



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.), 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:

Minster of External Affairs of India met with Foreign Affairs Adviser Md. Touhid Hossain of Bangladesh in New York on the sidelines of UNGA on September 24, 2024. Source: [X/DrSjaishankar](#)

Anura Kumara Dissanayake took oath as the 9th Executive President of Sri Lanka on September 23, 2024.

Source: [X/@anuradisanayake](#)

Imran Khan's supporter clashed with riot policemen as they protest demanding Khan's release in Rawalpindi on September 28, 2024. Source: [Arab News](#)

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Contents

INDIA	1
Human Rights.....	1
Attempts at Increasing Diplomatic Engagement.....	1
Afghanistan-Pakistan Ties	2
PAKISTAN	3
Continuing Political Crisis.....	3
Growing Radicalisation and Terrorism.....	4
India-Pakistan Ties	6
STANDOFF AT THE INDIA-CHINA LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL (LAC)	7
Situation at the LAC	7
BANGLADESH	9
Policy Developments	9
India-Bangladesh Relations	9
SRI LANKA	10
Presidential Elections.....	10

India's Strategic Neighbourhood

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

INDIA

Human Rights

On September 6, the United Nations Security Council members issued a joint statement condemning the "Taliban's continued systemic gender discrimination and oppression of women and girls in Afghanistan."¹ The statement urged the Taliban to swiftly reverse all the policies and practices that restrict the enjoyment by women and girls of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.

On September 25, Australia, Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands announced during the UN General Assembly that they would initiate legal proceedings that could ultimately lead to action at the International Court of Justice against Afghanistan for numerous violations of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).²

The Taliban remains unmoved. On August 21, the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice released a 114-page, 35-article document laying down sweeping restrictions on women. Despite the international condemnation, Taliban supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada has ordered Afghan officials to ensure strict implementation of the new morality law.³ In the absence of any real pressure on the Taliban, the plight of women in Afghanistan remains grim.

Attempts at Increasing Diplomatic Engagement

The Taliban foreign ministry is moving aggressively to take over Afghan missions abroad that were manned by nominees of the previous government. On September 12, the Embassy of Afghanistan in Norway announced that it is closing and its assets will be placed in the custody of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs until a new government is established in Afghanistan.⁴ This was followed by the closure of the Afghan Embassy in the United Kingdom on September 27.

Following the release of this news, an assistant to the Iranian Ministry of Foreign said, "The closure of Afghanistan's embassies in Europe is a step towards bringing European capitals closer to Kabul! It seems contradictory, but this is the path that Europe has started. Today, the embassies are removed from the control of the Taliban's opponents; after a while, they will reopen as consular service offices in coordination with Kabul."⁵

In July, the Taliban publicly announced that it only recognised five Afghan diplomatic missions in Europe as legitimate: its embassies in the Netherlands, Spain, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, as well as a consulate in Munich. The Taliban have withdrawn their recognition of Afghanistan's embassy in Berlin and consulate in Bonn, but business at the Munich consulate, which appears to follow Kabul's orders directly, continues. According to DW, the German Foreign Ministry has accepted the fact that Afghanistan's mission in Munich has now taken over all consular responsibility for Afghans in Germany.⁶

On September 17, the Taliban administration announced that its diplomats had been posted to Oman to reopen the Afghanistan embassy.⁷ Kyrgyzstan, in an unpublicised move, has removed the Taliban from its list of banned terrorist organisations. Kyrgyzstan is the second Central Asian country to delist the Taliban after Kazakhstan took the group off its own terrorist list as part of its growing economic engagement with the Taliban. In May, Russia had said that it was considering such a move as it decides whether to recognise the Taliban's government.⁸

Although no country has officially recognised the Taliban government, countries in Asia see engagement as a practical necessity. This is primarily driven by security concerns over the spread of terrorism from Afghanistan. However, there is also a desire to tap into the lucrative minerals sector of Afghanistan. In the past year, the Taliban has signed contracts for 183 mining projects with domestic and foreign companies from China, Qatar, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and Iran.⁹

Afghanistan-Pakistan Ties

Even as Afghanistan attempts to increase its engagement with neighbouring countries, ties with Pakistan remain strained. On September 7, a clash between Pakistani security forces and the Afghan Taliban on the border near the Kurram district resulted in the death of eight Afghan soldiers and injuries to at least 16. The incident reportedly occurred when Afghan soldiers attacked a Pakistani checkpoint with heavy weapons in the Palosin area on the Pak-Afghan border.¹⁰ Earlier on September 4, Pakistani troops opened fire when Taliban forces attempted to construct a security outpost in Khost provinces on the Afghan

side.¹¹ On September 28, Two Taliban members were killed and three others wounded in a clash with Pakistani border forces in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province.¹²

Tensions rise as Pakistan continues to accuse Afghanistan of harbouring terrorists affiliated with the banned Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and claims that the country's Taliban leadership is aiding these groups in carrying out cross-border attacks. Taliban authorities, on the other hand, blame Pakistan for harbouring the Islamic State. On September 30, Taliban government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said "special forces" apprehended "key members of the insurgent group", which claimed a Kabul suicide bombing that killed six people on September 2. He said the suicide attacker "infiltrated Afghanistan" from a training camp in Pakistan, while others arrested in a series of raids had also "recently returned" from there.¹³

Afghan Consul General in Peshawar, Hafiz Mohibullah Shakir, caused outrage on September 17 as he remained seated during Pakistan's national anthem at a conference. The Afghan Consulate in Peshawar defended the actions, stating, "There was no intention to disrespect or demean Pakistan's national anthem. The Consul General did not stand because of the music in the anthem."¹⁴

Amidst the tension in ties, Ambassador Asif Durrani, Pakistan's Special Representative on Afghanistan, has been removed from his position due to differences over Afghanistan policy. Durrani was appointed in May 2023 with the expectation that he would resolve the stalemate in Islamabad-Kabul relations, notably regarding TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan. According to reports, strict military oversight of his role severely limited his diplomatic flexibility, leaving him restricted in negotiations with the Taliban. Durrani had opposed the mass expulsions of Afghans and was of the view that Pakistan needed to focus on managing terrorism domestically, as the Afghan Taliban were unlikely to cut their ties with the banned TTP.¹⁵

PAKISTAN

Continuing Political Crisis

Political instability continues in Pakistan as the government and the military mount pressure on Imran Khan and the PTI. Lt Gen Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry, DG ISPR, on September 5 hinted at a military trial for Imran Khan, warning that using military personnel for personal or political gains invites legal action.¹⁶ Fearing such a move, Imran Khan filed a petition in Islamabad High Court against a potential trial in the military court and his transfer to military custody.¹⁷ In its reply to the court, the federal government stated that Imran

Khan's trial by military court was not under its consideration but added that in case military authorities sought his trial, the ex-premier would be dealt with in accordance with law.¹⁸

On September 2, the 'Peaceful Assembly and Public Order Bill 2024' was tabled in the upper house on September 2, approved by the standing committee concerned on September 3 and passed by the Senate on September 5 after a suspension of rules. The bill was then rushed through the National Assembly on September 6 amidst the opposition's outcry and given assent by the president within hours.¹⁹

The new law expands the power of the authorities to restrict or ban assemblies in Islamabad on overbroad grounds, including the 'disruption of daily activities', and significantly increases the maximum penalty for taking part in an 'unlawful assembly' from six months to three years imprisonment.²⁰ The bill has been seen as targeting the PTI, which had announced the holding of a rally in Islamabad on September 8.

The PTI rally on September 8 went ahead with security forces on high alert and multiple entry points to the capital blocked. The rally centred around the demand to release Imran Khan from custody, and PTI leaders criticised the government, alleging a conspiracy against their party and calling for an end to what they perceived as political victimisation. As the rally went past its permitted deadline, clashes erupted, with the police firing tear gas shells to disperse the crowd.²¹

Following the rally, the law-enforcement agencies launched a massive crackdown on the PTI top leadership for violating the newly enacted law on public gatherings. Islamabad police have registered cases against 28 PTI leaders and arrested many of them from the parliament building.²² National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq has summoned Islamabad's police officials seeking an explanation for arresting PTI leaders within the jurisdiction of the parliament.²³

The expectation that general elections would bring some political stability in Pakistan is diminishing as politics of vendetta continue to take priority over other critical issues.

Growing Radicalisation and Terrorism

The Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Pakistan continues to face violent persecution. On September 16, the Senate unanimously passed a resolution to

declare September 7 as a public holiday, commemorating the day in 1974 when parliament had declared Qadianis a non-Muslim minority.²⁴

The term "Qadianis" in Pakistan refers to members of the Ahmadiyya Community, a religious group founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in the late 19th century in Qadian, a town in present-day India. Ahmadis believe that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was the promised Messiah and Mahdi, a position that diverges from mainstream Islamic beliefs, which consider Prophet Muhammad as the last prophet. Due to this belief, Ahmadis have faced significant persecution and discrimination in Pakistan. Ahmadis are forbidden in Pakistan from using Islamic terminology, claiming to be Muslims, or calling their places of worship "mosques."

Pakistan's blasphemy laws also came under the spotlight when a police constable gunned down a blasphemy suspect inside the lockup in Quetta on September 12. Earlier, an angry mob belonging to religious parties, including Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), had gathered outside the Kharotabad Police Station where the suspect was initially held. The crowd demanded custody of the suspect, pelting the police station with stones and even throwing grenades.²⁵

In a telling reminder of how these incidents are treated, many lawyers and political parties announced that they would plead the police constable's case free of cost. Senator Abdul Shakoor Ghabizai of JUI-F has also announced that he is ready to bear all legal expenses. Meanwhile, the victim's family has pardoned the police constable and stated that they would not pursue the case.²⁶

In a similar incident, a doctor was shot dead by police in an alleged extra-judicial killing in Mirpurkhas on September 19, a day after he was booked on allegations of blasphemy. Subsequently, his body was snatched by a mob and burnt in public view.²⁷

Alongside growing radicalisation, there has been a surge in terror-related incidents. According to the Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), The third quarter of 2024 saw a sharp increase in fatalities of terrorist violence and counter-terrorism campaigns, with a 90 per cent rise in violence.²⁸

A total of 722 people were killed, including civilians, security personnel, and terrorists, while 615 were wounded in as many as 328 incidents recorded during the period under review. The total fatalities from three quarters of this year have now surpassed the total fatalities recorded for 2023; the number of deaths rose to at least 1534 in the first three quarters compared to 1523 in 2023. With 97 per

cent of fatalities occurring in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan, state writ over these two provinces has considerably weakened.

There is also growing distrust between the police and the Army over the conduct of anti-terrorist operations. On September 9, hundreds of police personnel in KP's Lakki Marwat blocked the Indus Highway connecting Peshawar to Karachi. A large number of policemen in plainclothes from Bannu, DI Khan, Tank and Karak districts also joined the sit-in. The protesting policemen were demanding immediate withdrawal of the Army from the district and empowerment of the police to launch actions against armed groups.²⁹ The protest was called off after authorities accepted police demands that they would not be forced to launch attacks against armed groups and that the security forces would be called back or confined to their camps.³⁰

On September 22, about a dozen foreign diplomats had a narrow escape after a police vehicle escorting them to a business meeting in the Swat district in northwestern Pakistan hit a land mine, **killing one officer and injuring three others.**³¹

Pakistan launched Operation Azm-e-Istehkam in June this year to bring about sustainable peace and stability in the country, but it has yet to show any results.

India-Pakistan Ties

On August 30, India served a formal notice on Pakistan seeking the review and modification of the Indus Waters Treaty under Article XII (3) of the treaty. Article XII (3) says: "The provisions of this Treaty may from time to time be modified by a duly ratified treaty concluded for that purpose between the two Governments."³²

India's notification highlights various concerns, the important ones being a change in demographics, environmental issues, and the need to accelerate the development of clean energy to meet India's emission targets. India has also cited the impact of persistent cross-border terrorism as one of the reasons for demanding the review.³³

The Indus Waters Treaty is a water-sharing agreement between India and Pakistan, signed on September 19, 1960. The treaty was designed to resolve disputes over water distribution from the Indus River system, which comprises six rivers: the Indus, Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej. The treaty allocated the waters of the three eastern rivers (Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej) to India, while Pakistan received the waters of the three western rivers (Indus, Jhelum, and

Chenab), which collectively constitute about 80 per cent of the total water of the Indus system.³⁴

The treaty has survived the tensions and hostilities between the two countries, including the wars of 1965 and 1971 and the Kargil conflict in 1999. However, Islamabad's repeated objections to the construction of hydel projects on the Indian side have led to numerous disputes, some of which remain unresolved.

This is not the first time that India has sought a review of the treaty, but the latest notice is the most serious attempt to get Pakistan to the negotiating table. According to a highly placed Indian official, "There will be no more meetings of the Permanent Indus Commission till the governments of India and Pakistan meet and discuss the renegotiation of the 64-year-old Indus Water Treaty."³⁵ During a press briefing on September 19, Pakistan Foreign Office said that all discussions could take place within the treaty's existing framework.³⁶

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif once again raised the issue of Kashmir at the United Nations. Addressing the 79th session of the UN General Assembly, Sharif said, "To secure durable peace, India must reverse the unilateral and illegal measures" of August 2019 and enter into a dialogue for a peaceful resolution of the Jammu and Kashmir issue in accordance with the UN Security resolutions and "wishes of the Kashmiri people."³⁷

In his address to the General Assembly the next day, Dr Jaishankar hit back at Pakistan, stating that Pakistan's cross-border terrorism policy will "never succeed" and "actions will certainly have consequences." He added that a "dysfunctional nation coveting the lands of others must be exposed and must be countered."³⁸

This sharp exchange shows that Pakistan's continued intransigence on Kashmir remains the biggest hurdle in moving towards any normalisation of ties.

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

Situation at the LAC

On September 12, Indian National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang on the sidelines of the BRICS High-Ranking Officials meeting in St. Petersburg, Russia. The press release by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs stated, "Both sides agreed to work with urgency and redouble their efforts to realise complete disengagement in the remaining

areas. NSA conveyed that peace and tranquillity in border areas and respect for LAC are essential for normalcy in bilateral relations. Both sides must fully abide by relevant bilateral agreements, protocols, and understandings reached in the past by the two Governments. The two sides agreed that the India-China bilateral relationship is significant not just for the two countries but also for the region and the world."³⁹

As has been seen repeatedly, China seeks to underplay the situation at the LAC. In the Chinese foreign ministry statement, there was no mention of disengagement. The statement read, "The two sides discussed the progress made in the recent consultations on border affairs and believed that the stability of China-India relations is in the fundamental and long-term interests of the two peoples and conducive to regional peace and development. They agreed to implement the consensus reached by the leaders of the two countries, strive to enhance mutual understanding and trust, create conditions for the improvement of bilateral relations, and continue to maintain communication on this."⁴⁰

In a conversation with Ambassador Jean-David Levitte at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar stated that there has been some progress on border talks with China and 75 per cent of disengagement problems are sorted out.⁴¹ He later clarified that 75 per cent referred only to disengagement, which is only one part of the problem—issues regarding patrolling needed to be resolved, followed by de-escalation.⁴²

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson also weighed in, stating that the two countries have realised disengagement in four areas in the Western sector of the China-India border, including the Galwan Valley and that the border situation is generally stable and under control.⁴³

There has been some speculation that India and China have made "significant progress" in narrowing their gap on pending issues along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh. Indian Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi has stated that "some kind of indication has been given by the diplomatic side" and the two militaries would sit together to see how this can be translated on the ground. He added, "We want the situation that was there pre-April 2020 to be restored, whether it is the ground occupation situation, buffer zones or patrolling. Till the time that situation is not restored, as far as we are concerned, we are fully operationally ready for any contingency."⁴⁴

The next meeting of military commanders is likely to be held soon. The discussions held during that meeting would be an indicator of whether the ongoing impasse in Eastern Ladakh is headed toward some resolution.

BANGLADESH

Policy Developments

In an address to the nation on September 11, the Chief Advisor to the Interim Government, Dr Yunus, announced that the government has decided to form six commissions to reform the judiciary, election system, administration, police, Anti-Corruption Commission, and the constitution. The reforms aim to have a state system based on public ownership, accountability, and welfare, as well as establish a fair electoral system and good governance.⁴⁵

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir has opposed the interim government making fundamental changes to the constitution. He said, "The government should make reforms to organisations like the administration and the Election Commission that are required to hold an election. The parliament to be formed through that election can make all the necessary amendments to the constitution."⁴⁶

In a significant development, the Bangladesh Army Chief, General Waker-uz-Zaman, set a specific timeframe for the interim government. In an interview with Reuters, he mentioned that there should be the initiation of a democratic process in the nation within 18 months. General Waker further clarified that the Army would be behind the interim government through its tenure till Chief Advisor Yunus completes his reforms.⁴⁷

Amidst a deteriorating law and order situation, the Army has been granted magisterial powers for 60 days. This gives the Army administrative and policing powers across Bangladesh, including the power to arrest people and disperse rallies that it deems unlawful. Asif Nazrul, the advisor for Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, said that the Army had been granted magisterial powers: "We are witnessing subversive acts and disrupted stability in several places, especially in the industrial areas across the country."⁴⁸

India-Bangladesh Relations

Officials from the interim government continue to publicly air issues with India in open forums and press conferences. Speaking to PTI, the advisor on water resources, Syeda Rizwana Hasan, said the interim government wants to restart the dialogue with India on the Teesta water-sharing treaty. Hasan expressed confidence that the Teesta treaty and other water-sharing agreements with India would be resolved amicably through dialogue but suggested that Bangladesh might consider international legal documents and principles if an agreement cannot be reached.⁴⁹

Speaking to newsmen, foreign affairs advisor Touhid Hossain said that border killings are a major obstacle to fostering good relations between Bangladesh and India. He emphasised that while Bangladesh seeks good relations with India, these ties must be built on fairness.⁵⁰

Speaking to PTI on September 5, Chief Advisor Yunus said that ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's political remarks from India were an "unfriendly gesture". He asserted that there was discomfort in Bangladesh over Hasina's statements from India and added that the relations between the two countries are now at a low.⁵¹

According to the media reports, Bangladesh requested for a meeting between Chief Advisor Yunus and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New York during the 79th United Nations General Assembly session. Apparently, the meeting could not be scheduled as India was upset over Yunus' remarks in the PTI interview.⁵² However, Touhid Hossain and Dr S Jaishankar met in New York on September 23, and both sides agreed to advance bilateral relations in their mutual interests.⁵³

Ties between Dhaka and New Delhi have been strained after Sheikh Hasina's ouster, and public airing of differences by Bangladeshi leaders would further hamper improvement in relations.

SRI LANKA

Presidential Elections

Anura Kumara Dissanayake, the leader of the left-leaning National People's Power (NPP), emerged victorious in the Sri Lankan Presidential Elections held on September 21. He secured a significant mandate with 5.6 million votes, constituting 42.3% of the total polled. Dissanayake surpassed both the current President, Ranil Wickremesinghe (17%), and the opposition leader, Sajith Premadasa (32.8%). Notably, this election was the first in Sri Lanka's history to require a second round of counting, as no candidate achieved the necessary 50% threshold for an outright victory. Official voter turnout was about 79.5%, lower than the 2015 and 2019 elections.⁵⁴

Dissanayake is the leader of the leftist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and its political front, the NPP. He began his political career in the late 1980s as a student activist during the Janatha JVP's second insurrection, a period marked by violence and anti-government protests. The JVP, which had a history of armed insurrections in 1971 and from 1987-1989, later entered mainstream politics, and Dissanayake became its leader in 2014.

He has served in various political capacities, including as a Member of Parliament since 2000 and briefly as Minister of Agriculture in 2004. Dissanayake's political approach has shifted significantly in recent years, moving away from hardline Marxism to form a broader coalition under the NPP, advocating for accountability, anti-corruption, and economic reforms. His message resonated strongly with voters disillusioned by the traditional political elite, especially after Sri Lanka's 2022 economic crisis.

Dissanayake was sworn in as the 9th President of Sri Lanka on September 23. He has appointed MP and former academic Harini Amarasuriya as Sri Lanka's Prime Minister as part of a four-member Cabinet under him that will lead policy until the parliamentary elections scheduled on November 14.⁵⁵

On September 22, the Indian High Commissioner, Santos Jha, met with then 'President Elect' Dissanayake and extended greetings from India's leadership and congratulated Dissanayake on his electoral victory, emphasising India's commitment to strengthening ties for the prosperity of both nations.⁵⁶

India must contend with another new leader in its neighbourhood, but Dissanayake has acknowledged India's crucial support during Sri Lanka's financial crisis in 2022, and he would be pragmatic in dealing with New Delhi.

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