



UNITED SERVICE INSTITUTION OF INDIA

SOUTH ASIA MONITOR

AUG 2023

Pakistan

Pak In A Pickle

Afghanistan

15 Aug : Clash Of Civilisations

Nepal

Adding Flavour to Indian Curries

Bangladesh

Importance of Matabari Port

Srilanka

Tapping Energy Possibilities

Bhutan

Indo Bhutan Bilateral Cooperation

Maldives

Strengthening Counterterrorism Cooperation

Editors

Col Maneesh Parthsarthy, VSM

Tanya Jain, Research Assistant



CS
3 CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC
STUDIES AND SIMULATION



Pak in a Pickle



The current political turmoil in Pakistan is a reflection of the complex nature of the country's political landscape. The situation is unlikely to be resolved in the short term, with the country facing significant challenges in terms of its governance, economy and security. Pakistan is entering yet another phase of political uncertainty with former prime minister Imran Khan sent to prison and the National Assembly completing its term. Under the advice of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, President Arif Alvi dissolved the National Assembly on August 9. **Senator Anwaar-ul-haq Kakar** was named as caretaker prime minister on August 12. The Sindh and the Balochistan provincial assemblies were also dissolved. Provincial assemblies of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were dissolved by their Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) governments, in January. Elections have not taken place in these two provinces, despite the constitutional requirement to hold elections within 90 days and the directives of the supreme court. Many observers are, therefore, sceptical whether national elections will take place on time or not.¹



The dissolution of the National Assembly marks the end of a chaotic tenure which began five years ago with Khan at the helm. Sharif, who assumed power in April 2022 after Khan lost a no-confidence vote in parliament, had asked President Alvi to dissolve the assembly three days before the schedule. The dissolution allows the interim government, which is still to be set up, to oversee the next general elections within 90 days, that is by November. According to Pakistan's constitution, elections should be held within 60 days if a legislative assembly is dissolved on the scheduled day and within 90 days if it is done earlier than that. The government approved the results of a digital census in Pakistan, which put the country's population at 241 million, up from 207 million according to the census conducted in 2017. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) says it requires at least four months to redraw the constituencies, making it uncertain if the polls will be held on time. Sharif's 15-month tenure was marked by political chaos, a precarious economy, and a worsening security situation. Catastrophic floods last year killed nearly 1,800 people and caused a loss of more than \$30bn. Pakistan has still not recovered from the calamity. Meanwhile, the country's economy was on the brink of default before it managed a last-minute \$3bn bailout from the International Monetary Fund. Sharif's coalition rule also saw a severe crackdown on Khan and his Pakistan Tahreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party following their demands to hold immediate elections and scathing attacks on the powerful military.²

¹ Mehmal Sarfraz, "Pakistani opposition worries govt will delay polls due this year," *The Week*, August 20, 2023, <https://www.theweek.in/theweek/more/2023/08/12/pakistan-political-crisis-imran-khan-future-situation-analysis.html>

² Abid Hussain, "Pakistan parliament dissolved to hold election without ex-PM Imran Khan," *Aljazeera*, August 9, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/9/pakistan-national->



Nawaz Sharif, 73, has been living in self-imposed exile in the UK since November 2019. In 2016, Nawaz Sharif stepped down as the prime minister after the Supreme Court disqualified him for life for concealing assets. His appeals against the conviction are currently pending in the relevant courts. He was convicted in the Al-Azizia Mills and Avenfield corruption cases in 2018. He was serving a seven-year imprisonment at

Lahore's Kot Lakhpat jail in the Al-Azizia Mills case before he was allowed to proceed to London in 2019 on "medical grounds". Pakistan's Supreme Court in a unanimous verdict on 11 Aug 2023 struck down as null and void a recently enacted law modifying the review process of its judgements, dampening former premier Nawaz Sharif's hopes as he seeks to challenge his lifetime disqualification from holding any public office. A three-member bench of the apex court led by Chief Justice Umar Ata Bandial and comprising Justice Ijazul Ahsan and Justice Munib Akhtar ruled that the Supreme Court (Review of Judgments and Orders) Act 2023 was "unconstitutional".³

Meanwhile, the ousted premier Imran Khan is behind bars at Attock Jail after a trial court in Islamabad found him guilty of concealing proceeds of Toshakhana (state depository) gifts that he received from foreign dignitaries as the prime minister of the country from 2018 to 2022, and sentenced him to three years in prison along with a fine of PKR 1,00, 000. Subsequently, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) disqualified him for five years from holding public office following his conviction. Khan's legal troubles are far from over as local courts in Islamabad have rejected nine of his bail pleas in cases pertaining to the violent protests on May 9. Also, on 17 Aug 2023, FIA's Counter-Terrorism Wing registered a case in connection with the "missing cipher" from the official record of the Prime Minister's Office and indicted Khan in the case. Last month, the cipher case took a new turn when PTI Chairman's then-principal secretary Azam Khan "recorded" a statement, terming the US cipher a "conspiracy" used by the



[assembly-to-dissolve-for-polls-without-ex-pm-imran-khan#:~:text=Shehbaz%20Sharif's%20advice.-,The%20dissolution%20marks%20the%20end%20of%20a%20chaotic%20tenure%20which,three%20days%20before%20the%20schedule](#)

³ "Pak SC strikes down judgements review law; dims former PM Nawaz Sharif's prospects to challenge his lifetime disqualification," *The Indian Express*, August 11, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/pakistan/pak-sc-strikes-down-judgments-review-law-dims-former-pm-nawaz-sharifs-prospects-challenge-lifetime-disqualification-8888031/>

ex-PM to “manipulate for creating a narrative against establishment and opposition.”⁴

Khan and his supporters see his conviction and jailing as naked political interference, intended to thwart his candidacy in elections slated for later this year. The Pakistani Army is yet again engaged in political engineering by forcing resignations from Khan’s party and steering together new political forces. The primary aim here is to remove Khan from the political process, as he’s no longer reliably obedient and has amassed popular support that gives him political capital independent of the military. Like his predecessors, Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, Imran too fell afoul of the military establishment and into a morass of legal travails.

Pakistan, a country of over 200 million people, is currently facing a political turmoil that could shape the future of the nation. The current turmoil in Pakistan is a reflection of the deep divisions in the country between different political parties, ethnic groups and religious sects. The situation is not helped by the fact that democracy in Pakistan is still in its infancy, with many people still struggling to come to terms with the idea of an independent judiciary, a free press, and an opposition that can hold the government accountable. The fact that the current caretaker government has no clear mandate to govern has added to the confusion and instability prevalent in the country. This has undermined the credibility of the government and weakened the trust of the populace in the democratic system as a whole. The current situation in Pakistan, exacerbated by the absence of the possibility of early elections, may indeed push the country further into chaos. If the situation continues to deteriorate, it may provide an opportunity for the country's powerful military to exploit the situation for their own benefit. The army has been accused of meddling in politics in the past and it is possible that they may take advantage of the situation to further consolidate their power. This could have serious implications, especially the peace along the Indian borders, given the precedence during such uncertain times. Though India may find a weaker Pakistan as more advantageous than one that is perceived as strong and hostile. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that peaceful and stable neighbouring countries are essential for the long-term stability and development of the region as well as ensuring the well-being of the people living in their respective nations.

⁴ "Pakistan: Imran Khan grilled in Attock jail over 'missing cipher copy'," *ANI News*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/pakistan-imran-khan-grilled-in-attock-jail-over-missing-cipher-copy20230817050255/>



15 Aug : Clash of Civilisations



India, the largest democracy in the world and Afghanistan, a country currently under the rule of the Taliban, both celebrated their Independence Day on August 15, 2023. However, both countries are representative of a very different forms of Independence, which stands in sharp contrast to the socio political and economic framework of the two countries. Amid waving flags and strict security precautions, the Taliban marked its two years since the group stormed into the Afghan capital and upended the lives of millions of Afghans, creating a dilemma for the international community that has since only grown. The hardliners chanted, “Death to the Europeans, death to the Westerners, long live the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, death to the Americans”⁵. As Afghanistan marks its 104th Independence Day under the Taliban rule, in tandem, a repressive past knocked in many forms- from human rights violations and weak governance to extreme poverty, inequalities and marginalization that breed hopelessness and despair. The same day



saw PM Narendra Modi wishing the nation on the 77th Independence Day and outlining a bold vision for India's economic growth. He alluded to the progress India is making across a mosaic of socio-economic initiatives which shall impact the next 1,000 years. He emphasized the potential India's demography, democracy and diversity have and evoked the people's trust in the government, in the country's bright future and the world's trust in India. His speech was a celebration of the power of free India, free

people, free thought and free action.

Afghan Independence in its present state is a stark antithesis of the Indian Independence. India has been growing in stature by each passing year whereas the Taliban-run government is yet to be recognized by any country and the prospect of Western embassies returning to Kabul appears more remote now than one year ago, as a crackdown on women's rights to education or work has accelerated. While global frustration with the group limits the inflow of aid, Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis is worsening with around two-thirds of the population now in need of assistance.



⁵ Rick Noack, "Celebration and anguish as Taliban marks second anniversary of takeover," *The Washington Post*, August 15, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/08/15/taliban-afghanistan-second-anniversary/>

The most glaring disparity that the two systems symbolize are their inherent approach towards the issue of women equality, empowerment and gender discrimination. We might say that India is itself struggling on this account but one cannot take away the fact that the Indian Constitution guarantees the rights of women in India in letter and spirit. PM's speech emphasised the work of Women scientists in Chandrayaan mission and lauded the contributions of women self-help groups in the country and highlighted the recognition of women-led development by the G20 countries. On the other hand, Taliban authorities have imposed a number of restrictions on women, including enforcing a strict dress code in public, barring them from gyms and parks, and keeping women out of secondary and tertiary education. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterated that continued engagement between Washington and the Taliban was conditional on the group supporting the rights of women. The Asia Regional Director of the German humanitarian NGO Welthungerhilfe, Elle Gottschalk, said that 17 million people in the country are threatened by hunger and 29 million people are dependent on humanitarian aid. Afghanistan has a total population of around 42 million.⁶ One of the last refuges of female workers, beauty salons, were ordered to shut last month. The Taliban has also resumed corporal punishments, sparking outrage abroad.

Taliban's return to power is a blueprint for other Islamist groups in the region whose aim is to topple and replace regimes through violence. Immediately after the Taliban victory in August 2021, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leader Noor Wali Mehsud renewed his oath of



allegiance to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in a statement, describing their win over the United States as a "victory" for the "entire Muslim ummah" (or worldwide community of Muslims). The group has re-established the power and authority of the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice as well as setting up ulama (religious) councils within government departments that directly report to Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada. They also retain

traditional ties to most regional terrorist entities, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, also known as the Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIM/TIP), and Jamaat Ansarullah (JA).⁷

India's democratic system is characterized by its emphasis on individual freedoms, human rights, and fair elections. In contrast, Afghanistan's current situation under Taliban rule presents an

⁶ "Afghanistan: Taliban celebrate 2 years since return to power," *Deutsche Welle*, August 15, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/afghanistan-taliban-celebrate-2-years-since-return-to-power/a-6542834#:~:text=Afghanistan's%20Taliban%20rulers%20took%20over,Kabul%20on%20August%2015%2C%202021>

⁷ Neelapu Shanti, "Reflecting on Afghan People's Aspirations Marking Afghanistan's 104th Independence Day," *Indian Defence Review*, August 21, 2023, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/reflecting-on-afghan-peoples-aspirations-marking-afghanistans-104th-independence-day/>

authoritarian regime that restricts personal liberties and lacks free elections. India embraces secularism, multiculturalism and diversity as core values of its society. These values sharply clash with the extremist ideology promoted by the Taliban which imposes strict Islamic law and disregards religious pluralism. India actively engages with other democratic nations worldwide to maintain diplomatic relations based on shared principles of democracy. However, Afghanistan under Taliban rule faces international isolation due to its association with terrorism and human rights abuses.

The contradictions between India and Afghanistan are significant in shaping global perceptions about democracy and extremism. The stark differences in political systems highlight India's commitment to democratic ideals while exposing the authoritarian nature of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Moreover, these asymmetries extend beyond politics into ideologies/values where India champions secularism while the Taliban promotes religious fundamentalism. Lastly, contrasting international relations demonstrate how democratic nations align themselves with India while isolating a nation associated with terrorism like Afghanistan.

The independence of India and Afghanistan may be celebrated on the same day, but their respective paths diverge significantly. These contradictions serve as a reminder that establishing independence alone does not guarantee adherence to democratic principles or alignment with global norms. Instead, it is essential for countries to consistently uphold core values such as individual freedoms, human rights and democratic governance in order to be recognized as true proponents of independence and democracy.



Nepal: Adding Flavour to Indian Curries



India's Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, disclosed that India has begun importing tomatoes from Nepal due to record-high prices caused by supply disruptions from heavy rains. High retail prices of around ₹242 per kg has led India to import tomatoes for the first time amid supply disruptions caused by heavy rains. Nepal is keen to export vegetables, particularly tomatoes, to India over the long term. However, this endeavour is contingent upon India providing straightforward market access and necessary facilities. The Nepalese tomato market faced challenges in the past, with farmers discarding significant amounts due to lack of demand. However, the scenario reversed with illegal exports to India, causing a surge in prices after traders started exporting tomatoes to India through illegal channels causing shortages in the local market. Tomatoes previously sold in the retail market for ₹40-50 per kg soared to ₹200 to 250 per kg when farmers started selling tomatoes to the Indian market through unofficial channels. Exported tomatoes to India, primarily through unofficial routes, soared to 70,000 to 90,000 kg daily, fetching up to ₹150 per kg, according to Badri Shrestha, a major tomato grower in Kathmandu. Since July 11, the National Cooperative Consumers' Federation of India Limited (NCCF) has sold around 9,38,862 kg of tomatoes at discounted rates in Delhi-NCR, Rajasthan,



and Uttar Pradesh. About 10 tonnes of tomatoes imported from Nepal are en route to Uttar Pradesh for distribution at a subsidized rate of ₹70 per kg.⁸

Political tensions can manifest in various forms, such as trade restrictions, adverse policies, or disruptions in transportation networks, which may impede the smooth flow of goods including tomatoes. However, it is important to note that historically, political differences have not completely hindered trade between Nepal and India, as the economic benefits have often outweighed the political divergences. The tomato export from Nepal to India stands as an example of how economic ties can transcend political differences. The historical context, economic implications and facilitating factors play crucial roles in sustaining this trade. While challenges may arise due to political divergences, the overall economic benefits encourage the continuation of this trade relationship. As Nepal and India navigate their political differences, the export of tomatoes serves as a testament to the resilience of bilateral trade and the potential for economic cooperation between neighbouring nations.



Importance of Matarbari Port



The Bay of Bengal has emerged as a significant location in the contest for control of sea routes and global trade as the Indo-Pacific narrative takes centre stage in global talks. Because of its strategic location near the channel of the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh has considerable responsibilities as a facilitator and connection between regions and competing forces. Bangladesh's role in revitalising regional connections is of global importance in the Indo-Pacific narrative, positioning it as a crucial participant in defining the region's future⁹. To transform the Bay of Bengal region, India, Bangladesh, and Japan are developing several communication corridors and industrial value chains.¹⁰

The Matarbari port project serves as a pivotal junction uniting two influential economies within the Indo-Pacific region, namely those of India and Japan. Matarbari port is Bangladesh's first deep-sea port in Moheshkhali subdistrict in Cox Bazaar district. It was created to support the Matarbari coal plant on Bangladesh's south-eastern coast, south of Chattogram port (previously known as Chittagong). The Matarbari coal power station was planned in 2011 and is now under construction with the assistance of considerable finance from the Japan International

⁸ Fareha Naaz, "Nepal ready to supply tomatoes to India to ease price rise, seeks easier access to market," *Mint*, August 12, 2023, <https://www.livemint.com/news/nepal-ready-to-supply-tomatoes-to-india-to-ease-price-rise-seeks-easier-access-to-market-11691825964919.html>

⁹ Tariq Karim, "The Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh in the Indo-Pacific region," *The Daily Star*, May 11, 2023, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/the-bay-bengal-and-bangladesh-the-indo-pacific-region-3316926>

¹⁰ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhary, "Japan funded Bangladesh deep sea port: game changer in Bay of Bengal," *The Economic Times*, August 11, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/japan-funded-bangladesh-deep-sea-port-game-changer-in-bay-of-bengal/articleshow/102658785.cms>

Cooperation Agency (JICA), which originally approved a loan of 41 billion Yen for the coal power plant in 2014.¹¹ It is estimated to be completed by January 2027.

Strategic Importance of Matarbari Port to India and Bangladesh



This port will be vital for Bangladesh since it will give an outlet to foreign commerce for the garment industry of the Cox's Bazar area. It would not only create an export potential for Bangladesh, but it will also help the country import numerous items and crucial resources.¹² According to a study titled, 'Towards a Connected and Prosperous Bay of Bengal Region: Perspective on the Northeast India and Bangladesh Connectivity' by Asian Confluence, the port will contribute to 2-3% to the

GDP of the country as compared to Chittagong port's 9.5 meters, its draft is greater than 16 meters to berth allowing other ships and reducing the dependence on just one port. Bangladesh has had to rely on other deep-sea ports in the region, such as those in Colombo, Singapore, and Malaysia, which significantly raises the cost of transshipment for ships arriving to/leaving from Bangladesh. Container ships with greater draughts will be able to dock directly at the deep-sea port rather than using feeder ships to/from the larger regional ports and it will also reduce the transshipment cost significantly.

This development would be very important for India and collaborating with Japan on the creation of the Matarbari port is another component of the interconnection and stability framework that both countries are attempting to build. This port will connect the marine trade route to the northeast of India through Tripura via Bangladesh, and the two nations' amicable ties will provide the groundwork for a robust economic partnership in the future. The Act East Forum was founded in 2017 to aid in the development of the Northeast and to improve connectivity within the area as well as between the region and Bangladesh and Southeast Asia. The meeting symbolises India's Act East Policy and Japan's desire for a free and open Indo-Pacific. By financing the construction of Matarbari Port in the neighbouring area, Japan wants to construct a holistic concept for regional development and economic progress by encouraging private investment and improving connecting infrastructure.¹³

¹¹ Shahana Thankachan, "China-India Brief #224," *Centre on Asia and Globalisation*, May 12, 2023, <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/cag/publications/center-publications/publication-article/detail/matarbari-a-deep-sea-port-at-the-heart-of-a-deep-seated-regional-and-global-rivalry>

¹² "The Matarbari Port and its strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific," *Global Order*, April 19, 2023, <https://www.globalorder.live/post/the-matarbari-port-and-its-strategic-importance-in-the-indo-pacific>

¹³ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhary, "Japan to connect landlocked North East with Bangladesh," *The Economic Times*, March 28, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/japan-to-connect-landlocked-north-east-with-bangladesh/articleshow/99043250.cms?from=mdr>



China's debt trap strategy and 'string of pearls' approach of isolating India along its maritime area of influence have created a tremendous push for India to oppose this strategy by forging regional ties¹⁴. The debt trap strategy has allowed China to seize control of huge projects in exchange for loan repayment defaults, as it did with the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka. Control of these vital ports also opens the door for Chinese military activity that might jeopardise national and

regional security. However, the agreement on the Matarbari Port might be viewed as a significant step forward in contrast to China's strategy in this respect.

Similarly, for Dhaka, to counter the Chinese influence in the area, back in 2006 nearby prospective port at Sonadia, which is less than 50 kilometres away was proposed as the most suitable location for a deep-sea port. China was eager to expand the port to make inroads taking control of infrastructural projects in the country and had presented a thorough project plan. However, the deal between Bangladesh and China was never materialised. Instead, Dhaka stated in 2018 that the deep-sea port at Matarbari will be built with Japanese aid. The last nail in the coffin for Sonadia Port came in 2020 when Bangladesh formally declared the project's cancellation. It was a great relief for India to counter China's interest in the Bay of Bengal region as the distance from Sonadia to the headquarters of India's Eastern Naval Command at Visakhapatnam is just 541 nautical miles (nm), while the distance to Kolkata, another key base for the Indian navy, is much shorter, at 173 nm which could threaten India's national security.¹⁵

Bangladesh is considered a core part of India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy and an important partner in its 'Act East' policy. The port has stored great strategic interest for India and Bangladesh which will further give a boost to their strategic partnership, boost trade and connectivity. It will also promote the development of the 'seven sisters' of India by building alternative trade routes except the Siliguri trade corridor or 'chicken's neck'.

¹⁴ "The Matarbari Port and its strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific," *Global Order*, April 19, 2023, <https://www.globalorder.live/post/the-matarbari-port-and-its-strategic-importance-in-the-indo-pacific>

¹⁵ Shahana Thankachan, "China-India Brief #224," *Centre on Asia and Globalisation*, May 12, 2023, <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/cag/publications/center-publications/publication-article/detail/matarbari-a-deep-sea-port-at-the-heart-of-a-deep-seated-regional-and-global-rivalry>



India and Sri Lanka: Tapping Energy Possibilities



India and Sri Lanka are providing new impetus to the long-delayed power grid link between the two countries for the exchange of electricity and to establish high-capacity power grid interconnection. During Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe's first visit to India, New Delhi and Colombo adopted a 'vision document' for a deeper economic partnership. The vision plan, according to Prime Minister Modi, aims to accelerate "mutual cooperation in tourism, power, trade, higher education, and skill development." He referred to the text as a "vision of India's long-term commitment to Sri Lanka¹⁶". According to a bilateral document released by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the MOU on cooperation in developing renewable energy would facilitate Sri Lanka's energy potential including offshore wind and solar and enable Sri Lanka to achieve the target of generating 70% of power requirements from renewable sources by 2030¹⁷. The high-capacity power grid interconnection will enable electricity trade with BBIN countries i.e., Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal which could help in bringing down the cost of electricity in Sri Lanka and creating a dependable source for foreign exchange for Colombo.¹⁸ India has given billions of dollars in aid to its southern neighbour to



combat the crisis, which was caused by a sharp decline in foreign exchange reserves, which slowed imports of basics such as fuel, affecting power supply. This would allow Sri Lanka to get energy during maintenance and droughts, as well as export excess generation to India.¹⁹ Hence, Sri Lanka's investment promotion authority granted approval for two renewable energy projects from India's Adani company, which would be

¹⁶ Shubhajit Roy, "Ports to UPI to green energy, India and Sri Lanka deepen economic ties," *The Indian Express*, July 22, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/ports-to-upi-to-green-energy-india-and-sri-lanka-deepen-economic-ties-8853545/>

¹⁷ "India, Sri Lanka to establish high-capacity power grid interconnection," *ANI News*, July 21, 2023, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/india-sri-lanka-to-establish-high-capacity-power-grid-interconnection20230721194032/>

¹⁸ "Promoting Connectivity, Catalysing Prosperity: India-Sri Lanka Economic Partnership Vision," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, July 21, 2023, <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36864/Promoting+Connectivity+Catalysing+Prosperity+IndiaSri+Lanka+Economic+Partnership+Vision>

¹⁹ "India, Sri Lanka restart talks to link power grids," *Hindustan Times*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-sri-lanka-restart-talks-to-link-power-grids-101650418174329.html>

built in the island nation's north and east for a total investment of USD 442 million. The Mannar wind power station will have a capacity of 250 MW (megawatt), whereas the Pooneryn wind power plant will have a capacity of 100 MW.²⁰

Shortly after President Ranil Wickremesinghe's visit to New Delhi, Sri Lanka released proposals for electricity projects in Jaffna, preferring India over China. According to Colombo-based sources, the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) recently solicited for contracts to undertake hybrid power projects in three northern islands of Sri Lanka i.e., Nainativu, Delft or Neduntheevu and Analaitivu islands utilising a \$12 million grant from India. This could have been an effort to prevent the Chinese rising influence in the region and counter the 'string of pearls' strategy. There is a need to accelerate the execution of the agreement made on the Sampur Solar Power Project and LNG infrastructure, as well as to explore collaboration in green hydrogen and green ammonia using novel technologies, with the goal of increasing Sri Lanka's renewable energy mix in power generation²¹. Sri Lanka has approved the construction of a 135-MW solar power plant at Sampur, Trincomalee, as part of a joint venture between the state-run CEB and India's National Thermal Power Corporation.²²

To achieve energy security in South Asia, India should invest and explore opportunities in renewable sources of energy to further reduce its dependence on fossil fuels. Sri Lanka has huge renewable energy potential, which might become a sustainable source of cash, and Trincomalee could become an energy centre. Therefore, both countries should further cooperate on energy cooperation and securing an integrated energy security market in South Asia. According to World Bank, South Asia has tremendous untapped hydropower potential, and the region's governments should accelerate the deployment of solar and wind energy resources. Sri Lanka should formulate one energy policy and being India's part of the Neighbourhood First Policy, both countries should dwell further into the areas of cooperation.

²⁰ "Adani group's renewable energy projects approved by Sri Lanka," *The Economic Times*, February 24, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/renewables/adani-groups-renewable-energy-projects-approved-by-sri-lanka/articleshow/98201482.cms?from=mdr>

²¹ Ibid.

²² "Sri Lanka give nod to 135-MW solar power project in a joint venture with NTPC," *News on AIR*, March 29, 2023, <https://newsonair.com/2023/03/29/sri-lanka-give-nod-to-135-mw-solar-power-project-in-a-joint-venture-with-ntpc/>



Indo Bhutan Bilateral Cooperation



Bhutanese Foreign Secretary Pema Choden was on a two-day official state visit to India to meet her counterpart Shri Vinay Kwatra, Foreign Secretary of India on 28-29 July 2023.²³ The two



foreign secretaries reviewed the entire scope of bilateral cooperation and discussed ways to strengthen it in a variety of sectors and including newer areas of cooperation like energy, developmental partnership, cross-border connectivity, trade and economy, science and technology and further enhancing people-to-people ties.²⁴

The meeting followed discussions that took place during King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk's April visit to India which focused on bilateral initiatives to expand commerce, build infrastructure, and enhance strategic partnership. A tradition of regular high-level visits between the two nations has helped to preserve the unique bilateral ties, which are characterised by mutual trust and understanding. Over the last decades, India has made major contributions to Bhutan's socioeconomic growth in accordance with the objectives and demands of the Bhutanese people and government. India's development aid to Bhutan is generally managed via the overarching framework of Bilateral Development Cooperation Talks or Annual Plan Talks, in which both parties agree on the components of assistance and the procedures. India had pledged INR 4500 crores in assistance to Bhutan under the 12th Five Year Plan (FYP) constitutes 73% of Bhutan's total external grant component.²⁵ During Pema Choden's visit, Bhutanese also discussed the 13th FYP starting in 2024 as India is the major funder of Bhutan's FYP.²⁶



The foreign secretary's recent visit served as a reminder of the long-standing tradition of high-level exchanges, which give an opportunity for discussing and resolving matters of mutual interest, therefore encouraging ongoing collaboration. In course of such visits, both the foreign secretaries have executed several development initiatives in collaboration with India. The Indian

²³ "Visit of Foreign Secretary of Bhutan, Aum Pema Choden to India (July 28-29, 2023)," Ministry of External Affairs, Accessed on August 22, 2023, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/36941/Visit+of+Foreign+Secretary+of+Bhutan+Aum+Pema+Choden+to+India+July+2829+2023>.

²⁴ ANI, "India, Bhutan discuss ways to further strengthen bilateral cooperation across diverse sectors," ANI, July 29, 2023, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/india-bhutan-discuss-ways-to-further-strengthen-bilateral-cooperation-across-diverse-sectors20230729185533/>.

²⁵ "India-Bhutan Relations," Embassy of India, March 07, 2023, <https://indembthimphu.gov.in/pages.php?id=549>.

²⁶ Mint, "Bhutan Foreign Secretary Visits India," Mint, July 30, 2023, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/bhutan-foreign-secretary-visits-india-11690690968432.html>

government has announced its support for Bhutan's third international internet gateway. India and Bhutan are partnering on a variety of technological endeavors. Bhutan's Flagship Programme 'Digital Drukyl' has provided an optical fibre backbone to the gewog (village) level in all 20 districts.²⁷ Agriculture and irrigation development, ICT, health, industrial development, road transport, energy, civil aviation, urban development, human resource development, capacity building, scholarship, education, and culture are among the primary areas of concentration for GOI support.²⁸ India is undertaking 82 PTA Projects and 524 HICDPs in Bhutan under the 12th Five-Year Plan.²⁹ A crucial component of bilateral economic cooperation is mutually beneficial hydropower collaboration with Bhutan. Hydropower development is an important motivator for socioeconomic growth in Bhutan. Hydropower revenues account for a substantial portion of the Himalayan country's total revenue. The ongoing collaboration between India and Bhutan in the hydropower industry is covered under the bilateral cooperation agreement signed in 2006 and its protocol in 2009. Bhutan already has four hydroelectric plants (HEPs) totaling 2136 MW that send energy to India. The 720 MW Mangdechhu power plant began operations in August 2019 and will be turned over to Bhutan in December 2022. Two HEPs, 1200 MW Punatsangchhu-I, and 1020 MW Punatsangchhu-II are at various phases of construction in an Inter-Governmental manner.³⁰



India and Bhutan are also dwelling into the newer areas of cooperation as Bhutan became the second country to implement the BHIM app, bolstering our two countries' financial ties and starting bilateral trade in Rupee. Both the nations share a historical relationship since 1968 and signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1949 which was revised in 2007. India and Bhutan should also explore cooperation in Space, encouraging start-ups, and private investments in STEM education.



Strengthening Counterterrorism Cooperation



On July 24, 2023, the Maldives and India conducted the Second Meeting of the Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism, Counter-Violent Extremism, and De-Radicalisation in Male'. His Excellency Ahmed Latheef, Foreign Secretary of the Maldives, headed the Maldivian Delegation, and His Excellency Sanjay Verma, Secretary



ing New Hights," *Business World*, February 10, 2023, <https://www.businessworld.com/ship-Touching-New-Heights/10-02-2023-465130/>.

India and Thimphu agree to further strengthen bilateral relations," www.indianewsnetwork.com/20230730/bhutan-s-fs-visits-india-n-delhi-and-thimphu-agree-to-further-strengthen-bilateral-relations.

²⁹ "India-Bhutan Relations," Embassy of India, March 07, 2023, <https://indembthimphu.gov.in/pages.php?id=549>.

³⁰ Indian news Network, "Bhutan's FS visits India: N Delhi and Thimphu agree to further strengthen bilateral relations," *Indian News Network*, July 30, 2023, <https://www.indianewsnetwork.com/20230730/bhutan-s-fs-visits-india-n-delhi-and-thimphu-agree-to-further-strengthen-bilateral-relations>.

(West), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, led the Indian Delegation. The meeting was held in a cordial and constructive atmosphere, symbolising the Maldives' and India's time-tested and good neighbourly ties, as well as the energy, ambition, and scale acquired by our bilateral relations under the leadership of His Excellency President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih and His Excellency Prime Minister Narendra Modi.³¹ Counter-terrorism cooperation between the Maldives and India has been reinforced as an important part of preserving security in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Both parties discussed the challenges presented by terrorist organisations sanctioned by the UN and emphasised the necessity for coordinated action against all terrorist networks. They emphasised the critical need for all governments to take quick, persistent, verifiable, and irreversible measures to guarantee that no territory under their control is utilised for terrorist attacks on others, and to bring perpetrators of such acts to justice as soon as possible.³² Both sides exchanged views on various areas of cooperation, such as countering radicalisation and violent extremism, combating terrorism financing, preventing exploitation of the internet and cyberspace for terrorism and violent extremism, mutual information sharing, capacity building, and establishing institutional linkages between law enforcement agencies, security forces, customs, immigration. Furthermore, the two sides discussed ways to strengthen bilateral cooperation against organised crime and drugs, as well as repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration of refugees. Both parties promised to further expand cooperation, which would include more support and capacity development for the Maldives' security and law enforcement institutions, as well as collaboration and the exchange of best practices in the fields of Counterterrorism, preventing and combating violent extremism, including strategic communication, and de-radicalisation. The two sides also reiterated their commitment to increasing communication and collaboration in multilateral fora such as the United Nations and other global and regional venues such as the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC).³³

³¹ "Second Meeting of Maldives-India Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism, Countering Violent Extremism and De-radicalisation," Ministry of External Affairs, July 24, 2023, <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/36875/Second+Meeting+of+MaldivesIndia+Joint+Working+Group+on+Counter+Terrorism+Countering+Violent+Extremism+and+Deradicalisation>

³² Fathmath Udhma, "Maldives, India reaffirmed counter-terrorism cooperation," *Raajje*, July 25, 2023, <https://raajje.mv/139444>

³³ "Second Meeting of Maldives-India Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism, Countering Violent Extremism and De-radicalisation," Ministry of External Affairs, July 24, 2023, <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/36875/Second+Meeting+of+MaldivesIndia+Joint+Working+Group+on+Counter+Terrorism+Countering+Violent+Extremism+and+Deradicalisation>

The Maldives' strategic location in the Indian Ocean is critical to regional security. The presence of any external forces in the Maldives would help it gain influence over the Indian Ocean, posing a severe danger to the security and integrity of some of its neighbours as well as the region³⁴. Maldives has become the nation of origin for the greatest number of fighters in the world (as a percentage of the population) who have joined the ranks of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq.³⁵ The presence of Islam fosters the proliferation of jihadi groups, which is a major problem for the Maldives and other South Asian countries, particularly India. The rising presence of radical Islamists in the Maldives is a major source of concern for national security. Ties between Maldivians and international terrorist organisations, especially Al-Qaeda, allegedly began in



2008, and with the Islamic State (IS) in 2014 when some³⁶ Maldivians responded to the call of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed Caliph of IS. Local radicalism may be caused by endemic poverty and hardship. Some came from poor fishing towns on remote islands, while others came from the city, which has a mix of radical preaching, organised crime, and socioeconomic misery.³⁷ Hence, in a significant measure against terrorists in India's southern neighbour, the United States

(US) sanctioned 20 Maldivians and 29 entities tied to terror organisations ISIS, ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K), and Al-Qaeda. The sanctions forbid contacts with them and business entities correlated with them, as well as entering the US.³⁸ New Delhi has been keeping a careful eye on a developing network of extremists in the Maldives, which has security consequences for southern India and Sri Lanka.

³⁴ Mohamed Ziad, "Countering Terrorism—The Maldivian Perspective," *The Terror Challenge in South Asia and Prospect of Regional Cooperation*, ed. Anand Kumar (Noida: Pentagon Security International, 2012), 61–70.

https://www.idsa.in/system/files/book/Book_TerrorChallengesSouthAsia.pdf

³⁵ Francesca Borri, "Where jihadists are heroes," *Norwegian Refugee Council*, March 14, 2017, <https://www.nrc.no/perspectives/2017/where-jihadists-are-heroes/>

³⁶ Anurag Sharma, "Radical Islam in the Maldives: Hotbed for al-Qa'ida and Islamic State," *Vivekananda International Foundation*, October 16, 2019, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2019/october/16/radical-islam-in-the-maldives-hotbed-for-al-qaida-and-islamic-state>

³⁷ Peter Carty, "Isis in paradise: Maldives latest recruiting ground for Islamic State," *International Business Times*, August 31, 2015, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-paradise-maldives-latest-recruiting-ground-islamic-state-1517853>

³⁸ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhary, "US imposes curbs on 20 Al-Qaeda and ISIS terrorists in Maldives," *The Economic Times*, August 02, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/us-imposes-curbs-on-20-al-qaeda-and-isis-terrorists-in-maldives/articleshow/102328166.cms?from=mdr>

The Maldivian government acknowledges the importance of an integrated and comprehensive strategy for combating terrorism in the nation. They recognised this existential threat and implemented a 'Zero Tolerance Policy' on terrorism and violent extremism, which is carried out through a multidisciplinary, whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. To comprehend the nuances of threats and violent extremism in the Maldives, a Baseline Study on radicalisation was undertaken, offering a holistic understanding of the threat landscape and the various narratives underpinning extremist ideology. Collaborative efforts with universities and stakeholders resulted in assessments such as the "Youth Vulnerability Assessment" and "Women as Peace Builders and Agents of Change in the Maldives." These studies have significantly illuminated the array of societal challenges. These insights have subsequently informed a collaborative, multi-agency approach to prevent and counter violent extremism in the region.



India and Maldives are cooperating to combat terrorism firmly committed to the shared principles of peace and development. Both countries have enhanced the collaborative efforts to address these shared challenges, encompassing capacity enhancement and training assistance for Maldivian security personnel. India will contribute 24 vehicles and a naval boat to bolster the Maldives Security Force. Furthermore, our cooperation extends to the construction of

police facilities on 61 islands within the Maldives³⁹. Being the founding members of Colombo Security Conclave, Maldives and India will cooperate in key areas such as Maritime Safety and Security, Countering Terrorism and Radicalisation, Combating Trafficking and Transnational Organised Crime, Cyber Security, Protection of Critical Infrastructure and Technology, and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief.⁴⁰ Looking ahead, it is imperative to adopt an integrated and comprehensive strategy to address the complex challenge of terrorism in the Maldives. The collective determination of both nations, fortified by their historical friendship, holds the promise of a secure and prosperous future for the region.

³⁹ Shubhajit Roy, "Flagging terror threat, India pledges support to Maldives," *The Indian Express*, August 03, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/flagging-terror-threat-india-pledges-support-to-maldives-8066781/>

⁴⁰ "Colombo Security Conclave: NSAs of India, Sri Lanka, Maldives agree on roadmap for further strengthening maritime regional security," *The Print*, March 10, 2022, https://theprint.in/world/colombo-security-conclave-nsas-of-india-sri-lanka-maldives-agree-on-roadmap-for-further-strengthening-maritime-regional-security/867852/#google_vignette



About the Contributors

Col Maneesh Parthsarthy, VSM is an alumnus of National Defence Academy, Khadkwasla and Indian Military Academy, Dehradun. He was commissioned into Second Battalion The 8th Gorkha Rifles on 11 Dec 1999. He has varied military experience by virtue of serving along the LC, LAC and the AGPL with his unit in OP MEGHDOOT, OP AMAN, OP PARAKRAM and OP RAKSHAK. He has been an Instructor at the NDA, Senior Comd Wing, Army War College and the Trg Task Force, Congo. He has excelled on military courses including the prestigious Defence Services Staff College Course and the Higher Command Course. He holds degrees in MSc and MPhil in Defence and Strategic Studies from Madras University and Punjab University. He commanded the 51 Special Action Group of the National Security Guard from 2014-2017. The officer before joining the USI was serving as Director, Evaluation and Monitoring of Investments, AGIF.

Tanya Jain is currently serving as a Research Assistant at the Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation (CS3) at the United Service Institution (USI) of India. She holds a Master of Arts degree in Political Science, along with a bachelor's degree in Political Science from Delhi University. She has also pursued Diploma in International Affairs from Indian Institute of Leadership and Governance. Prior to her current role, Tanya has worked with Netri Foundation as a communication intern building communication content for key stakeholders and worked in tandem with the program manager to develop communication content. She has published few research articles as an research intern with The international Prism on various topics like Sudan crisis, India's foreign policy post Modi and Indo-Sri Lanka Relation during economic crisis. Her research interests primarily revolve around South Asia and Southeast Asia.



**United Service Institution of India Rao Tularam Marg, Opposite
Signals Enclave, Anuj Vihar, Vasant Vihar, New Delhi, Delhi 110057**



Disclaimer: The South Asia Monitor does not reflect the official views of the USI, and USI is not responsible for the credibility and factual correctness of the news items in the given newsletter.