRC highlighted a drastic reduction in the number of individuals they could assist, from over 770,000 in 2022 to just over 216,000 in 2024.⁴ The head of the World Food Programme in Afghanistan, Hsiao-Wei Lee, has stated the agency can only feed half of the Afghans in need after cuts in international aid and an impending freeze in US foreign funding.⁵ Afghanistan's humanitarian plan was

only just over half funded in 2024, and aid officials have flagged fears that this could fall further this year.

On January 25, The US State Department suspended funding for organisations that assist refugees with resettlement, employment, and other essential needs. In a letter, the department instructed these organisations to halt all activities and cancel any remaining commitments. The suspension of funding is part of President Trump's broader policy to pause refugee admissions into the US for a three-month period. The suspension of US refugee admissions and related funding could have a severe impact on Afghan refugees awaiting resettlement in the US.⁶

On January 23, International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor Karim Khan applied for arrest warrants for two senior Taliban officials: Supreme Leader Haibatullah Akhundzada and Supreme Court Chief Justice Abdul Hakim Haqqani. They are accused of crimes against humanity on the grounds of gender-based persecution under the Rome Statute of the court, which sets out the duty of every State signatory to exercise its criminal jurisdiction over those responsible for international crimes. This marks the first time the ICC has issued arrest warrant applications concerning Afghanistan.⁷ The Taliban's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has refuted the warrants as "devoid of just legal basis, duplicitous in nature and politically motivated."⁸

Pakistan-Afghanistan Ties

Tensions persist along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border after Pakistani airstrikes on villages within Paktika province on December 24 caused the deaths of at least 46 people, including women and children. Rana Sanaullah, Special Assistant to the Pakistani Prime Minister on Political Affairs, has warned that Pakistan may once again carry out cross-border operations in Afghanistan as part of its counterterrorism efforts if its security is threatened.⁹

Pakistan Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir has said that the only difference with Afghanistan is the presence of the Tehreek-i-Taliban (TTP) Afghanistan and the "spread of terrorism in Pakistan from across the border, and it will remain so until they remove this issue."¹⁰

Pakistan has imposed stricter controls on the border with Afghanistan to prevent illegal entries. Pakistan had introduced a "one-document regime" system for border crossings between the two countries, which mandates that all movement at crossing points like Chaman be conducted via passports and valid visas.¹¹ In the wake of these measures and the crackdown on smuggling,

the Afghan transit trade has declined by 89 per cent in the first five months of the current financial year.¹²

Regional Outreach

Even as ties with Pakistan remain strained, the Taliban are making an outreach to other neighbours. On January 8, a meeting was held in Dubai between Vikram Misri, India's Foreign Secretary, and Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, Afghanistan's Acting Foreign Minister. Misri affirmed India's commitment to humanitarian assistance and readiness to respond to the urgent development needs of the Afghan people. India will provide further material support to the health sector and for the rehabilitation of refugees. The two sides also agreed to promote the use of Chabahar port to support trade and commercial activities, including humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan.¹³

The Afghan statement about the meeting said, "In line with Afghanistan's balanced and economy-focused foreign policy, the Islamic Emirate aims to strengthen political and economic ties with India as a significant regional and economic partner." The Afghan side has underlined its sensitivities to India's security concerns and agreed to remain in touch and continue regular contact at various levels.¹⁴

On January 26, Iran's Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi met with Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Taliban's Foreign Minister, in Kabul. The meeting focused on strengthening ties and addressing mutual interests. At the end of his trip, Araghchi stated, "We have always been significantly affected by developments in Afghanistan, and therefore, it is natural for us to be sensitive to our neighbour's future, its developments, and policies so that we can manage them effectively." Araghchi also mentioned that there are challenges between the two countries, particularly concerning water resources.¹⁵

Earlier in the month, the filling of the Pashdan Dam in Herat and the Afghan government's efforts to build two new dams on the Farah River had drawn a strong reaction from the Iranian government. Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has stated that the construction of these water and power dams violates bilateral agreements between the two countries and disregards Iran's rights.¹⁶ Araghchi's visit has allayed some of Iran's concerns about the sharing of river waters.

PAKISTAN

Political Developments

The second and third rounds of talks between the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the Pakistan government were held on January 2 and 16. While aimed at easing political tensions, the negotiations have stalled and ended without resolution.

In the third round of talks, the PTI presented a 'charter of demands' that included the formation of two judicial commissions to investigate the events of May 9, 2023, and November 26, 2024, and the "support" of the federal and provincial governments in bail, sentence suspensions, and acquittals of "political prisoners" identified by the PTI.¹⁷ With no confirmation from the government on the formation of the judicial commissions, the PTI refused to attend the meeting scheduled for January 28.

The PTI is also attempting to involve the military in the negotiations. PTI Chairman Barrister Gohar said that on January 16, he and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur called on Army Chief General Asim Munir. The PTI chairman said that all matters and demands of the party were presented directly to General Munir.¹⁸ The PTI has also asked the government to include 'real decision-makers' in the talks, implying that the Army should join the process to avoid any ambiguity in the agreement.¹⁹

Although Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has said he wishes to take forward the talks with the PTI, the government continues to exert pressure on Imran Khan. On January 17, Imran Khan received a fourteen-year prison sentence for corruption and abuse of power. The charge sheet accused Khan and his wife of acquiring land worth millions of US dollars for the Al-Qadir Trust from Malik Riaz, a prominent property tycoon in Pakistan, to establish a nonprofit educational institute. After his conviction, Imran Khan said that he would "neither make any deal nor seek any relief."²⁰

Internal Security

The "Pakistan Security Report 2024," released by the Islamabad-based think tank Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), warned that Pakistan is on the brink of a security crisis reminiscent of the pre-2015 era, marked by escalating terrorist attacks and fatalities throughout 2024. The number of attacks surged dramatically in 2024, showing a 70 per cent increase from the previous year. The attacks resulted in 852 deaths and left 1,092 others injured. The report highlights that Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan remain the

epicentres of violence, accounting for over 95 per cent of all terrorist incidents in the nation. KP experienced 295 attacks, resulting in 509 fatalities and 517 injuries. Balochistan saw a sharp 84 per cent increase in attacks, with 202 incidents claiming 322 lives and injuring 534 more.²¹

There was some relief in the ongoing sectarian violence in Kurram after the warring sides signed a 14-point peace agreement on January 1, providing for a permanent ceasefire, resolution of land disputes and banning of weapons in the restive district.²² Due to sectarian tribal clashes, which claimed more than 300 lives, the main road connecting Kurram district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province has been closed for three months, resulting in a humanitarian crisis.

However, the situation has still not completely stabilised. On January 4, a Deputy Commissioner and six other people were injured when unidentified gunmen opened fire on a team of the district administration inspecting the security arrangements for a convoy destined for Parachinar. On January 16, a convoy of 35 trucks carrying relief material came under attack, killing two security personnel. At least nine truck drivers were abducted, and many trucks looted.²³

In order to secure the highway connecting Kurram, on January 19, the security forces launched an operation in the Bagan area of the tribal district. The security forces reportedly employed artillery strikes and helicopter gunships on suspected hideouts of militants.²⁴ After a four-day operation, two convoys of over 131 vehicles reached Kurram. However, till the time that the tribes surrender all weapons, peace will remain uncertain.

Economic Situation

The World Bank has pledged to provide \$20 billion to Pakistan under the 10-year Country Partnership Framework (CPF) to support inclusive and sustainable development within the country. In a statement, the World Bank said, "We are focused on prioritising investment and advisory interventions that will help crowd in much-needed private investment in sectors critical for Pakistan's sustainable growth and job creation, including energy and water, agriculture, access to finance, manufacturing and digital infrastructure."²⁵

The World Bank has recommended that Pakistan establish a permanent Debt and Risk Management Committee (DRMC) to mitigate growing fiscal risks and address the fragmentation in debt management. The committee would be accountable to Parliament, ensuring transparency and accountability in loan-related decisions. In recent months, the Washington-based lender has

repeatedly urged the finance ministry to introduce secondary legislation to address the "high debt burden."²⁶

Pakistan's economic crisis is showing some signs of easing. Inflation has substantially declined to 7.2 per cent from 28.8 per cent a year earlier. Foreign exchange reserves are enough to cover over two months of imports, supported by IMF disbursements and international financial assistance. The agricultural sector grew by 6.2 per cent in FY 2024, and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) surged by 20 per cent in the first half of FY2025, driven by investments in the power and oil sectors.²⁷ After contracting by 0.2 per cent in FY 2023, Pakistan's GDP grew by 2.4 per cent in FY 2024. The IMF has forecast a growth of 3 per cent in FY 2025.

Despite the marginal improvement in the economy, major challenges remain. Political risks remain a pressing concern, as frequent government changes and short political cycles disrupt the continuity of reforms. Macroeconomic risks include Pakistan's large external financing needs, a heavy debt burden, and declining investor confidence. Fiduciary risks also persist, stemming from inefficiencies in public procurement, weak institutional capacity, and corruption concerns.²⁸

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

Situation at the LAC

Addressing a press conference ahead of the Army Day on January 14, the Army Chief, General Upendra Dwivedi, said that there exists a "degree" of standoff with the Chinese armed forces across the LAC in Eastern Ladakh but stressed that the situation continues to be "sensitive but stable." He confirmed that no reduction in troop levels is planned for the winter months. Still, a review could occur before summer, depending on the progress of trust-building measures and the results of ongoing diplomatic discussions. The Army Chief said, "Troop deployment directly depends on the trust factor (between the two Armies) and the capabilities have been created on other side. The current capabilities across entails we will need to maintain the troop levels."²⁹

Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri visited Beijing from January 26 to 27 for a meeting of the Foreign Secretary-Vice Foreign Minister mechanism between India and China. This visit marked the second significant Indian diplomatic engagement with China in less than six weeks, following National Security Advisor Ajit Doval's visit in December 2024.

According to the official statement issued by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, both nations agreed to restart direct air services, suspended for nearly five years following the 2020 border clashes. The pilgrimage to Mount Kailash in Tibet halted since 2020, is set to resume in the summer of 2025. Both sides agreed to enhance people-to-people exchanges, including media and think-tank interactions.

They also agreed to hold an early meeting of the India-China Expert Level Mechanism to discuss the resumption of the provision of hydrological data and other cooperation pertaining to trans-border rivers. The two sides will conduct a number of commemorative activities to mark the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Specific concerns in the economic and trade areas were discussed with a view to resolving these issues and promoting long-term policy transparency and predictability.³⁰

In his meeting with Misri, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stressed that the improvement and development of China-India relations are fully in line with the fundamental interests of the two countries and peoples and are conducive to safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of the countries of the Global South. Wang said China and India should seize the opportunity to meet each other halfway, explore more substantive measures, and commit themselves to mutual understanding, mutual support and mutual achievement, rather than mutual suspicion, alienation and mutual depletion.³¹

Both sides publicly avoided any mention of the situation at the LAC, although this is likely to be a dominant factor in the normalisation of relations.

BANGLADESH

India-Bangladesh Ties

Tensions persist in India-Bangladesh ties. A new flashpoint emerged over India's fencing at the shared border between the two countries. On January 12, Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Md Jashim Uddin summoned the High Commissioner of India, Pranay Verma, to his office and expressed deep concern over the recent activities of India's Border Security Force along the border. He stated that the unauthorised attempt to construct barbed wire fencing and the recent killing of a Bangladesh citizen at Sunamganj by the BSF had caused tensions and disturbances along the border.³²

In response, the Bangladesh Acting High Commissioner to India, Mr. Md. Nural Islam, was summoned by MEA on January 13. It was conveyed that with regard to security measures at the border, including fencing, India observed all

protocols and agreements between the two governments and between the Border Security Force and Border Guard Bangladesh.³³

The border fencing issue is linked to the broader anti-India sentiment prevailing in Bangladesh. On January 12, Home Affairs Adviser to the interim administration, Lt Gen (retd) Md Jahangir Alam Chowdhury, said that the Hasina government allowed "India to perform some unequal activities at the border from 2010 to 2023." He added that the previous government had signed four agreements regarding the border situation, which would be reviewed by the interim government.³⁴

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Army Chief General Waker-uz-Zaman struck a conciliatory note stating India and Bangladesh depended on each other for their security needs, economic activities, and the medical requirements of the people of Bangladesh. He said, "We will not do anything with our neighbour [India] that goes against their strategic interests. At the same time, we will expect that our neighbour does nothing that is contrary to our interests."³⁵

Improving Ties with Pakistan

Even though the Yunus administration has made little effort to repair ties with India, Dhaka is working hard to improve relations with Pakistan. On January 14, Lieutenant General SM Kamrul Hassan, Principal Staff Officer of Bangladesh's Armed Forces Division, visited Rawalpindi, where he met with Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Asim Munir, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, General Sahir Shamshad Mirza. Discussions focused on enhancing defence cooperation and addressing regional security challenges. Both sides emphasised the importance of a resilient partnership, underscoring that their "enduring partnership" must "remain resilient against external influences."³⁶ On January 21, a delegation from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, led by Major General Shahid Amir Afsar, flew to Bangladesh on a four-day visit.

Pakistan has reached an agreement to provide military training to the Bangladesh Army. Starting in February 2025, training sessions will be conducted in multiple Bangladeshi cantonments, beginning with the Mymensingh cantonment.³⁷ There are also reports that Bangladesh has shown an interest in acquiring the JF-17 aircraft from China.

External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal has reacted to these developments, stating, "We keep an eye on all activities around the country and in the region, as well as all activities affecting national security, and the government will take appropriate steps."³⁸

Bangladesh's bonhomie with Pakistan may be an attempt to show Dhaka's freedom to forge a foreign policy free from Indian influence. However, it has the potential to cause instability in the region and provoke greater pressure on Bangladesh from India.

SRI LANKA

President Dissanayake's Visit to China

A month after his visit to India, Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake undertook a state visit to China from January 14 to 17. President Dissanayake held talks with President Xi Jinping and met with Li Qiang, Premier of the State Council, and Zhao Leji, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, during his visit.

The Joint Statement indicates that both nations engaged in discussions to enhance Belt and Road collaboration and advance Colombo Port City and Hambantota Port integrated development initiatives. Sri Lanka reaffirmed its commitment to supporting and actively participating in the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative proposed by President Xi Jinping.³⁹

Agreements on economic and technological progress and the integration of China's Belt and Road Initiative with Sri Lanka's 2030 digital economy strategy comprised fifteen cooperation documents signed by both countries.⁴⁰ The specifics of the agreements remained undisclosed during the signing ceremony. The two sides also agreed to work toward the early conclusion of a comprehensive free trade agreement. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka and the People's Bank of China have extended their bilateral currency swap arrangement for a further three-year term.⁴¹ Notably, an agreement was reached to expedite Sinopec's \$3.7 billion investment in an oil refinery in Hambantota, marking one of Sri Lanka's largest foreign investments.⁴²

The two visits to India and China illustrate Sri Lanka's approach to foreign relations, aiming to harness the strength of both partnerships to foster economic recovery while maintaining a balance in ties.

Meanwhile, a committee chaired by Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath has been formed to amend the existing Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for granting diplomatic clearance to foreign warships, military aircraft and research vessels in Sri Lanka. The visit of Chinese research vessels to Sri Lankan ports has been a matter of security concern to India. In response to Indian apprehensions, Sri Lanka imposed a one-year moratorium on foreign research vessels docking at

its ports, effective January 1, 2024. The moratorium has now been lifted, and future visits will be governed by the new SOP being formulated.⁴³

MALDIVES

India-Maldives Relations

Maldives Foreign Minister Abdulla Khaleel visited India from January 2 to 4, during which he held bilateral talks with Indian Minister of External Affairs Dr S Jaishankar. In a statement, Khaleel acknowledged India's steadfast support in addressing the Maldives' financial challenges, stressing the importance of their collaboration for the country's long-term economic stability. The two nations also signed a memorandum of understanding on High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDP) to launch the third phase of the projects.⁴⁴

The Foreign Minister's visit was followed by the visit of Maldivian Defence Minister Mohammed Ghassan Maumoon for bilateral talks with his Indian counterpart, Rajnath Singh. During the talks, both sides reasserted the firm commitment to work closely to realise the joint vision for the India-Maldives Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership. Maumoon appreciated India's historical role as the 'First Responder' for the Maldives and thanked New Delhi for assisting Male in augmenting the modern infrastructural capacities and training of defence & security personnel.⁴⁵

Discussions also covered extending the lease on two Advanced Light Helicopters (ALH) expiring this year, and the impact of foreign vessels frequently docking in Maldivian waters. The Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) received \$4 million worth of defence equipment from India, which included utility vehicles and berthing equipment.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, on January 10, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi made an unannounced visit to Maldives, during which he called on President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu. During the meeting, discussions centred on advancing the China-Maldives Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership and fast-tracking key infrastructure projects.⁴⁷

A Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Maldives and China came into effect in January 2025. The FTA was signed in 2014 and ratified by the Maldivian Parliament in 2017, but its implementation was delayed over political differences and concerns that it could undermine Maldivian economic sovereignty. India has expressed concern over the FTA, with the MEA spokesperson stating, "Recent agreements that are likely to result in revenue loss for the Maldives Government are obviously a matter of concern and do not

bode well for the long-term fiscal stability of the country."⁴⁸ There are reports that India has been reconsidering its financial aid to Maldives in light of the FTA.

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