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Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



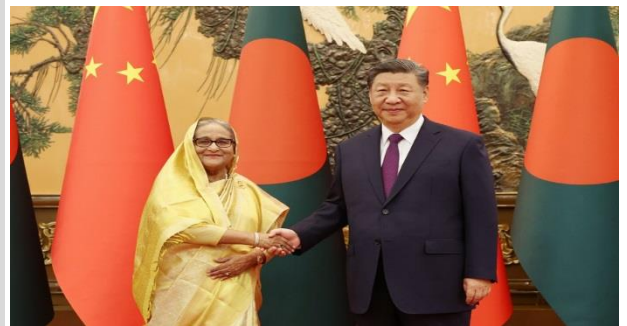
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INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

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.), Senior 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:

The Taliban representatives at the UN-led meet in Doha, July 1, 2024. Source: [Taliban spokesman X account @Zabehulah M33](#)

China's President Xi Jinping met with Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in Beijing on July 10, 2024. Source: [China](#)

Foreign Minstrv Spokesperson @SpokespersonCHN.

KP Sharma Oli sworn in as Prime Minister of Nepal on July 15, 2024. Source: [X/ @PM nepal](#)

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India's Strategic Neighbourhood

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

AFGHANISTAN

Human Rights and Humanitarian Situation

Amid continuous repression of women's rights, Taliban authorities have drastically cut the salaries of female government workers who have been forced to stay at home since they seized power. The Taliban's Finance Ministry spokesman said, "Women who are at home and do not go to the office... their salaries are 5,000 Afghanis (\$70) a month". Women had previously earned up to around 35,000 Afghanis in the public sector, including university professors forced off campus.¹

The UN Mission in Afghanistan, in a July 2024 report on human rights, has condemned the activities of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV) for their negative impacts on the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms in various aspects of life for people living in Afghanistan, with a discriminatory and disproportionate impact on women. The report notes that the ambiguities and inconsistencies surrounding the instructions issued by the MPVPV, the unpredictability, severity and disproportionality of punishments associated with non-compliance, and restrictive measures to regulate activities of individuals in the private sphere all contribute to a climate of fear and intimidation among the people.²

In its latest report released on July 10th, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) states that the agency faces a shortage of funds to carry out humanitarian activities. The sectors at high risk of disruption due to severe budget shortages include health care, shelter, food, education, and protection. It adds that without timely assistance, humanitarian crises in Afghanistan will worsen.³

In another report, which was released on July 2, the OCHA revealed that approximately 595,000 Afghan migrants have returned to Afghanistan from Iran and Pakistan from January to the end of May 2024. The expulsion of Afghan migrants from Iran increased by 44 per cent and from Pakistan by over 41 per cent compared to the same period last year.⁴ Despite international

reactions, the process of expelling Afghan migrants from Iran and Pakistan continues unabated amid the dire humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

Doha Talks

The third round of U.N.-led talks to explore engagement with Afghanistan was held on June 30 and July 1 in Doha, Qatar. The closed-door session gathered representatives from over 25 countries, and at least five international organisations focused on Afghanistan. India was represented by JP Singh, Joint Secretary PAI division (Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran) in the Ministry of External Affairs.

In his inaugural remarks at the Doha talks, Afghan Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid, who led the delegation, said the process of easing financial and trade sanctions has been "slow", leading to several challenges for the Afghan government and the private sector. He admitted that some countries "have problems" with the steps taken by the Afghan Taliban government since coming into power in 2021 but added that such "policy differences amid states are natural."⁵

Rosemary DiCarlo, UN undersecretary-general for political and peacebuilding affairs, who presided over the event, told reporters the talks were "constructive" and "useful." While participants in the latest round of talks agreed to continue to engage, DiCarlo ruled out recognising the de facto regime in Kabul unless the Taliban ended curbs on women's education and participation in public life.⁶

Rights groups strongly criticised the conference for not engaging Afghan women and civil society members. However, DiCarlo said that eight civil activists from Afghanistan had attended the meeting and provided "valuable insights on the rights of women and minorities in the country, girls' education, the media, business and many other issues."⁷

Afghanistan-Pakistan Ties

Afghanistan-Pakistan ties remain strained over terror attacks in Pakistan from Afghan territory. On July 15, terrorists attacked a military base in Bannu, ramming a vehicle loaded with explosives into the perimeter wall and killing eight security force members. The attack was claimed by the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group, which operates out of Afghanistan.

Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the Taliban's deputy head of mission and "reiterated its serious concerns over the presence of terror outfits inside Afghanistan that continue to threaten Pakistan's security." It urged

Taliban authorities to “fully investigate and take immediate, robust and effective action against the perpetrators of the Bannu attack and to prevent the recurrence of such attacks.”⁸

According to the latest United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team concerning the Taliban, Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is now the largest terrorist group in Afghanistan, with an estimated strength of 6,000–6,500 fighters. TTP has intensified attacks against Pakistan, significantly increasing from 573 in 2021 to 715 in 2022 and 1,210 in 2023, with the trend continuing into 2024. The report states, “The Taliban do not conceive of TTP as a terrorist group: the bonds are close, and the debt owed to TTP significant.”⁹

Following the visit of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Filippo Grandi, Pakistan has halted the expulsion of undocumented migrants from Afghanistan. The decision to suspend the evictions of Afghans was taken on “humanitarian grounds” because of the deteriorating economic and humanitarian conditions facing impoverished Afghanistan.¹⁰ In another relief to Afghan refugees, **the** Pakistan government has extended the period of stay of registered refugees by one year.¹¹

The Chaman border crossing between Pakistan and Afghanistan reopened on July 21 following a 10-month closure. The border was closed in October 2023 after the government, citing security concerns, imposed the requirement of presenting passports and visas for cross-border travel. Following talks with protesting Chaman residents, the government announced that “People can now travel using their ID [identity] cards and Afghan Tazkira as before.”¹²

PAKISTAN

Political Developments

In July 2024, Pakistan witnessed two pivotal political developments that could have significant implications for its current and future political landscape. The first was the Supreme Court's decision to allot reserved seats to the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). This decision came after a contentious period following the 2024 general elections, which were marked by disputes over the allocation of these seats by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP).

In March 2024, the ECP allocated these seats to other parties, arguing that the PTI, now represented by the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC), was not entitled to them due to not contesting under its own symbol. The commission had also decided to distribute the seats among other parliamentary parties, with the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP)

becoming major beneficiaries with 16 and five additional seats, while the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam Fazl (JUI-F) was given four.

On July 12, the apex court ruled, "The order of the Election Commission of Pakistan, dated 1st of March 2024, is declared to be ultra vires to (beyond the powers of) the Constitution, without lawful authority and of no legal effect."¹³ The verdict of the 13-member bench clears the way for the PTI to be allotted 23 reserved seats, making it the largest party in the National Assembly.¹⁴ Although this does not pose a threat to the ruling coalition led by Shehbaz Sharif, it could reshape the power dynamics within the National Assembly and provincial assemblies, making the political environment more volatile.

The second development was the reported move by the government to ban the PTI and launch high treason proceedings against the party's founder, Imran Khan, and other leaders under Article 6 of the Constitution. Three days after the Supreme Court ruling on reserved seats, Information Minister Atta Tarar announced in a press conference, "We are going to impose a ban on PTI and we believe that Article 17 of the Constitution gives the government the right to ban political parties, and this matter will be referred to the Supreme Court."¹⁵

The decision was widely condemned by Pakistani media. An editorial in *The Nation* said, "A ruling party derives its power from a popular mandate, a parliamentary majority, or a coalition. The PML-N has neither of these, making the assertion to ban PTI a poorly thought-out, revenge-oriented political move."¹⁶ *The Dawn* said, "It is dangerous for a government to appear so desperate...In their obsession with countering the resurgent PTI, the ruling parties are, wittingly or unwittingly, pushing the country towards even more chaos and anarchy instead of accepting ground realities and working around them."¹⁷

The government's move has found little support, even from its allies. The PPP distanced itself from the potential ban on the PTI, saying its leadership was not taken on board regarding the decision. Other parties like the Awami National Party, Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam, and Jamaat-i-Islami have criticised the decision, calling it 'childish' and against the law.¹⁸

The government's decision to ban the PTI has deepened political divides and raised significant concerns about the future of democracy in Pakistan. While the government cites legal and security reasons for the ban, the widespread opposition underscores the potential risks to political stability and democratic integrity. A ban on the PTI could also trigger widespread protests, potentially leading to civil unrest.

Security Situation

According to the Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), during the second quarter of 2024, from April to June, Pakistan witnessed 380 violence-linked fatalities and 220 injuries among civilians, security personnel, and militants, resulting from 240 incidents of terror attacks and counter-terror operations. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan provinces were the epicentres of violence, accounting for nearly 92 per cent of all fatalities and 87 per cent of attacks. The report claims that the country experienced a 12 per cent reduction in overall violence, with 380 fatalities recorded compared to 432 in the first quarter.¹⁹

Another report issued by the Islamabad-based think tank Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) suggests that nine districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa witnessed terrorist attacks in June 2024, in what has been termed as a sign of expanding militancy in the province.²⁰

The month of July saw a spate of terrorist attacks against security forces. On July 9, four soldiers, including a captain, were killed in the North Waziristan district.²¹ Five people, including a former senator, Hidayatullah Khan, were killed when an improvised explosive device (IED) went off in Bajaur tribal district on July 3.²² Two soldiers of the Pakistan Army, two police officers and three terrorists were killed in Peshawar district on July 10.²³ In a major attack on July 15, at least 15 people, including ten soldiers, lost their lives in two attacks in Dera Ismail Khan and Bannu.²⁴ On July 31, four personnel of law enforcement agencies were killed in armed attacks in the Pishin and Khyber districts of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.²⁵

On July 27, at least three people died, and several were injured after participants of a Balochistan Yakjehti Committee (BYC) protest clashed with security personnel in different areas of the Balochistan province. The clashes occurred as people from across the province moved towards Gwadar for a 'Baloch National Gathering.' They were demanding the recovery of victims of enforced disappearances and meaningful involvement in Chinese-funded projects in the resource-rich yet impoverished Balochistan province.²⁶ On July 28, one Pakistani soldier was killed, and 16 others, including an officer, were injured when protesters attacked the military personnel during a rally in the Gwadar District.²⁷

On August 2, the BYC and the local administration signed a seven-point agreement. The BYC agreed to end its protest once all the protesters arrested by security forces in Balochistan and Karachi were released. However, unless the longstanding grievances over enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings,

and demands for civil, political, and economic rights are addressed, Balochistan will remain restive.

STANDOFF AT THE INDIA-CHINA LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL (LAC)

Situation at the LAC

In July, there were two significant meetings between the foreign ministers of India and China, Dr S Jaishankar and Wang Yi. The first meeting took place on July 4 in Astana, Kazakhstan, on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Heads of State Summit. The second meeting occurred on July 25 in Vientiane, Laos, during ASEAN-related Foreign Ministers' meetings.

These meetings are important to resolve the ongoing standoff at the LAC. However, the official readouts of these meetings issued by the two sides show a marked difference in their approach to finding a solution.

The two press releases of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) talk about the need to redouble efforts and work with purpose and urgency to achieve complete disengagement from the remaining areas in Eastern Ladakh at the earliest and restore border peace and tranquillity in order to remove obstacles towards the return of normalcy in bilateral relations. Both sides should fully abide by relevant bilateral agreements, protocols, and understandings reached between the two Governments in the past. Dr Jaishankar also stressed the importance of the three mutuals- mutual respect, mutual interest, and mutual sensitivity- in bilateral ties.²⁸

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release discusses the need to step up dialogue and communication, increase understanding and mutual trust, properly handle differences, and develop mutually beneficial cooperation. It is hoped that the two sides will work together to actively explore the right way for the two big neighbours to get along. The release talks about efforts to maintain peace and tranquillity in the border areas, but there is absolutely no mention of disengagement from the LAC.²⁹

On July 31, the 30th meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation & Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC) was held in New Delhi. The MEA press release stated that the two sides reviewed the current situation along the LAC with a view to finding an early resolution of the outstanding issues. Both sides agreed on the need to jointly uphold peace and tranquillity on the ground in the border areas in accordance with relevant bilateral agreements, protocols and understandings.³⁰

Even as there is no apparent sign of a breakthrough in the current impasse at the LAC in Eastern Ladakh, both sides continue to upgrade their infrastructure. Recent satellite imagery has revealed that China has completed the construction of a 400-meter bridge across Pangong Tso. The bridge, which has been black-topped and is already being used by light motor vehicles, connects the northern and southern banks of the lake, significantly reducing travel time for Chinese military forces by 50-100 kilometres, or several hours.³¹

There is similar activity on the Indian side. In the defence budget of 2024-25, the Border Roads Organisation has been allotted Rs 6,500 crore, which is 30 per cent higher than the allocation for 2023-24. There is also an allocation of Rs 1,050 crore for the Vibrant Villages Programme that will benefit select villages in 19 districts in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Ladakh.³²

BANGLADESH

Sheikh Hasina's Visits to China

On July 8, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina arrived in Beijing on a planned four-day visit to China. During the visit, Hasina engaged in high-level talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang. The bilateral discussions led to the signing of 21 cooperation documents, primarily memorandums of understanding (MoUs), aimed at enhancing development and economic collaboration. The two nations also announced seven key outcomes, including the conclusion of a joint feasibility study on a Bangladesh-China Free Trade Agreement (FTA).³³

While Hasina's administration touted the visit as a step forward in bilateral relations, the tangible benefits appeared limited. Hasina abruptly cut short her visit, returning to Dhaka a day early, which various reports attribute to her dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the trip. One of the primary reasons cited for Hasina's early return was the unmet financial expectations. Bangladesh had hoped to secure a substantial \$5 billion loan from China to bolster its foreign currency reserves. However, the financial assistance offered by China during the visit was significantly lower, amounting to only around \$137 million.³⁴

Additionally, there were issues regarding the diplomatic protocol extended to Hasina. Reports indicate that the bilateral talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping were shorter than anticipated, and there was a notable absence of a meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. This lack of engagement at expected levels further contributed to the perceived slight and dissatisfaction on Hasina's part.³⁵

The visit underscored the delicate balance Bangladesh must maintain between its relationships with China and India. Prior to Hasina's trip to China, her engagements with India had raised concerns in Beijing, particularly regarding the Teesta water management. On her return from China, Hasina said that both India and China had made an offer for the Teesta project, but priority would be given to India to execute the project.³⁶

Student Protests

On June 5, the Bangladesh High Court gave a decision to reinstate a quota system that reserves 30 per cent of government jobs for families of veterans from the 1971 War of Independence. This quota system was abolished in 2018 by Hasina after widespread protests in Bangladesh. The June 5 court order, which said the abolition was illegal, sparked off immediate anger among the youth.³⁷

The situation worsened when Hasina called the protesters "razakar," a derogatory term for those accused of collaborating with the Pakistan Army in 1971 to betray the country. Clashes immediately broke out between students and security forces, as well as members of the ruling Awami League's student wing, have resulted in numerous deaths and injuries. Reports indicate that at least 19 people were killed in one day alone, with incidents occurring in various parts of the country, including Dhaka, Chattogram, and Khulna.³⁸

In response to the escalating violence, the government shut down universities, imposed a near-total internet blackout, and conducted raids on opposition party headquarters. On July 19, the government ordered a curfew and deployed the army. The unrest also took a political dimension, with the main opposition, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its student wing calling for marches to protest the attacks on the anti-quota protesters. At least 150 people have been killed as a result of nationwide clashes between police and university students.

On July 21, the situation calmed somewhat after the Supreme Court ordered that the quota for veterans' descendants be cut to 5 per cent, with 93 per cent of jobs to be allocated on merit. The remaining 2 per cent would be set aside for members of ethnic minorities and transgender and disabled people.³⁹ On July 24, broadband internet services were partially restored in select areas following a five-day nationwide blackout.⁴⁰ Army Chief General Waker-Uz-Zaman said soldiers will patrol the streets until the return of normalcy in the country.⁴¹

While the Indian government has termed the Bangladesh protests as an "internal matter" of the country, Bengal Chief Minister Mamta Banerjee created a stir when she said she would not hesitate to provide shelter to the "helpless

people" coming from Bangladesh and seeking refuge in West Bengal. The Sheikh Hasina government has termed the Mamta Banerjee's remarks "provocative" and "inaccurate."⁴²

This wave of demonstrations marks the first significant challenge to Prime Minister Hasina's administration since she commenced her fourth consecutive term in January, following an election boycotted by the opposition BNP. While the protests were over job quotas, they are also a manifestation of the simmering discontent over the economic situation in the country and Hasina's increasingly autocratic rule.

NEPAL

Political Shift

In the ongoing political seesaw in Nepal, on July 2, Communist Party of Nepal (UML) Chairmen KP Sharma Oli and Nepali Congress Chairman Sher Bahadur Deuba announced an alliance to form the new government.⁴³ Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal initially said he would not resign following the withdrawal of support by the CPN (UML).

Following the announcement of the new coalition, all the eight ministers representing the CPN (UML) in the old coalition government resigned. The CPN-UML also pulled out from provincial governments in Lumbini and Sudurpaschim provinces.⁴⁴ Another coalition partner, the Janata Samajbadi Party (JSP), led by Ashok Kumar Rai, withdrew its support for the government on July 5.⁴⁵ Eventually, Prime Minister Dahal announced that he would seek a vote of confidence in the House of Representatives on July 12.

Prime Minister Dahal failed to secure the trust vote during the floor test. Only 63 lawmakers gave him the vote of confidence, less than half the majority of 138 in the 275-member House.⁴⁶ This paved the way for Oli to be appointed as the Prime Minister of Nepal for the fourth time. Under the power-sharing agreement, Oli and Deuba will take turns as prime ministers for 18 months each until the next general elections in 2027.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated Oli on being appointed the prime minister of Nepal, saying he looked forward to expanding mutually beneficial cooperation between the two countries.⁴⁷ China's Prime Minister Li Qiang, in his congratulatory message to Oli, expressed his desire to implement the understanding reached between the top leaders and the two countries in the past to collaborate under the China-Nepal Belt and Road Cooperation and also to promote collaboration in other areas to further strengthen bilateral ties.⁴⁸

Oli has had a complex relationship with India. During his previous terms, there were moments of tension, particularly regarding border issues and perceptions of Indian influence in Nepalese politics. However, facing significant economic challenges, a pragmatic and balanced foreign policy would be in Nepal's national interest.

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