



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

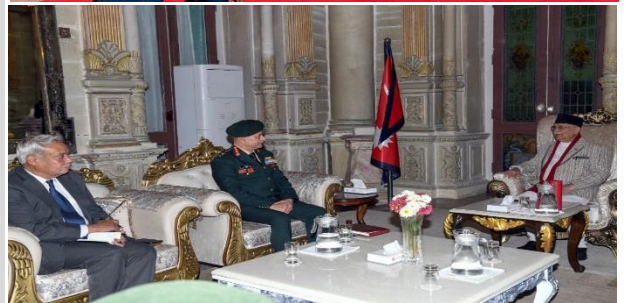
NOVEMBER 2024

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Volume V, Issue 11



Delhi Policy Group

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www.delhipolicygroup.org



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Vol. V, Issue 11

November 2024

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Delhi Policy Group as an Institution.

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:

General Zhang Youxia, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the People's Republic of China, met with Pakistan Army Chief Gen Asim Munir in Rawalpindi, Pakistan on November 27, 2024. Source: [X/@TheDailyCPEC](#)

Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake heading to deliver speech at the inauguration of the 10th Parliament on November 21, 2024. Source: [X/@anuradisanayake](#)

On November 22, 2024, General Upendra Dwivedi, the Chief of Army Staff of the Indian Army, met with Nepal's Prime Minister, K.P. Sharma Oli, in Kathmandu. Source: [X/@IndiaInNepal](#)

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India Strategic Review

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

AFGHANISTAN

Human Rights and Humanitarian Situation

Taliban authorities are working to remove "un-Islamic" and anti-government literature from circulation. The efforts were led by a commission established under the Ministry of Information and Culture, which announced that 400 books had been identified as "conflicted with Islamic and Afghan values." Banned titles include "Jesus the Son of Man" by renowned Lebanese American author Khalil Gibran for containing "blasphemous expressions" and the "counterculture" novel "Twilight of the Eastern Gods" by Albanian author Ismail Kadare. The ministry statement said that the department in charge of publishing has distributed copies of the Quran and other Islamic texts to replace seized books.¹

On November 13, Taliban authorities in eastern Afghanistan publicly executed an alleged murderer at a sports stadium in Gardez, the capital of the Paktia province, citing the Islamic concept of retributive justice or qisas. This was the sixth public execution of a murder convict in Afghanistan since the Taliban regained power in August 2021.²

According to a report released by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Afghanistan has received around \$6.7 billion in humanitarian aid since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. The report cited a "severe" economic decline brought about by disruption to the banking sector and the abrupt suspension of bilateral development cooperation, rising food insecurity and poverty levels, the worst drought in 30 years, and concerns over a potential collapse of the public health system, as key reasons behind the increasing number of people in need.

Although the situation has stabilised since then, with a significant reduction in conflict-related displacement and fragile improvements in food insecurity and poverty, Afghanistan remains "extremely" vulnerable to natural disasters, the effects of climate change, and geopolitical dynamics, all of which can generate new needs and exacerbate existing ones.³

On November 17, The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that from September 15, 2023, to September 30, 2024, a total of 2.2 million Afghan migrants have returned to Afghanistan from Iran and Pakistan. The UN agency added that the Iranian government has intensified its deportation of Afghan migrants, resulting in hundreds of individuals crossing the borders into Afghanistan daily.⁴

Regional Outreach

The US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), in its latest report to the Congress, noted that over the past three years, officials of the Afghan interim government have engaged in nearly 1,400 diplomatic meetings with representatives from around 80 countries between August 2021 and February 2024, the majority of which occurred with regional counterparts. China has had the most diplomatic engagements with the Taliban at 215, followed by Turkey (194), Iran (169), Qatar (135), and Pakistan (118).⁵

The first train carrying goods from China to Afghanistan arrived in Mazar-e Sharif on November 23 after crossing through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Fifty-five containers arrived in Afghanistan after a 22-day journey, marking the inauguration of the first direct train link between China and Afghanistan. The train is expected to take Afghan goods back to China for sale.⁶ While China has not formally recognised the Taliban government, it is increasingly engaging with Kabul on economic and security interests.

A delegation from India, headed by JP Singh, the Joint Secretary of the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran division in the MEA, arrived in Kabul on November 4. During the visit, Singh met with the Taliban's interim Defence Minister, Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, and former President Hamid Karzai. Discussions centred on India's humanitarian aid to Kabul and the utilisation of Chabahar Port **in Iran** by the business community in Afghanistan.⁷

The Taliban has appointed Ikramuddin Kamil in the position of Acting Consul at the Afghan Consulate in Mumbai. Ikramuddin is currently a PhD student at South Asia University in Delhi. The Afghan media has reported that Ikramuddin was "the first such appointment made by the Taliban regime to any Afghan mission in India". India has not officially responded to the announcement.⁸

PAKISTAN

Political Developments

On November 20, the Islamabad High Court (IHC) granted bail to Imran Khan in the Toshakhana II case. This case involves allegations that Khan and his wife, Bushra Bibi, retained an expensive Bulgari jewellery set gifted by a foreign leader – including a necklace, earrings, bracelets, and rings – at a low price, thus causing significant loss to the exchequer.⁹

However, there is little possibility that Imran Khan will be released from jail. Information Minister Ataullah Tarar has stated that Imran would remain incarcerated due to not having bail in eight pending cases related to the violent protests on May 9, 2023. Separately, the Lahore High Court denied Imran pre-arrest bail in cases registered against him in Punjab and Islamabad.¹⁰

Hours after the IHC granted bail to Imran, the Rawalpindi police arrested him in connection with a new case on terrorism and other charges. A police spokesperson said Imran had been detained in a case filed on September 28.

On November 13, Imran Khan issued a "final call" for nationwide protests on November 24, denouncing what he described as the stolen mandate, the unjust arrests of people and the passage of the 26th amendment, which he said has strengthened a "dictatorial regime".¹¹ As Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) supporters converged on Islamabad, the roads leading to the capital were blocked with large shipping containers, barbed wire, and other barriers.

As the protestors entered Islamabad on November 25, there were violent clashes with the police. At least six security personnel were killed and dozens injured in the violence, prompting the government to issue "shoot at sight" orders and deploy the army in Islamabad.¹² In a midnight crackdown on November 26, the security forces drove the protestors out of Islamabad.

Commenting on the protests, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said, "In Pakistan and around the world, we support freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association. We call on protesters to demonstrate peacefully and refrain from violence, and at the same time, we call on Pakistani authorities to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms and to ensure respect for Pakistan's laws and constitution."¹³

Even as political instability continued, on November 4, the government rushed through legislation to extend the tenure of the army, navy, and air force chiefs from three to five years through an amendment to the Pakistan Army Act of

1952. The retirement age bar of 64 years will not apply to the service chiefs, and any extension granted to them will be for a further period of five years.¹⁴

According to the government, the amendment aims to provide greater continuity in military leadership, potentially leading to a more stable security environment. Information Minister Attaullah Tarar emphasised that the extension would "help bring stability and continuity of policies within institutions."¹⁵

PTI's leader of opposition in the National Assembly, Omar Ayub Khan, criticised the move, stating, "Extending the tenure of the chiefs of the armed forces will have a negative impact on the professional competence of the rest of the officers of the armed forces and the standard of the armed forces."¹⁶

The extension of the army chief's tenure has also raised concerns about the increased influence of the military in political affairs and the effect it would have on civil-military relations by altering the dynamics between civilian leadership and the military establishment.

Internal Security

The surge in violence due to terrorist attacks continues to rock Pakistan. According to the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), a think tank based in Islamabad, 55 security personnel were killed in the first 20 days of November compared to 30 during the same period last month. In October, security forces lost 62 personnel, marking the highest number of such casualties in any month of 2024.¹⁷

On November 9, at least 26 people, including 16 security personnel, lost their lives, and 61 others were injured in a suicide bombing at a Quetta railway station. Police officials suggested that the bomber's primary target was army personnel from the Infantry School, Quetta.¹⁸ Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) claimed responsibility for the blast, stating that its Majeed Brigade had carried out the attack.

On November 19, terrorists linked to the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) stormed a checkpoint in the Mali Khel area of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Bannu. In the attack, 12 security personnel were killed, along with six terrorists.¹⁹

Sectarian violence broke out in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Kurram district when gunmen attacked a convoy of vehicles carrying Shiite Muslims on November 21. The assault resulted in at least 52 fatalities, including women and children. Following the ambush, retaliatory violence erupted between armed Shiite and

Sunni groups. By the end of November, the death toll in the fighting had risen to at least 130, with 200 people wounded.²⁰

Under pressure due to attacks on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects and Chinese nationals, the Pakistani government has announced a comprehensive military operation against terrorist organisations operating in Balochistan. According to a statement by the Prime Minister's Office, these organisations are "targeting innocent civilians and foreign nationals to scuttle Pakistan's economic progress by creating insecurity at the behest of hostile external powers."²¹

In June 2024, the government launched Operation Azm-i-Istehkam "to combat the menace of extremism and terrorism in a comprehensive and decisive manner." This operation has yielded little success, and it is not yet known whether the new operation will adopt a different approach.

China-Pakistan Ties

On November 5, a private security company guard posted at a textile mill in Karachi opened fire and seriously injured two Chinese nationals following a quarrel. Following the attack, Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif and Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi visited the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad to give assurance about the safety of Chinese nationals.²²

On November 5, Wang Huihui, Chairman of the China Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Pakistan, while speaking at an event, called on the Pakistani government to create a secure investment environment to encourage Chinese private sector participation. A recent survey has revealed a Business Climate Index of 49.63 for Chinese firms in Pakistan, just below the crucial 50-point threshold separating optimism from pessimism. The survey found that 83.4 per cent of companies cited deteriorating security as a primary barrier to business, alongside concerns over foreign exchange controls and policy inconsistencies.²³

Reuters has reported that Beijing is pushing to allow its own security staff to provide protection to thousands of Chinese citizens working in Pakistan. A written proposal sent to Islamabad by Beijing and forwarded to Pakistani security agencies for review mentioned a clause allowing the dispatching of security agencies and military forces into each other's territory to assist in counter-terrorism missions and conduct joint strikes. So far, Pakistani agencies are opposed to this proposal.²⁴

General Zhang Youxia, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the People's Republic of China, visited Pakistan and met with Army

Chief Gen Asim Munir on November 27. Gen Zhang spoke about Pakistan's ongoing counter-terrorism efforts, which remain a key topic of discussion between the two countries due to the rising frequency of attacks targeting Chinese nationals working in Pakistan. Additionally, Chinese troops are currently participating in Warrior-VIII, a joint military exercise hosted by Pakistan. Running until mid-December, the drills aim to enhance joint counter-terrorism operational capabilities.²⁵

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

Situation at the LAC

Following the agreement on patrolling, both sides have been conducting weekly patrols at Depsang and Demchok. The easing of tensions at the LAC has also resulted in increased political engagement.

On November 18, External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Rio de Janeiro on the sidelines of the G20 Summit. This marked the first high-level engagement since the completion of troop disengagement in eastern Ladakh. The ministers discussed resuming direct flights between the two countries, the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra pilgrimage, data sharing on trans-border rivers, and media exchanges. Asked about the meeting, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Lin Jian said China-India relations are at "a new starting point."²⁶

On November 20, Defense Minister Rajnath Singh met with his Chinese counterpart, Admiral Dong Jun, in Vientiane, Laos, during the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus. According to the Indian press release, Rajnath Singh highlighted that amicable relations between India and China would have positive implications for global peace and prosperity and that the two countries should focus on cooperation rather than conflict.

Rajnath Singh called for reflecting on the lessons learnt from the unfortunate border clashes of 2020, taking measures to prevent the recurrence of such events and safeguarding peace and tranquillity along the India-China border. He emphasised and looked forward to greater trust and confidence building between the two sides through de-escalation.²⁷

With disengagement completed, further discussions in the coming days will focus on de-escalation and effective management of the LAC. India has clearly stated that three key principles must be observed in all circumstances: (i) both sides should strictly respect and observe the LAC, (ii) neither side should

attempt to unilaterally alter the status quo, and (iii) agreements and understandings reached in the past must be fully abided by in their entirety.

BANGLADESH

India-Bangladesh Ties

The downward spiral in India-Bangladesh ties continues. Protests broke out at the Bangladesh capital, Dhaka, on November 25 after the Dhaka Metropolitan Police announced the arrest of Chinmoy Krishna Das, leader of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in Bangladesh.²⁸ He was arrested for sedition over allegations he had disrespected the Bangladeshi flag. He was the spokesperson for the Bangladesh Sammilita Sanatan Jagaran Jote and had been at the forefront of protests advocating for the protection of the Hindu minority.

Further violence erupted after the bail plea of Krishna Das was turned down by a court in Chattogram, resulting in the death of a public prosecutor, Saiful Islam Alif.²⁹ In a press release, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs voiced strong concern over the arrest and denial of bail for Krishna Das. It urged Bangladesh authorities to ensure the safety and security of Hindus and all minorities.³⁰

Dhaka reacted to New Delhi's statement, calling the issue "internal affairs of Bangladesh." It said that "such unfounded statements not only misrepresent facts but also stand contrary to the spirit of friendship and understanding between the two neighbouring countries."³¹

The arrest of Krishna Das also triggered protests in West Bengal and Assam. On December 2, demonstrators breached the security barricade at the Bangladesh Assistant High Commission in Agartala on Monday, vandalising property and removing the Bangladeshi national flag. The Ministry of External Affairs termed the situation "deeply regrettable" and announced additional security deployment at the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi and other missions of the country in India.³²

While speaking at the event on November 17, Indian high commissioner Pranay Verma sought to downplay the tension in ties. He said India's relations with Bangladesh are multifaceted and cannot be reduced to a 'single agenda' or a single issue. Verma underscored India's continued commitment to fostering a stable and constructive relationship with Bangladesh. and the growing interdependence between the two countries, noting their intertwined economies and development paths.³³

Earlier, on November 6, the Indian Army Chief, General Upendra Dwivedi, engaged in a virtual discussion with his Bangladeshi counterpart, General Waker-Uz-Zaman. According to a statement by the Indian Army, General Dwivedi "interacted with General Waker-Uz-Zaman and exchanged views on issues of mutual interest including bilateral Defence Cooperation."³⁴

SRI LANKA

General Elections

Held on November 14, the parliamentary elections witnessed the National People's Power (NPP) coalition, under the leadership of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, securing an unprecedented 61.56 per cent of the popular vote, translating to 159 out of 225 parliamentary seats. The party of former President Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, experienced a near wipeout in the legislature, dropping from 145 seats in the 2020 general elections to just three. Notably, the NPP won in districts traditionally dominated by minority parties, including the Jaffna Electoral District, marking the first time a non-Tamil political party has achieved such a victory.³⁵

The election results give President Dissanayake substantial influence in the legislature, enabling him to implement his political and economic reform pledges. A new 21-member Cabinet was sworn in on November 18 by President Dissanayake.³⁶ He has kept crucial ministries like Defence, Finance, Planning, and Digital Economy under his control and reappointed Harini Amarasuriya as Prime Minister.

Speaking at the inauguration of the first session of the Tenth Parliament, President Dissanayake outlined a three-pronged economic strategy aimed at fostering rapid growth, inclusive participation, and equitable wealth distribution to stabilise the country's economy. The President stressed the importance of inclusive economic growth, stating that an economy "that excludes the people" would fail to deliver tangible benefits.³⁷

The foremost challenge ahead of the new government is to revitalise a severely impacted economy. The government has initiated a \$12.55 billion debt restructuring plan, including a bond swap aimed at reducing debt service payments by \$9.5 billion under the International Monetary Fund (IMF) program. This initiative is crucial for emerging from the nation's first external default.³⁸

On November 23, the IMF approved the third review of Sri Lanka's \$2.9 billion bailout but warned that the economy remains vulnerable, though signs of economic recovery were emerging. The global lender said it would release

about \$333 million, bringing total funding to \$1.3 billion. However, Sri Lanka still needs to complete a \$12.5 billion bondholder debt restructuring and a \$10 billion debt rework with bilateral creditors, including Japan, China and India, to take the programme forward.³⁹

Adhering to IMF conditions while addressing public expectations for economic relief could become challenging. President Dissanayake's campaign promises, such as tax reductions and increased social support, may conflict with the austerity measures stipulated by the IMF agreement.

NEPAL

General Dwivedi's Visit to Nepal

In November 2024, General Upendra Dwivedi, the Chief of Army Staff of the Indian Army, undertook a significant five-day official visit to Nepal, aimed at reinforcing the longstanding defence and cultural ties between the two neighbouring countries.

General Dwivedi engaged extensively with Nepal's political and military leadership during his visit. He held high-level meetings with the President of Nepal, Ram Chandra Paudel, the Prime Minister, K.P. Sharma Oli, the Defence Minister, Manbir Rai, and Nepal Army Chief, General Ashok Raj Sigdel.⁴⁰

A highlight of General Dwivedi's visit was the conferment of the honorary rank of General of the Nepali Army by Nepal's President, Ram Chandra Paudel. This tradition, initiated in 1950, symbolises the deep-rooted military camaraderie between India and Nepal. The meeting with General Sigdel focused on enhancing military bonds, joint exercises, training cooperation, and capability development.

In Pokhara, General Dwivedi attended an Ex-Servicemen Rally, where he interacted with Indian Army veterans residing in Nepal, as well as 'Veer Naris' (war widows) and gallantry awardees. He acknowledged their contributions and emphasised the enduring bond between the Indian Army and its retired personnel in Nepal.

The official press release stated that the visit "exceeded all stated objectives." However, the important issue of recruiting soldiers from Nepal under the Agniveer scheme still remains unresolved. There was no official word on this subject.

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