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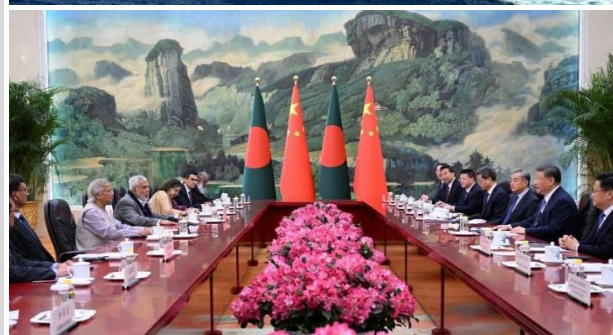
Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW MARCH 2025

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

Cover Images:

On March 20, a U.S. delegation, led by Special Envoy for Prisoner Affairs and former Afghan reconciliation envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, visited Kabul to discuss prisoner releases with Amir Khan Muttaqi, an acting Foreign Minister of the Taliban.

Source: [MOFA IEA](#)

INS Ranvir from Indian Navy and BNS Abu Ubaidah from Bangladesh Navy during Naval Exercise Bongosagar 2025 and Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) in the Bay of Bengal. Source: [Indian Navy](#)

President Xi Jinping met with Chief Adviser of the Bangladeshi Interim Government Muhammad Yunus in Beijing, on March 28, 2025.

Source: [X/@ChiefAdviserGoB](#)

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India Strategic Review

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

AFGHANISTAN

Tensions in Afghanistan-Pakistan Ties

On March 3, Afghanistan's Ministry of Interior Affairs reported that one member of its security forces had been killed and two injured in the overnight clashes with Pakistani soldiers at the Torkham crossing.¹ Torkham is the main artery for trade and travel between Afghanistan and Pakistan but has been closed since April 21, when the two sides used mortars and rocket fire after Afghan forces objected to Pakistan's construction of a border outpost.²

Torkham was reopened for trade on March 19, after the two sides agreed to a ceasefire till April 15 and a halt to the construction of checkpoints close to the border.³ The reopening brings relief to the Afghan population, which faces a humanitarian crisis and relies heavily on Pakistan for food imports.

Following the hijacking of the Jaffar Express by Baloch militants on March 11, a senior Afghan diplomat was summoned to the Pakistan Foreign Office to register a protest over the hijackers being in contact with their handlers in Afghanistan.⁴ In response, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Emirate urged "Pakistani authorities to focus on ensuring security and addressing their internal issues instead of making such irresponsible remarks."⁵

In a bid to repair ties, Pakistan's special envoy for Afghanistan, Ambassador Muhammad Sadiq, visited Kabul from March 21 to 23. During his meeting with Afghanistan's Acting Foreign Minister, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, both sides agreed to sustain their diplomatic engagement to address ongoing bilateral challenges, including trade, security and the status of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Muttaqi emphasised that "obstacles to transit routes and trade are not in the interest of either side and should not be linked to other disputes."⁶

Sadiq's visit is being termed fruitful, but some fundamental disagreements will keep the bilateral relationship volatile. The central issue is the sharp rise in Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) cross-border attacks from Afghan soil into Pakistan. The Global Terrorism Index 2025 report notes, "Since the [Afghan] Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021, TTP has capitalised on

increased operational freedom and access to safe havens across the border. This has allowed the group to plan and execute attacks with greater impunity."⁷

Even as Sadiq was in Kabul, the Pakistan Army reported that it had killed 16 terrorists attempting to infiltrate from Afghanistan. Pakistan's frustration with the Taliban's unwillingness to control the TTP has led to cross-border attacks, including airstrikes conducted by the Pakistan Air Force in December 2024.

Another source of bilateral tensions is the decision by Pakistan to deport Afghan Citizen Card holders and those refugees residing illegally if they do not voluntarily leave Pakistan by March 31. These two categories of refugees total more than 1.4 million, of which about 840,000 have already returned to Afghanistan.⁸ The Taliban government has repeatedly stressed that Afghan refugees in Pakistan should be allowed to return with dignity, rather than being forcibly expelled.

The Durand Line, a colonial-era border established in 1893, remains a point of contention, with Afghanistan not recognising it as an official border. This has led to repeated clashes over the erection of a border fence by Pakistan and the construction of posts by both sides close to the border.

While diplomatic efforts are ongoing, unless both sides can address the TTP and border issues effectively, the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan is likely to remain tense.

International Engagements

On March 20, the US State Department announced that George Glezzmann, an American tourist abducted in December 2022 while travelling through Afghanistan, had been released by the Taliban. George Glezzmann is the third American detainee to be released by the Taliban since January.⁹

On March 23, the Afghanistan Interior Ministry spokesman Abdul Mateen Qani said the US government had revoked the bounties placed on three senior Taliban leaders - Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, Abdul Aziz Haqqani, and Yahya Haqqani.¹⁰ A US State Department spokesperson confirmed that "there is no current reward" for these individuals. Still, they remain 'Specially Designated Global Terrorists and the Haqqani Network remains designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization."¹¹

Qani said that the revocation of bounties was "a good step, and this shows our new interaction with the world and particularly with the United States." While it would be premature to see this as a potential thaw in US-Taliban relations, it is

evident that there is increasing acceptance among the international community to engage with the Taliban government on selective issues.

On March 3, a statement from the Afghanistan Embassy in Tehran said that Fazl Mohammad Haqqani, the head of the embassy, held a meeting with Rudra Gaurav Shresth, the Indian Ambassador to Iran. The embassy added that the discussions focused on developing bilateral cooperation, particularly on expanding trade through Chabahar.¹²

Speaking at a ceremony in New Delhi on March 20, India's External Affairs Minister, Dr S Jaishankar, stated that India would like to keep the relationship with the Afghan people going. India has, therefore, taken a practical approach based on humanitarian considerations to engage with the Taliban, who currently govern Afghanistan.¹³

PAKISTAN

Deteriorating Internal Security

The Global Terrorism Index 2025, released this month, placed Pakistan second in the list, noting a 45 per cent rise in deaths from terrorism over the previous year, totalling 1,081.¹⁴ This is the fifth consecutive year in which an increase in terrorism-related deaths has been recorded and is the largest year-on-year increase in the last decade for Pakistan. This trend is mirrored by a rise in the number of terror attacks, which more than doubled from 517 in 2023 to 1,099 in 2024.

The TTP has emerged as the fastest-growing terrorist group, responsible for 52 per cent of deaths in Pakistan in 2024. Last year, the TTP carried out 482 attacks, resulting in 558 deaths, an increase of 91 per cent from the 293 deaths in the preceding year.¹⁵

On March 4, suicide bombers drove two vehicles packed with explosives into a military base in Bannu, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In the ensuing firefight, five Pakistan Army soldiers and 16 terrorists were killed. The blast also destroyed a nearby mosque and a residential building, killing 13 civilians and injuring 32 others. Jaish al-Fursan, an outfit affiliated with the TTP, claimed responsibility for the attack.¹⁶

Even as the TTP has stepped up its attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the security situation in Balochistan has deteriorated even more rapidly. In February, 62 per cent of all terror-related fatalities occurred in Balochistan.¹⁷ Attacks by Baloch

militants have not only targeted security forces but also infrastructure projects and non-Baloch civilians.

On March 11, the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) hijacked the Jaffar Express, a passenger train travelling from Quetta to Peshawar, with around 440 passengers on board. The attackers detonated explosives on the tracks near Sibi, Balochistan, halting the train in a remote area. In a rescue operation that lasted more than 30 hours, the Pakistan Army killed 33 militants and freed the passengers. However, 26 passengers and security personnel were killed, which included 18 army and paramilitary forces, three railway staff members and five civilian passengers.¹⁸

In a press conference held on March 14, Lieutenant General Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry, the director general for the military's media wing Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), accused India and Afghanistan of supporting the train hijackers.¹⁹ India has rejected the "baseless allegations" and asked Pakistan to "look inwards instead of pointing fingers and shifting the blame for its own internal problems and failures onto others."²⁰

Pakistan's militarised approach in dealing with the security situation in Balochistan has only alienated the local population and strengthened the separatist narrative. Pressure on the Afghan Taliban to rein in the TTP has met with very limited success. Given these dynamics, any improvement in the internal security appears unlikely.

China-Pakistan Arms Trade

On March 13, The Wuchang Shipbuilding Industry Group of China launched the second diesel-electric Hangor class submarine for the Pakistan Navy. Pakistan has contracted for eight submarines, four to be built in China and four in Pakistan by Karachi Shipyard and Engineering Works under a transfer of technology arrangement.²¹

China dominates Pakistan's arms imports, providing advanced weaponry across air, land, and sea domains. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), between 2020 and 2024, Pakistan was the fifth largest arms importer in the world, accounting for 4.6 per cent of global arms imports. 81 per cent of these imports came from China, compared with 74 per cent in 2015–19. Pakistan is also China's top arms export destination, accounting for 63 per cent of all arms exports in 2020–24.²²

Major arms acquisitions from China that have helped modernise the Pakistan military are:

- **Army.** Pakistan's latest battle tank, Haider, is a variant of the Chinese VT-4 and is being manufactured in collaboration with a Chinese defence contractor, NORINCO. Pakistan has contracted for 236 SH-15 self-propelled artillery systems, deliveries of which commenced in 2022. Long-range air defence systems are all of Chinese origin, with the HQ-9/P being inducted in 2021. Pakistan also operates Chinese Wing Loong II and CH-4 Unmanned Aerial Vehicles.
- **Navy.** Pakistan's most modern frigates are four Type 054 A/P Frigates built in China. The ship features several capabilities - including anti-surface warfare, anti-aircraft warfare, anti-submarine warfare, and low radar observability. Pakistan has procured a specialised research ship, PNS Rizwan, from China in 2023. The ship possesses the capability to track nuclear-armed ballistic missiles and carry out other intelligence-gathering missions.²³
- **Air Force.** The JF-17 Thunder fighter jet, co-developed by Pakistan Aeronautical Complex and China's Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group, is the mainstay of the Pakistan Air Force, with over 150 units in service. 25 J-10CE aircraft are also being delivered, with some sources indicating that additional aircraft could be ordered. There are reports that Pakistan will procure 40 Chinese J-35 stealth fighter jets. This deal would be Beijing's first transfer of fifth-generation fighters to a foreign ally.²⁴

Apart from conventional weaponry, there is close cooperation between China and Pakistan in cyber and space operations. Pakistan is among the few countries granted access to China's BeiDou satellite navigation system's military service, allowing for more precise guidance of missiles, ships, and aircraft.²⁵

With a defence budget currently about 10 per cent of India's defence budget, Pakistan's ability to maintain a credible military capability is almost entirely dependent on arms transfers from China.

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

Situation at the LAC

The LAC remains calm with the understanding on patrolling arrangements working satisfactorily. Speaking at the India Today Conclave on March 8, Indian Army Chief Gen Upendra Dwivedi stated that the second and third rounds of patrolling have taken place at Depsang, and both sides are cooperating with

each other. However, he did contend that there is a high degree of collusivity between China and Pakistan and that the two-front threat is a reality.²⁶

With the easing of tensions along the LAC, positive statements are coming from both sides on bilateral relations. Speaking on the Lex Fridman Podcast, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that India and China were "working to restore conditions to how they were before 2020." Prime Minister Modi stressed that the government is focused on ensuring that differences between the two countries do not escalate into disputes. He added, "Competition is not a bad thing, but it should never turn into conflict."²⁷

China's foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning "appreciated" Prime Minister Modi's "positive" remarks. She said China "stands ready to work with India to implement the important common understandings between the two leaders... and advance China-India relations on the track of sound and stable development."²⁸

The 33rd meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation & Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC) was held on March 25 in Beijing. The official statement of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said that the meeting was held in a positive and constructive atmosphere and that the situation was comprehensively reviewed along the Line of Actual Control. Both sides exchanged views on the early resumption of cross-border cooperation and exchanges, including on trans-border rivers and the Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra. They also agreed to work together to make substantial preparations for the next meeting of the Special Representatives, which will be held in India.²⁹

A post on Facebook by the Chinese Embassy in India was similar in wording to the MEA statement. However, there was no reference to the exchange of information on trans-border rivers and the resumption of the Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra.³⁰

Even as ties move towards normalisation, there is unlikely to be any slow-down in the military capability development on the LAC. Some media reports indicate that India is planning to raise 72 Infantry Division, a new formation that will be deployed in Eastern Ladakh. It will take over the operational responsibility of the Uniform Force, which was moved from its counter-insurgency role in the Jammu region to Eastern Ladakh in 2020.³¹

BANGLADESH

Deepening Political Instability

On February 28, Bangladeshi students, key players in last year's government ouster, formed a new political party, the National Citizens Party (NCP). The party's leadership comprises key organisers from Students Against Discrimination (SAD). The NCP is led by its convener, Nahid Islam, a former advisor to the interim government, with Akhtar Hossain serving as its secretary. All nine top officials of the party are fellow student leaders who gained prominence during the mass uprising. This youth-dominated leadership marks a decisive break from Bangladesh's traditional political elite. Nahid has said that building a new Bangladesh is impossible unless the governance structure and constitution are reformed.³²

One of the key demands of the NCP is banning the Awami League (AL). Nahid has called for the AL to be declared a terrorist group and to be banned from political activity.³³ In this demand, the NCP is supported by Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, a party that the Sheikh Hasina government banned, a ban subsequently lifted after her ouster.³⁴

While the AL is a much-weakened party with most of its leadership in hiding or jailed, the NCP's demand to ban AL has found little resonance with the interim government and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus has said that the interim government has no plans to ban the AL, but individuals within its leadership accused of crimes, including murder and crimes against humanity, will be tried in Bangladeshi courts.³⁵

BNP is opposed to an outright ban on the AL. BNP leaders have stressed their party's commitment to multiparty democracy and said that endorsing a move to ban a party contradicts its core values. The BNP also sees demands for a ban on the AL as "an attempt to create an anarchic situation in the country and ultimately delay the electoral process."³⁶

The debate over the AL has also resulted in a clash between the NCP and the Bangladesh Army. In a Facebook post, Hasnat Abdullah, principal coordinator of the NCP, accused the Army of proposing the rehabilitation of AL during a meeting held on March 11. He wrote, "A plan is underway to introduce a new plot called 'Refined Awami League.' This plan is entirely orchestrated by India." The Army Headquarters has reacted to Hasnat Abdullah's Facebook post, stating that these are "extremely laughable and an immature array of stories."³⁷

Differences have emerged between the interim government and the BNP over the timing of the election. In his speech on the occasion of Bangladesh Independence Day, Muhammad Yunus announced that the national elections will be held between December 2025 and June 2026. This would give time for reforms to conduct "the most free, fair and acceptable election in the country's history."³⁸

The BNP wants a return to democracy this year. In an interview with Reuters, Abdul Moyeen Khan, a senior party member, said, "We will try to convince them [interim government] that the best way for them is to call an election as soon as possible and go for an honourable exit." Any delay beyond December could lead to "strong resentment" among the people and maybe "some instability."³⁹

The political vacuum and fragile law and order situation have heightened concerns about the growing radical threat from Islamic fundamentalist groups. The bulk of security operations (like Operation Devil Hunt) have been directed at remnants of the Awami League and its affiliates, leaving the hardline religious extremists largely untouched.

India-Bangladesh Ties

Even as India-Bangladesh relations remain strained, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, in an interview with BBC, sought to allay concerns, asserting that there is no other way but to have good relations between Bangladesh and India. Yunus acknowledged the emergence of some conflicts but attributed them primarily to "propaganda."⁴⁰

On March 26, on the occasion of National Day of Bangladesh, Prime Minister Modi wrote a letter to Chief Adviser Yunus, calling for taking forward bilateral ties based on sensitivity to each other's concerns. Prime Minister Modi's outreach comes after the Bangladesh interim government sought a meeting between Yunus and the Indian Prime Minister on the sidelines of the BIMSTEC summit, to be held early April in Bangkok.⁴¹

A series of bilateral engagements took place in March. Officials of Bangladesh and India held the 86th meeting of the Joint River Commission in Kolkata on March 6, where they discussed the pros and cons of renewing the 30-year-old Ganges water-sharing treaty, which is coming up for renewal next year.⁴²

A two-day meeting to review Indian-funded projects in Bangladesh was held in Dhaka on March 5-6. At least 11 of the 40 projects currently listed under the three Indian Lines of Credit (LoC) are set to be removed from the loan scheme. This decision comes as projects in the approval stage or those approved but not

yet under construction will be excluded. Consequently, the total LoC will decrease from \$7.34 billion to \$4.68 billion.⁴³

India and Bangladesh concluded the Naval Exercise Bongosagar 2025 and Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) in the Bay of Bengal on March 13. The exercise saw participation from INS Ranvir, a guided-missile destroyer of the Indian Navy, and BNS Abu Ubaidah, a frigate from the Bangladesh Navy. The exercise provided the opportunity for both navies to develop closer links in tactical planning, coordination and information sharing for undertaking seamless maritime operations.⁴⁴

Despite these bilateral engagements, fundamental differences persist in ties. India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, in an interaction with the Standing Committee on External Affairs of the Parliament, outlined the rise of disruptive factional forces in Bangladesh and noted that the "continued release of Islamist extremists" by the interim government is a matter of concern for "regional and global security."⁴⁵ Dr Jaishankar has informed the Parliament that attacks on minorities in Bangladesh are a matter of concern for the Indian government.

Bangladesh's strategic shift towards Pakistan and China is another cause of tensions. Yunus undertook a four-day official to China from March 26 to 29. While the visit primarily aimed to deepen economic cooperation with China, several aspects are of concern to India. Yunus invited China's state-owned entities to participate in the comprehensive management and restoration project of Teesta, a transboundary river that flows from India to Bangladesh.⁴⁶ New Delhi is concerned that this would allow Chinese personnel to be present in an area close to the strategically sensitive Siliguri Corridor.

China has pledged \$400 million for the modernisation of the Mongla Port. In July 2024, India had obtained the operational rights for a terminal at Mongla. China's involvement in the port's modernisation could complicate India's access and strategic interests.

Yunus also stirred up a controversy with a reference to India's northeastern states. During a roundtable discussion in Beijing, he said, "The seven states of India, the eastern part of India, are called the Seven Sisters. They are a landlocked region of India. They have no way to reach out to the ocean. We are the only guardian of the ocean for all this region. So this opens up a huge possibility. This could be an extension of the Chinese economy."⁴⁷

These remarks drew a sharp response from political leaders of the Northeastern states. Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma called them "offensive and strongly condemnable." Congress MP from Assam, Gaurav Gogoi called the

remarks "deeply concerning and unacceptable, as they undermine India's sovereignty and territorial integrity."⁴⁸

NEPAL

Pro-Monarchy Protests

On the eve of Nepal's 75th Democracy Day, February 19, former King Gyanendra Shah released a video expressing deep dissatisfaction with the current state of Nepal, warning of eroding national identity, economic decay, and widespread disillusionment among the youth. The video sparked a debate in the country on whether the former king was hinting at a leadership role for himself.⁴⁹ On March 9, when King Gyanendra Shah returned to Kathmandu following a trip to Western Nepal, thousands of loyalists, including leaders and party workers from the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RJP), assembled outside the airport, demanding the reinstatement of the monarchy.⁵⁰

The abolition of Nepal's monarchy in 2008 marked the country's transition to a secular republic. However, Nepal has experienced significant political instability since then, with 13 different governments in 17 years. This instability, coupled with widespread corruption and economic challenges, has fueled public frustration. Many citizens believe that the current political system has failed to deliver stability and development, leading to renewed calls for the restoration of the monarchy.

On March 28, the protests turned violent as pro-royalists clashed with the police in Kathmandu. Two persons, including a TV cameraman, were killed and 110 others injured, while over a dozen properties, including business complexes, restaurants, hospitals and private and government buildings, were vandalised.⁵¹

Nepal's main political parties have reacted strongly to the pro-monarchy sentiment. Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli accused the former king of inciting unrest and warned of legal action, likening the violent incidents to "terrorist activities."⁵² Former prime minister and CPN (Maoist Centre) party chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' has warned the pro-monarchy forces that any attempt to challenge the republican set-up would be countered with a revolution.⁵³

Prime Minister Oli has reportedly claimed that India has played a role in the pro-monarchy protests. This charge has been categorically denied by Indian Foreign Minister Dr Jaishankar and conveyed to Nepal's political leadership by the Indian Ambassador to Nepal.⁵⁴

It is unlikely that the monarchy will return to Nepal. However, the protests reflect a deep frustration among the population at the political instability in the country, charges of corruption against leaders, economic underperformance, and apathy to people's concerns.

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