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South Asia is a region of immense diversity, both in terms of its people and its cultures. It is also a region that has faced its fair share of challenges. From political instability and economic inequality to religious and ethnic tensions, the region has grappled with a range of complex issues over the years. In this Monitor, we will delve into the complexities, explore various challenges and analyse the efforts being made to overcome them.

We curate the geopolitical situations in the region to analyse the affect and as the ongoing activities in Pakistan indicate, there are tumultuous times ahead. We will keep you informed.

Happy reading

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PAKISTAN FAULTLINES ARE GROWING

As if Pakistan wasn't having enough to handle, Supreme Court approved Punjab Provisional election in May 2023. Readers would recollect that there Imran Khan (IK) had dissolved Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) lead assemblies in KPK and Punjab. He has been seeking early elections in the state and the country. Courts seem to be supporting IK and the Punjab elections are now confirmed. Combine all this with ongoing economic crisis, inflation, famine, climate change. It feels like a military exercise where a commanding officer is painted scenarios, one after another, stretching him for decisions and resources – his 'crises' ends with the exercises, but this is a real life scenario for Pakistan.

Supreme Court's decision¹ to order elections in May 2023, has clearly pit judiciary against the government –it is now IK plus Judiciary vs The Government. Election in most populous Punjab also involves the military. The court has announced elections rejecting a petition from the defence ministry to instead hold elections simultaneously across the country later, amid deteriorating security and economic conditions. To buttress its petition, Army also insinuated possibility of India exploiting the crises militarily. The court of course thought nothing about it. Why is military worried about the court's decision? British sponsored Government Colleges in Punjab in 1920s and encouraged by this 'elitist' status of western education, military and bureaucracy took to sponsoring its majority carders from Punjab. It made Punjab the principal recruiting ground for bureaucrats and army officers. Connect it with the government policies and 1959 Land Reforms that provide plots to servicemen in Punjab at appallingly low prices. No wonder the military is symbiotically connected with Punjab. The elections are likely to give fillip and the governance to IK and PTI so the fault line is a four way match - IK plus Judiciary vs Government plus Military. The plight does not end here.

On the positive note, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif secured a vote of confidence² from the National Assembly. He was able to garner, 'full confidence' of 180 lawmakers, much more than 172 votes he needed to remain leader of the house. Pakistanis are themselves surprised about this upbeat news. The National Assembly had rejected a money bill tabled for providing funds to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) for holding polls in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The three-member bench of the Supreme Court, is dejected about government not implementing its directives to provide Rs 21 billion for provincial elections. The National Assembly will complete its five-year term in August 2023

¹Shah Meer Baloch, 'Pakistan's Punjab elections to go ahead as court confirms ruling', 20 April 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/20/pakistan-punjab-elections-to-go-ahead-as-court-confirms-ruling>, accessed on 27 April 2023.

²Pakistan PM Shehbaz Sharif Secures Vote Of Confidence in National Assembly, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/pakistan-pm-shehbaz-sharif-secures-vote-of-confidence-in-national-assembly/articleshow/99819691.cms>, accessed on 02 May 2023.

and according to the 'Constitution', elections shall be held within 90 days. This means that the election must be held by mid-October. If the government fails to decide a date for elections, the court can disqualify the prime minister for contempt of court – it has for minor infringements in the past. Two way fight is underway – Government vs Judiciary.

Bajwa, emboldened and relieved by notoriety of his retirement benefits (family members and relatives becoming billionaires³ during his six-year tenure, making assets amounting to Rs 12.7 billion) got pulled in for his epiphany of 2021 about Army's real capabilities. He was scapegoated by Hamid Mir and Nasim Zehra in a Pakistani channel UK44 interview⁴. The Pakistani journalists revealed then COAS's admission that Pakistan lacked ammunition and economic strength to go to war with India and Pakistan Army is no match for Indian Army. The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), quickly came out with a rebuttal⁵ – 'Bajwa's statement on Pak Army's 'combat worthiness' quoted out of context'. It is evident that military and its capabilities are under question by the citizens of the failing state. This is another fault line – People vs Military.

Former Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi mentioned potential to attract a military takeover on 23 April in an interview to Dawn⁶. He warned of anarchy and friction within the society and institutions can see the army step in. He said that martial law always remained a possibility if the system failed. A senior leader of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party, served as the 21st prime minister of Pakistan from August 2017 to May 2018, obviously cannot call it a slip of tongue. It is a warning to the people, army or a pleading to the world. He even suggested that the military should play an arbitrary role to resolve the political impasse, as no bar on institutional heads (PTI Chairman Imran Khan, PML-N Supremo Nawaz Sharif, and Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir) to sit down and work out a solution for the country- even calling it 'their responsibility'.

General Asim Munir, Pak COAS, in his maiden speech, while addressing the PMA passing out parade on 29 April 2023 accepted that there is 'wedge driving'⁷ between people and the armed forces. Munir also mentioned 'safety and security of our people is sacred and no duty is more binding than the defence of our motherland'. Army is trying to secure the lost public trust. Obviously there was a rhetoric of 'Stability, security and peace in Afghanistan' and 'political, moral and diplomatic support to our Kashmiri brothers.'

³ <https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/world/story/army-chief-bajwa-family-became-billionaires-during-tenure-claims-report-pak-govt-says-leak-illegal-353849-2022-11-23>, accessed on 01 May 2023.

⁴ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/former-chief-qamar-javed-bajwas-remarks-on-combat-preparedness-quoted-out-of-context-pakistan-army/article66789096.ece>, accessed on 01 May 2023

⁵ <https://pakobserver.net/ispr-says-bajwas-statement-on-pak-armys-combat-worthiness-quoted-out-of-context/>, accessed on 02 May 2023.

⁶ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1749011>, accessed on 02 May 2023.

⁷ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2414245/bond-with-people-to-be-solidified-coas>, accessed on 03 May 2023.

For the fiscal year 2022-023, Pakistan announced a defence budget of Rs 1.53 trillion (\$7.5 billion), a 12% increase over 2021-2022. To justify the rise, it was said that the increase would be offset by rising inflation. Pakistan economists⁸ are ascribing the high inflation to high non-developmental expenditures of military. They believe a 33% (Rs 500 billion) of defence budget if utilised in education, health, micro-finance, infrastructure is expected to control inflation. There are reports which hint at the conflict⁹ at the commanders' conference about cut in the military expenditure put forth by the MoD under the bailout negotiations. Military is now being targeted to share the poverty – literally.

The Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) continues to intensify its attacks. Negotiations with Taliban, brought about more misery to Pakistan. Taliban has proposed that Pakistan bear the cost¹⁰ of disarming and rehabilitating TTP members and families (30000) from the Pak-Af border! Money is not there though. TTP continues to be a bone of contention.

Pakistan army is the lead agency for the Pakistan crisis now. It understands its diminishing elitist status and hammering by TTP. It has to managing the internal dissidents (rank and file) who feel IK is a good bet, contrarily it has to support the ruling government, since IK had called out their bluff – 'ye jo dahshatgardi hai iske peeche vardi hai'. The previous chief's comment may be 'out of context' but the army is aware of its internal health and cannot justify equipment failure to the military personnel who utilise them. Faced with a Catch 22 – Pak Army coup may control the political situation, but lose out on likely economic bailout.

Or, let a sense prevail – permit elections – let people choose, and hope that TTP gives them a breather. But who's listening?

AFGHANISTAN AFTERSHOCKS

The United Nations held a conference on Afghanistan in May 2023 at Doha to focus on establishing a unified international strategy. UN prioritised unified strategy discussion over the clamour to recognise the official status of Taliban. Since the Taliban took over in September 2021, it has imposed strict conditions on women in the country that closes girls' high schools and stops women from attending university. In April 2023, Taliban extended their ban to women working for the United Nations.

⁸<https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2023/02/17/reduce-the-defence-budget/>, accessed on 03 May 2023.

⁹<https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-pakistan-economic-crisis-army-commanders-conference-sparks-another-military-coup-3021478/>, accessed on 03 May 2023.

¹⁰<https://www.pakpips.com/web/article/7602>, accessed on 03 May 2023.

The UN Security Council condemned the decision to ban women nationals from working for the United Nations. The resolution was passed unanimously by the 15-member body in New York, calling for the 'full, equal, meaningful and safe participation of women and girls in Afghanistan', urging all countries and organisations with influence on Taliban¹¹, 'to promote an urgent reversal' of policies which have in effect erased women from public life. The new ban is erosions of basic rights and 'will **negatively and severely impact**' the **UN aid operations throughout the country**, 'including the delivery of life-saving assistance and basic services to the most vulnerable'. The resolution also stresses the importance of unfreezing the foreign assets of Central Bank (Da Afghanistan Bank - DAB) to address Afghanistan's 'dire economic and humanitarian situation' and restore self-reliance. The UN concern emphasis need of Funds and those who can communicate with Taliban.

Funds. The USA froze¹² nearly \$9.5 billion in assets belonging to the DAB and stopped shipments of cash to the nation in September 2021. No bank asset in the USA is available to the Taliban. A major portion of money in the account is invested in the New York Federal Reserve and American financial institutions. Realising the necessity to assist the Afghans, without empowering Taliban, a part of the fund was converted to 'The Afghan Fund' in September 2022. President Biden signed an Executive Order (E.O.) 14064¹³, to release \$3.5 billion of DAB reserves for the benefit of the people, alienating 'Taliban and other malign actors'. The Afghan Fund will make targeted disbursements under a Board of Trustees. It is a decision-making body, consists of two US based Afghan professionals with DAB experience in the past, the US Ambassador to Switzerland and a Swiss government representative. The fund is transferred to a Geneva-based foundation with its account at the Bank for International Settlements. There are missed reviews¹⁴ to the benefits and expectations are modest – relate it to \$8 billion a year spent on civilian aid and security assistance in Afghanistan, before Taliban took over. Afghanistan requires more money to ameliorate the humanitarian issues, sanctions may not be the only way to resolve it. The UN has major responsibilities to look at it as a global responsibility and not a regional security concern.

Relations with Taliban. Many countries shut down their diplomatic offices in Afghanistan after the Taliban took over. Taliban now calls it Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The world is trying to understand how to react to the Taliban governance.

- There is an outright acceptance of primacy of Taliban by; Iran accredited the Taliban Chargé d'Affairs, handing over the embassy in Tehran, Qatar allowed Taliban to take over the Embassy in Doha. Turkmenistan accepted the credentials of the Taliban

¹¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/04/1136162>, accessed on 04 May 2023.

¹² <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/8/18/us-freezes-afghan-central-banks-assets-of-9-5bn>, accessed on 02 May 2023.

¹³ <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-and-partners-announce-establishment-of-fund-for-the-people-of-afghanistan/>, accessed on 02 May 2023.

¹⁴ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/us-move-afghanistans-frozen-central-bank-reserves-new-swiss-fund>, accessed on 02 May 2023.

Chargé d'Affaires without formally recognizing the Islamic Emirate, China 'respects the wishes and choices of the Afghan people and hopes for friendship and cooperation', Pakistan is elated that Taliban has 'broken the shackles of slavery' warning that west risks a second 9/11 situation if it doesn't 'immediately recognise' the Taliban, Russia accepted the diplomatic credentials of a Taliban-appointed envoy but is not equivalent to official recognition and 'hopes to develop ties with the Taliban, but is in no rush to recognize them as the country's rulers', Turkey wants to work to internationally recognize the Islamic Emirate.

- Few countries are willing to negotiate; Spain wants a 'possibility of keeping 'operational contact', Australian desires 'no premature commitments to engage with an Afghan administration that is Taliban led'.
- Some have taken a hard stand; Canada 'will not recognize the Islamic Emirate as the legitimate government of Afghanistan', France 'refuses to recognize or have any type of relationship with this government', UK 'will not recognize the Taliban as the new government in Kabul but will be willing to engage in direct communications with the group' USA 'will not recognize any government that harbours terrorist groups or does not uphold basic human rights, and also declines to confirm Ashraf Ghani still as the President
- India represents an autonomous stand – while the Indian Government does not recognize the country, but will help Afghanistan whenever required.

The world will continue to mull over its strategic choices, trying to identify 'those with influence over Taliban' rather than looking for 'those who can communicate and discuss'. Meanwhile the Afghans will continue to suffer, unless the competitive players identify a common ground and agree to play a non-maximalist plan. Indian Way is as of now a sure stand to support the country and its citizens and offers no comments on the incumbent rulers. This strategy offer options:

- Power sharing - a solution which most of the world desires is not normal to Afghans, previous experiments have cascaded into tribal and clan wars, ruining the country. 'Power rules' – is a normal in Afghan culture, other have to realise it as a fait accompli. Jirga will stay and so will the associated 'dictates'.
- Taliban on the other hand has to moderate its views if the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has to sustain. Moderations of decrees and draconian religious interpretation is a necessity, the Taliban has to understand – sooner than later.
- The Taliban also has to understand the futility of espousing their version of Islam and issuing tough decrees on women and girls, which the normal world cannot relate to. Could Taliban allow the women to study in a women colleges, run by women? Could the Afghani women become doctors in a women hospital?

Afghani proverbs provide the look into the future – 'Even on a mountain, there is still a road' – a path can be found by the ones who are willing to travel and keep options open 'if you plan to keep elephants/camels, make your door high'.

GEOPOLITICAL PROGRESS IN BANGLADESH

AND ITS TIES WITH THE US AND INDIA

On 10 April 2023, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, accused the United States of seeking to overthrow her government and remove democracy from Bangladesh. The accusation came after the US accused Bangladesh's ruling party, Awami League, of human rights violations. In December 2022, the US imposed sanctions on several leaders of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) for their alleged involvement in extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances on behalf of the government. The US ambassador to Bangladesh, Peter Haas, met with families of victims who were allegedly forcefully disappeared, including the family of an opposition leader¹⁵.

It is worth noting that Bangladesh was not invited to the Democracy Summit in December 2022, whereas Pakistan was invited, despite Bangladesh ranking higher than Pakistan in the 2022 Democracy Index. Bangladesh ranked 73rd in the 2022 democracy index, published in February 2023 and Pakistan ranked 107th¹⁶. In February 2023, the US State Department Counsellor expressed concern about the declining state of democracy in Bangladesh, which he believed would limit the US cooperation with the country. He urged Sheikh Hasina to ensure free and fair elections.

In April 2023, Bangladesh stopped using the US dollar for trade with India and instead started using Indian rupees. Sonali Bank and Eastern Bank will open SBI and ICICI Bank accounts, and the two Indian banks will reciprocate by opening accounts in the two Bangladeshi banks. According to the CEO and MD of Sonali Bank Limited, this move is expected to reduce pressure on the US dollar. However, it is important to note that not all bilateral trade will be conducted in local currencies¹⁷.

Overall, there has been a negative growth in the US and Bangladesh relationship. It has been seen that the US and Bangladesh have accused each other for various reasons mentioned above. It is important that India brings positive engagement between both nations, which will also be beneficial for India. By enhancing the positive engagement between the US and Bangladesh, India can also counter the Chinese influence in Bangladesh.

CHALLENGES FOR BHUTAN AND COMPLEXITIES FOR INDIA

¹⁵ <https://scroll.in/latest/1047161/sheikh-hasina-accuses-us-of-seeking-regime-change-in-bangladesh#:~:text=Bangladesh%20Prime%20Minister%20Sheikh%20Hasina,%2C%E2%80%9D%20Hasina%20said%20in%20Parliament.>

¹⁶ <https://www.siasat.com/pakistans-hybrid-regime-sinks-towards-authoritarianism-2517867/> & <https://dailytimes.com.pk/1065809/bangladesh-in-democracy-index-2022/>

¹⁷ <https://theprint.in/world/india-bangladesh-agree-to-settle-bilateral-trade-transactions-in-rupee-taka-report/1530609/>

From April 3 to 5, 2023, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck of Bhutan visited India to strengthen bilateral ties between the two nations. The King and the Prime Minister of India engaged in discussions regarding cooperation in various fields and regional/global issues of mutual concern. The visit proved to be fruitful as both nations expressed satisfaction with new areas of cooperation, such as space, start-ups, and STEM education. Additionally, they agreed to work towards sustainable arrangements for Bhutanese agricultural commodity exports and Indian imports of critical agricultural commodities and explore long-term bilateral arrangements to ensure Bhutan's supply of vital commodities like petroleum, fertilizers, and coal. The Kokrajhar-Gelephu rail link project also received a boost and support from the Government of India and Bhutan's involvement. This rail link would be the first-ever connection between India and Bhutan, marking a significant development in their relationship¹⁸.

This development comes after China and Bhutan have agreed to expedite negotiations to solve border disputes and have implemented a three-step roadmap to that effect. The resolution of the dispute was appreciated by the Chinese government, who subsequently donated a batch of supplies to Bhutan¹⁹. The Chinese have praised Bhutan's PM after his recent interview with a Belgian paper, La Libre, in which the PM of Bhutan said the Chinese have the same stakes in the Doklam issue²⁰. Chinese see this as a move to draw closer to China at India's expense. This is in contrast to India's approach, where they are cooperating with Bhutan in various domains.

China's propaganda machinery regularly claims that "Bhutan is vulnerable to a takeover by India," "that the special relationship between India and Bhutan...stems from...India's regional hegemony," and "Bhutan must learn a lesson from Sikkim." They also claim that they are ready to help Bhutan get rid of India's "control" and promote its sovereignty and independence²¹.

In conclusion, while India and China are both trying to strengthen their relations with Bhutan, India's approach is more cooperative and holistic, covering various domains. Bhutan's recent border dispute resolution with China, which was also appreciated by

¹⁸ <https://newsonair.gov.in/News?title=PM-Modi-holds-bilateral-meeting-with-Bhutan-King-Jigme-Khesar-Namgyel-Wangchuck-in-New-Delhi&id=458754#:~:text=Prime%20Minister%20Narendra%20Modi%20and,to%20further%20boost%20their%20relationship>. & <https://newsonair.gov.in/News?title=PM-Modi-holds-bilateral-meeting-with-Bhutan-King-Jigme-Khesar-Namgyel-Wangchuck-in-New-Delhi&id=458754#:~:text=Prime%20Minister%20Narendra%20Modi%20and,to%20further%20boost%20their%20relationship>.

¹⁹ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-bhutan-agree-to-expedite-negotiations-to-resolve-border-dispute/articleshow/96984252.cms>

²⁰ <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/china-has-equal-stake-in-doklam-dispute-says-bhutan-pm-lotay-tshering-2352718-2023-03-28>

²¹ <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/chinese-reactions-to-bhutan-pms-interview/>

China, shows that Bhutan prioritizes its sovereignty and will continue to engage in diplomatic relations with both countries based on mutual benefits.

INDIAN AND CHINESE ENGAGEMENT IN MALDIVES IN 2023

In 2023, India has been proactive in engaging with the Maldives, while there has not been any significant development in China-Maldives relationship. According to PRC Embassy in Maldives, there have been seven engagement between China and Maldives in 2023. These were;

- Ambassador Wang Lixin Attended the 4th Meeting of the Joint Meeting Mechanism to Deal with the Issue of Safety of Chinese Citizens in Maldives held on 21st March 2023.
- Ambassador Wang Lixin Attended the Welcome Ceremony for the Chinese Coaching Team from Yunnan Province on 21st March 2023.
- Launch of China-Maldives Ophthalmology Centre Assistance & Corporation Program on 14th February 2023,
- Commencing of China-Maldives Hospital Assistance & Cooperation Program on 13th March 2023,
- The Hangzhou Asian Games Fun Run in Maldives held on 13th February 2023,
- The Friendship Ping Pong Games held on 13th February 2023 and
- Chinese Ambassador Wang Lixin Donated PCR Machine and Test Kits to Tree Top Hospital on 11th January 2023²².

It can be acknowledged that none of the initiative have a significant impact on the Maldives and China relations. Whereas India has developed a multi domain relations with Maldives consisting cultural, defence, economic and security relations.

EAM Dr S. Jaishankar visited the Northern Atolls of Maldives in January 2023. Notable accomplishments included an additional grant for High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs), fostering educational cooperation between Maldives National University and Cochin University of Science and Technology, the development of a sports complex, the handover of sea ambulances, the inauguration of a community center, the ground breaking ceremony for an airport development project, and the agreement for a cold storage complex²³.

EAM again visited Maldives in March 2023 and jointly inaugurated National College for Policing and Law Enforcement (NCPLE) on 27th March 2023 with President of Maldives Ibrahim Mohamed Solih. India provided a \$33 million grant for the Maldives NCPLE. It is anticipated to improve the capacity of the Maldives' internal security services²⁴.

²²<http://mv.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zmgx/>

²³<https://hci.gov.in/male/?17555?000>

²⁴ <https://www.freepressjournal.in/corporate-gallery/nbcc-built-national-college-for-policing-and-law-enforcement-ncple-inaugurated-in-maldives>

Additionally in March 2023, India and the Maldives strengthened bilateral defence ties, with a focus on maritime cooperation and military engagements. The 4th defence cooperation dialogue (DCD) held in Malé on 19th March 2023, chaired by defence secretary Giridhar Aramane and Maldivian counterpart Major General Abdulla Shamaal, reviewed ongoing defence activities. The DCD serves as the key platform shaping their defence cooperation. India had intensified diplomatic and military engagement with the Maldives since President Ibrahim Mohamad Solih assumed office in 2018. The Indian Navy and the Maldives National Defence Forces had collaborated on maritime information sharing and domain awareness, aligning their perspectives on Indian Ocean security in various forums²⁵.

NEPAL – TOUGH DECISIONS TO MAKE

India's growing economy and military power make it a key player in the South Asian region and global geopolitics. Its foreign policy focuses on "neighbours first," and it has been actively supporting Nepal in addressing various issues. However, there are ongoing concerns about political instability in Nepal, with a fragile coalition government led by Dahal 'Prachanda' of the Maoist Center facing challenges.

The 2022 national elections saw formation of a fragile coalition government led by Dahal 'Prachanda'- Maoist Center. Major partners in this coalition were the CPN-UML (led by Oli), the National Democratic Party and the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP). Nepali Congress though winning a majority, could not create a winning support was reduced to the opposition (a major one at that). Interestingly, Nepali Congress and Maoist Centre, worked together previously but divorced and went separate ways since Prachanda was not being offered the high table.

Three months into this delicate arrangement and Prachanda decided to back Ram Chandra Poudel²⁶ of Nepali Congress party as the Presidential candidate. Peeved, the two major coalition partners, the CPN-UML (led by Oli) and the National Democratic Party, announced their withdrawal. Previously, the Rastriya Swatantra Party quit the coalition after its leader lost his cabinet position amidst a citizenship issue²⁷. Three parties withdrew from the government, which was already at tipping point.

Though the President in Nepal is largely a ceremonial seat, the appointment is considered important, ever since previous president allegedly aided stay of then-Prime Minister K. P.

²⁵ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/eye-on-china-india-to-boost-defence-ties-with-maldives/articleshow/98788886.cms?from=mdr>

²⁶ <https://thefrontiermanipur.com/recalibrating-india-nepal-relationship/>, accessed on 08 April 2023.

²⁷ <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/unified-marxist-leninist-party-withdraws-from-nepals-fragile-coalition-government/>, accessed on 08 April 2023.

Sharma Oli (CPN-UML) in power. With loss of majority, Dahal required all support and proved his majority by forming new alliances to stay the Prime Minister.

The political turmoil and ever-growing Chinese presence in Nepal is strategic concern for India. The original December coalition is said to have been urged on by China. Now that it is broken, Nepali Congress with a pro-India leaning now partners the Maoist Centre (pro-China leaning) to form the government. Dahal will face challenges forming his new cabinet to distribute ministerial positions and satisfy all allies. Dahal is already in the middle of another crisis - the Supreme Court is hearing a petition demanding his arrest and an investigation into his leadership during a decade-long civil war that killed thousands of people before it ended in 2006.

All in all, the Nepali Government has a huge task list ahead of it. Nepal's society is bifurcated on caste lines, conflict between Hinduism and Buddhism jeopardizes the developmental pace, which, fuels political instability in Nepal.

- Boundary disputes relating to the Kalapani River and the discrepancy in locating its source of origin continues as a bone of contention between India and Nepal.
- Porous borders are conducive to money laundering, arms, drug and narcotics smuggling. Case of human trafficking also appear occasionally. Nepal has to understand that all these illegal activities, though criminal are a cover for ISI-sponsored proxies & spy rings that are aiming to destabilize India. Nepal's inability to rein in these anti-India forces within its territory is disturbing for India.
- Nepal is still struggling to recover from the economic troubles brought by COVID-19. This affects adventure tourism in Nepal, adversely affecting the economy. Tourism revenue accounts for 7.9% of the country's GDP and supports more than million jobs, expected to increase to 1.5 million²⁸. Reviving tourism will necessarily become an important function for the government.
- Both New Delhi and Beijing compete for influence in the tiny Himalayan nation and Prachanda has a tough responsibility to balance relations between two giant neighbours. Nepal's new Prime Minister's maiden visit to China or India will likely define the sway, but Dahal is yet to decide.
- India could avoid unnecessary intervention into Nepal²⁹, like supporting some factions in the Terai region in Nepal, which is considered a provocative gesture by Nepal.

Political turmoil and frequent changes in government is not helping Nepal in anyway. All governments since monarchy have had tough decision to make and so will the present one. It is crucial for India to maintain a close relationship with Nepal and continue to

²⁸ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7454820/#:~:text=Tourism%20is%20one%20of%20Nepal's,1.35%20million%20jobs%20by%202029>, accessed on 10 April 2023.

²⁹ <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/assessment-of-indias-approach-to-nepal/>, accessed on 08 April 2023.

support it in addressing these challenges. As a responsible neighbour, India is hoping and wishing well to people of Nepal - □□□□□□□□ □□□□□

INDIA CURATES A JOINT PLATFORM FOR THE SRI LANKAN DEBT RESTRUCTURING PROGRAMME

Representatives from India, Japan, and France came together on the side-lines of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) annual spring meetings to announce a common platform for talks among creditors to address the debt restructuring programme of Sri Lanka. This move comes as Sri Lanka faces its worst economic crisis and is in dire need of relief.

The programme focused on debt restructuring for middle-income countries and aimed to provide much-needed stability to Sri Lanka's economy. To this end, the Japanese Finance Minister, Shunichi Suzuki, emphasized that the committee will be open to everyone, including China, and that geopolitics will be kept away from the programme. Furthermore, the top currency diplomat of Japan, Masato Kanda, has sent invitations to all of Sri Lanka's creditor nations, including China.

Sri Lanka has secured a loan of \$2.9 billion from the IMF to deal with its debt burden. However, the IMF made Sri Lanka's debt restructure a prerequisite before granting the loan. These recent developments are expected to improve the economic condition of Sri Lanka and bring stability to the country.

To enhance Sri Lanka's credibility in repaying its loans, the President of Sri Lanka, Ranil Wickremesinghe, has stated that Sri Lanka remains committed to engaging with all credit lending nations and stakeholders in a transparent manner based on the principles of comparable treatment. Since India is part of the loan programme, it is likely to bring certain benefits and enhance the India-Sri Lanka relationship. The G-20 loan framework grants loans to lower-income countries, and since Sri Lanka does not qualify as a lower-income country, it could not apply to the G-20 for a loan.

Overall, this debt restructuring programme is an important step towards improving Sri Lanka's economic stability, and the involvement of various nations, including India, Japan, and France, highlights the significance of international cooperation in addressing global economic challenges³⁰.

³⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/japan-india-france-launch-creditors-meeting-sri-lanka-debt-2023-04-13/> &

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