



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

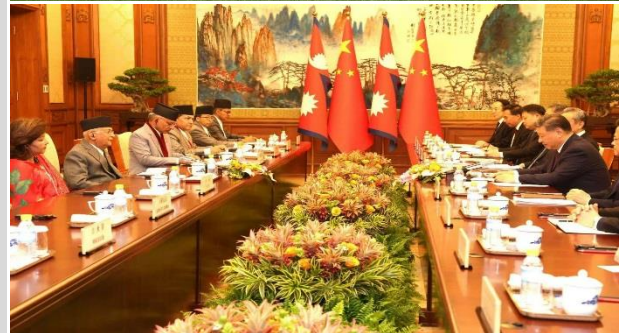


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INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

The ISR features an assessment of key developments, trends, and policies pertaining to India's immediate and continental neighbourhood, and is authored by Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.), Distinguished Fellow for Military Strategy. The research team includes Shreyas Deshmukh, Research Associate. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to Shreyas Deshmukh at shreyas@dpg.org.in. To subscribe, please [click here](#).

Cover Images:

Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi received President of Sri Lanka, Anura Kumara Disanayake at Hyderabad House, New Delhi on December 16, 2024. Source: [Flickr/MEA](#)

On December 3, 2024, Nepal's Prime Minister held bilateral meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing.

Source: [X/@MofaNepal](#)

The Foreign Office Consultation between Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Jashim Uddin held in Dhaka on December 9. Source: [X/DD News](#)

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India Strategic Review

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

AFGHANISTAN

Human Rights and Humanitarian Situation

The World Food Program (WFP) has announced that with the arrival of winter, one in four families in Afghanistan will face challenges in securing sufficient food. The organisation emphasised that millions of people in Afghanistan are grappling with a food crisis, with a quarter of the country's population unable to access enough food to sustain their lives. WFP added that \$680 million in funding will be needed over the next six months to assist the most vulnerable families across Afghanistan.¹

The latest report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) for Afghanistan presents a grim picture.² In 2025, almost half of the population – some 22.9 million people – will require humanitarian assistance to survive, due to limited capacity to meet both chronic and acute needs. The cumulative effects of prolonged food insecurity, inadequate water and sanitation and limited access to healthcare have contributed to increased acute malnutrition rates among children and pregnant women, with the number of districts classified as severity level 4 for malnutrition nearly tripling from 19 in 2024 to 56 in 2025. In total, 7.8 million children under five years old and women will require nutrition assistance in 2025, which includes 3.5 million acutely malnourished children and 1.1 million women who will require treatment.

The report also notes that from January to early December 2024, approximately 1.2 million undocumented returnees have returned to Afghanistan, with more than 1.1 million coming from Iran and 80,000 from Pakistan. This has further burdened over-stretched essential services and local resources in host communities in a country already grappling with an estimated 6.3 million people in protracted displacement.

Briefing ambassadors in the Security Council on December 12, Roza Otunbayeva, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, painted a grim picture of escalating human rights abuses, diminishing freedoms and growing humanitarian challenges. A recent decree

barring women from attending medical institutes could further devastate the country's healthcare system, with deadly implications not only for women and girls but for men and boys as well.³ On December 2, the Public Health Ministry ordered all private educational institutions in Afghanistan to cease female medical education, banning women from attending classes at private medical institutions. This decision will limit women and girls' already precarious access to healthcare, as male medical staff are prohibited from treating women unless a male relative is present.⁴

Pakistan-Afghanistan Ties

On December 12, the acting Afghan ambassador in Islamabad visited the foreign office to meet Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar. After the meeting, foreign office spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch told reporters that the meetings "are an expression of Pakistan's interest in dialogue to resolve any issues that arise from time to time and to find constructive approach and solutions to issues, including issues that are of serious concern to Pakistan."⁵

On December 24, a delegation led by Pakistan's special envoy on Afghanistan, Muhammad Sadiq, held talks in Kabul. This was the first high-level visit by the Pakistani side to Kabul in 15 months and came at a time when Pakistan was battling terrorism, particularly in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. Ambassador Muhammad Sadiq met Afghan Taliban Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani and Afghan Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi. A statement issued by the Afghan side said the delegation led by Muhammad Sadiq discussed bilateral issues, cooperation in various sectors, and improved relations between the two countries. Both sides emphasised the need for "joint efforts" to stabilise peace and security and foster economic growth.⁶

However, even as the delegation was in Kabul, Pakistan carried out multiple airstrikes in Afghanistan's eastern Paktika province on the 14th. The Pakistan Foreign Office (FO) said that Pakistani forces conduct "operations in border areas to protect the people of Pakistan from terrorist groups."⁷ The airstrikes appear to be a response to an attack by the TTP on December 21 on an army checkpoint in South Waziristan that killed 16 soldiers.⁸

The Taliban government confirmed the airstrikes but claimed that civilians had been targeted and the 46 people killed in the bombing included women and children. Enayatullah Khowarazami, spokesperson for Afghanistan's Defence Ministry, wrote on social media platform X: "The Islamic Emirate will not leave this cowardly act unanswered and considers the defense of its territory an inalienable right."⁹

On December 28, Afghanistan's Ministry of Defense issued a statement that the Taliban forces had targeted several points beyond the "hypothetical line" – a term used by Afghan authorities to refer to the disputed border with Pakistan.¹⁰ Pakistani sources confirmed that a Frontier Constabulary soldier was killed and 11 others were injured when militants and Afghan forces jointly opened fire on Pakistani posts with heavy weapons on Saturday morning. In the retaliatory firing, seven to eight personnel of the Afghan forces were killed.¹¹

Although both countries stress the importance of dialogue, the shelter given by the Taliban to TTP is a major cause of tension between Pakistan and Afghanistan. With the Taliban unwilling to act against the TTP, which has intensified its attacks within Pakistan, ties will remain strained.

PAKISTAN

Political Developments

Pressure continues to mount on former Prime Minister Imran Khan and members of his party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Imran Khan was booked in a murder case in connection with the death of paramilitary personnel who were run over by a speeding vehicle during a protest by the PTI on November 26.¹² According to data submitted before the Islamabad High Court (IHC) on December 6, Imran is now facing 188 criminal cases and inquiries.¹³

In relation to the GHQ attack case on May 9, 2023, an anti-terrorism court in Rawalpindi has indicted 113 members of the PTI, including Imran Khan, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, Shireen Mazari, and Khyber Pakhtun Khwa Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur.¹⁴ On December 13, A seven-member constitutional bench of the Supreme Court allowed military courts to pronounce judgements in the cases of 85 civilians who are in military custody for their alleged role in the May 9 riots.¹⁵ Following the ruling, a military court handed out sentences to 25 PTI members ranging between two and 10 years of rigorous imprisonment.¹⁶

The European Union, the UK and the US have expressed concern over the sentencing of civilians by military courts, stating "trying civilians in military courts lacks transparency, independent scrutiny and undermines the right to a fair trial. The EU spokesperson reminded that under the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+), beneficiary countries, including Pakistan, have voluntarily agreed to implement effectively 27 international core conventions, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, in order to continue benefitting from GSP+ status.¹⁷ However, these statements will unlikely result in the government easing pressure on the PTI.

On December 10, former ISI chief Lt Gen Faiz Hameed was indicted on charges of "engaging in political activities, violations of Official Secret Act detrimental to safety and interest of the state, misuse of authority & government resources and causing wrongful loss to a person(s)." A statement by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) noted that the involvement of Lt Gen Faiz Hamid in "events related to creating agitation and unrest, leading up to multiple incidents including but not limited to 9th May 2023 incident for fomenting instability; at the behest of and in collusion with vested political interests, is also being separately investigated."¹⁸

With his back to the wall, Imran and his party have expressed willingness to negotiate with the Shehbaz-led government if given any "implementable" or "serious" offer.¹⁹ The first round of negotiations between the government and the PTI was held in Islamabad on December 23. National Assembly (NA) Speaker Ayaz Sadiq presided over the meeting, which Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar and other allied party leaders attended. On the PTI side, the delegation included former National Assembly Speaker Asad Qaiser, Sunni Ittehad Council Chairman Sahibzada Hamid Raza, and Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen leader Allama Raja Nasir Abbas. The PTI's demands include the release of all detainees, including Imran Khan, and the formation of a judicial commission to investigate the events of May 9 and the D-Chowk firing incident on November 26. The next meeting will be held on January 2.²⁰

Meanwhile, differences are emerging within the ruling coalition members. On November 30, PPP Chairperson Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari criticised the government for not consulting his party over the actions taken against the PTI and expressed disappointment over PML-N's economic and security policies.²¹ In another meeting of PPP senior leadership held at Bilawal House on December 20, the participants "expressed a lack of confidence in the federal government regarding the progress on commitments made to various provinces."²² To resolve the matter, President Asif Ali Zardari met with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on December 23, where both leaders agreed to move forward with legal reforms and make decisions through consultations with all political stakeholders.²³

Internal Security

Following the sectarian clashes in Kurram last month, the government ordered the closure of all roads in Kurram, including the Parachinar-Peshawar highway. The government's decision has led to Upper Kurram being cut off from the rest of the country resulting in around 400,000 residents being stranded. The prolonged closure has disrupted daily life in the area. Due to fuel

shortages, government and private educational institutions have been forced to shut down. Hotels, bakeries, vegetable stalls, and fruit shops are closed due to insufficient supplies.²⁴

Although the government has launched a helicopter service for essential supplies, there are reports that 50 children have died due to a lack of medical facilities at hospitals and other health centres.²⁵ Efforts by the government to bring about a resolution to the sectarian crisis have failed, as one group has refused to surrender its weapons.²⁶

Meanwhile, terrorist attacks continued across Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. According to data from the South Asian Terrorism portal, the total number of fatalities in terror-related incidents in 2024 is the highest since 2015. The number of security force personnel killed stands at 733, the highest since 2009.²⁷ On December 20, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Apex Committee decided that temporary evacuations would be carried out in some parts of the Khyber and Bannu districts amid efforts to cleanse the areas of miscreants and ensure the safety of their residents.²⁸

In a briefing to the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Planning Development, the director of the National Counter Terrorism Authority informed that China has proposed a joint venture security company for the protection of Chinese nationals in Pakistan. There are 20,000 Chinese nationals in Pakistan, of which 2,700 are working on CPEC projects. In 14 attacks against the Chinese citizens since 2021, 20 Chinese have been killed and 34 injured.²⁹

Mass protest backed by various civil society organisations carried out across the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) against a controversial ordinance seeking to 'regulate' public gatherings. In November 2024, POK President Barrister Sultan Mehmood approved a presidential ordinance that imposed punishments for 'illegal' public gatherings, rallies, and protests.³⁰ On December 8, after several days of protests, the government withdrew the controversial presidential ordinance and accepted several protesters' demands.³¹

US Sanctions on Pakistan Missile Programme

On December 18, the United States announced sanctions on four Pakistani entities for their involvement in advancing the country's long-range missile programme. The US State Department in a Press release stated that "In light of the continuing proliferation threat of Pakistan's long-range missile development, the United States is designating four entities for sanctions under Executive Order (E.O.) 13382, which targets proliferators of weapons of mass

destruction and their means of delivery."³² The firms include The National Development Complex (NDC), Akhtar and Sons Private Limited, Affiliates International, and Rockside Enterprise.

The US has intensified pressure on Pakistan's missile development since October 2023 when it sanctioned three Chinese companies - General Technology Limited, Beijing Luo Luo Technology Development Co Ltd, and Changzhou Utek Composite Company Ltd - for supplying missile-applicable items to Pakistan.³³ In April and September 2024, further sanctions had been imposed on seven Chinese companies for assisting Pakistan's ballistic missile programme.

On December 19, speaking at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the US Deputy National Security Adviser Jon Finer asserted that Pakistan is developing long-range ballistic missile capabilities that eventually could allow it to strike targets well beyond South Asia, making it an "emerging threat" to the United States.³⁴

Pakistan Foreign Office has rejected Finer's remarks, calling them "unfounded, devoid of rationality and sense of history."³⁵ The Foreign Office has further stated, "Pakistan's strategic capabilities are meant to defend its sovereignty and preserve peace and stability in South Asia. The latest installment of sanctions defies the objective of peace and security by aiming to accentuate military asymmetries."³⁶ Meanwhile, Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif maintained that there would be no compromise on Pakistan's nuclear programme.³⁷

INDIA-CHINA BORDER

Situation at the LAC

In its 2024 year-end review, the Ministry of Defence stated, "Overall situation along the LAC is stable but sensitive. Post prolonged negotiations at Diplomatic and Military levels, on 21 October 2024, broad consensus has been achieved to restore ground situation based on principles of Equal and Mutual Security. Consensus achieved includes disengagement and relocation of troops from the friction areas of Depsang and Demchok followed by joint verification. Currently, blocking positions have been removed by both sides and joint verification has been completed. Patrolling activity has commenced to traditional patrolling areas in Depsang and Demchok."³⁸

The disengagement at the LAC has permitted a calibrated move forward in bilateral ties. India's National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign

Minister Wang Yi met in Beijing on December 18, the first time they held formal talks as their countries' Special Representatives (SRs) on border issues since 2019.

There were positive signals from the meeting as both sides "reiterated the importance of maintaining a political perspective of the overall bilateral relationship while seeking a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable framework for settlement of the boundary question and resolved to inject more vitality into this process."³⁹ The SRs also agreed to strengthen cross-border exchanges, including the resumption of Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, data sharing on transborder rivers, and border trade at Nathula.

Even as bilateral ties show signs of improvement, the military posture at the LAC is unlikely to be diluted till mutual trust is restored.

BANGLADESH

India-Bangladesh Ties

Amidst strained relations, India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri visited Dhaka on December 9 and met the Chief Adviser of the Interim Government of Bangladesh Dr Muhammad Yunus and the Foreign Affairs Adviser Touhid Hossain. He also held consultations with the Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh, Mohammad Jashim Uddin.

Misri reaffirmed India's support for a democratic, peaceful, progressive, and inclusive Bangladesh. He also voiced concerns about the recent events affecting the safety and well-being of minority communities. The Foreign Office Consultations included discussions on political and security affairs, border management, trade and commerce. Furthermore, both sides agreed to enhance cooperation to advance regional integration, including under the BIMSTEC framework.⁴⁰

Misri's visit was the first high-level engagement between India and Bangladesh since the interim government assumed office in August. However, it has not visibly impacted easing tensions between the two countries.

Mahfuz Alam, a close aide of Muhammad Yunus and an advisor to the interim government, stoked controversy after saying that West Bengal, Assam and Tripura "are part of Bangladesh." This remark evoked a sharp response with the Indian Ministry of External Affairs stating, "We would like to remind all concerned to be mindful of their public comments. While India has repeatedly signalled interest in fostering relations with the people and the interim

government of Bangladesh, such comments underline the need for responsibility in public articulation."⁴¹

In a diplomatic note issued December 23, Bangladesh's interim government sought the extradition of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina from India. India has confirmed that a note verbale has been received regarding the extradition request but has made no further comments.⁴² At this stage, it appears unlikely that India would agree to send Hasina back to Bangladesh.

The treatment of minorities in Bangladesh is also attracting international attention. On December 13, the White House said that President Joe Biden is closely monitoring the situation in Bangladesh and the US will hold the country's interim government accountable for ensuring the protection of religious and ethnic minorities.⁴³ The UK government has revised its travel guidance for Bangladesh, cautioning that "terrorists are likely to try to carry out attacks" in the South Asian nation. The advisory highlights risks to foreign nationals in crowded areas and at religious places and political rallies, warning that "some groups have targeted people who they consider to have views and lifestyles contrary to Islam."⁴⁴

SRI LANKA

President Dissanayake's Visit to India

Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's state visit to India from December 15 to 17 marked his first overseas trip since assuming office in September. The visit reinforced the commitment of both nations to deepen their multifaceted partnership, focusing on sustainable development, regional security, and economic cooperation.

A joint statement issued after the meeting between President Dissanayake and Prime Minister Narendra Modi titled "Fostering Partnerships for a Shared Future" indicated the commitment of both countries in strengthening ties in wide range of areas.⁴⁵

On the economic front, the statement reflected a paradigm shift from debt-driven partnerships to investment-led development. This transition seeks to foster long-term growth through trade, infrastructure development, and technological collaboration. Additionally, President Dissanayaka thanked Prime Minister Modi for India's support in stabilising the Sri Lankan economy through unparalleled and multi-pronged assistance, including emergency financing and forex support worth \$4 billion.

A significant focus was placed on enhancing energy connectivity, with both leaders expressing their determination to establish power grid integration and develop offshore wind energy projects in the Palk Strait. These initiatives aim to promote sustainable energy solutions and improve energy security for both countries. The agreement to supply liquefied natural gas (LNG) from India to Sri Lanka was also highlighted as a pivotal step towards fostering economic ties and ensuring reliable energy resources.

The importance of regional security, particularly in the Indian Ocean, was emphasised along with a shared commitment to a free, open, and secure maritime domain. Sri Lanka reiterated its assurance that its territory would not be used for activities detrimental to India's security. Both sides acknowledged the critical role of mutual trust in navigating regional challenges, particularly concerning non-traditional threats.

India conveyed its continued commitment to working closely with Sri Lanka to advance its defence and maritime security needs and extend necessary assistance to augment its capabilities to address its maritime challenges. The two sides also agreed to explore the possibility of concluding a framework Agreement on defence cooperation.

The leaders also discussed enhancing connectivity through infrastructure projects, resumption of ferry services, and other initiatives to promote people-to-people ties. Tourism and cultural exchange were recognised as vital avenues for strengthening bilateral relations, with a shared commitment to fostering deeper understanding and collaboration.

During the visit, some of the sensitive issues in the bilateral ties were deftly handled. The 13th Amendment to Sri Lanka's Constitution, which was intended to provide greater autonomy to address the aspirations of the Tamil minority, was not directly mentioned. In an oblique reference, Prime Minister Modi said, "We hope that Sri Lanka will fully implement the Constitution and will fulfil its commitment to hold provincial council elections."⁴⁶ Similarly, on the issue of illegal fishing and bottom trawling, both sides agreed to address this in a humanitarian manner.

There has been some criticism from the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) that the deals struck during Dissanayake's visit could disproportionately favour India while undermining Sri Lanka's local workforce, resources, and autonomy.⁴⁷ Notwithstanding this, there is a positive momentum in bilateral ties that both countries should nurture.

NEPAL

Prime Minister Oli's Visit to China

Nepal's Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli conducted a four-day official visit to China from December 2 to 5, marking his first foreign trip since assuming office in July. This visit deviated from the traditional practice of Nepali leaders choosing India for their inaugural foreign visit.

Prime Minister Oli engaged in discussions with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang, focusing on strengthening Nepal-China relations and exploring avenues for economic and infrastructural collaboration.⁴⁸ Nine agreements were formalised, including a framework for Belt and Road Cooperation, pending since the initial pact in 2017. This framework sets the stage for future infrastructure projects, such as road upgrades and transportation corridors, and outlines financing modalities.⁴⁹

Among the agreements signed were a memorandum for constructing the Tokha-Chahare tunnel road and another to enhance Nepal-China trade. Another significant agreement was to deploy volunteer Chinese language teachers to Nepal and to facilitate collaboration between Nepal Television and China Media Group on communication technology.⁵⁰

On his return to Nepal, Oli said, "Nepal–China relations have further deepened after my visit. This will certainly benefit Nepal."⁵¹ However, there are structural and practical problems with an excessive reliance on China. Nepali Congress (NC), an important coalition partner of Oli and his party CPN-UML, is concerned that the BRI could draw the country into a debt trap. The NC has consistently maintained that Nepal should not take loans to finance BRI projects, citing the example of Pokhara airport, built with Chinese loans, failing to attract international flights.⁵²

Nepal's trade and energy sectors exhibit a pronounced dependence on India. India accounts for approximately two-thirds of Nepal's international trade, while China has a share of just 14 per cent.⁵³ India has been a pivotal partner in developing Nepal's hydropower sector, facilitating both investment in infrastructure and the export of electricity to the Indian market. Nepal has exported electricity worth Nepalese rupees 13 billion (INR 8.15 billion approximately) to India from mid-July to mid-December of 2024.⁵⁴

Oli's tilt towards China is evident, but he is not in a position to ignore Nepal's dependency on India. On the other hand, New Delhi must take a proactive approach to ensure Kathmandu is not drawn closer to the China camp.

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