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SOFT LANDING AKA SOFT POWER



In a historic achievement, India became the first country to successfully land a spacecraft on the uncharted territory of the Lunar South Pole. The soft landing of Chandrayaan-3, India's lunar mission, has not only put the country at the forefront of space exploration but has also significantly boosted India's soft power on the global stage. The international media coverage of this remarkable feat is testament to India's growing influence and reputation as a technological and scientific powerhouse.



The International Media's Perspective

BBC: A Historic Moon Landing

The British broadcaster, BBC, described the soft landing of Chandrayaan-3 as a "historic moon landing." The live streaming of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) mission's landing garnered global attention. BBC's South Asian correspondent in Bengaluru captured the final moments before the landing, reflecting the excitement and pride surrounding this achievement. The successful outcome was met with astonishment and celebration, further solidifying India's position in the global space race.

The Washington Post: India's Triumph in Space

The Washington Post highlighted the significance of the Chandrayaan-3 mission, emphasizing India's growing ambitions in space. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been instrumental in strengthening India's space agency, ISRO, showcasing it as a symbol of the country's global stature. The article noted that India's space program is not only a source of national pride but also a strategic move to boost the economy and technological sector. The success of the soft landing is seen as a response to China's advancements in space exploration, positioning India as a formidable competitor.

The Guardian: India's Emergence as a Space Power

The Guardian recognized India's emergence as a space power, acknowledging the efforts of the Modi-led government to enhance ISRO's capabilities and elevate India's standing on the global stage. The successful landing of Chandrayaan-3 signifies India's technological prowess and its determination to spur investment in private space launches and satellite-based businesses. The article highlighted India's low-budget aerospace program, which has achieved significant milestones with limited financial resources. This cost-effective approach has further enhanced India's reputation in the space engineering domain.

The New York Times: Diplomatic Implications of Chandrayaan-3's Success

The New York Times emphasized the diplomatic implications of the Chandrayaan-3 landing for India's rising global influence. The success of the mission comes at a crucial time, as India seeks to establish itself as an ambitious rising power in the international arena. The Indian government has been advocating for a multipolar world order, positioning New Delhi as a key player in global solutions. The article highlighted the Indian public's deep pride in the accomplishments of their space program, which has achieved remarkable feats with limited resources compared to other space-faring nations.

ABC Australia: Showcasing India as a Technological Leader

ABC Australia noted that the successful landing of Chandrayaan-3 is not only a technological milestone but also a significant win for Prime Minister Modi's government. India's leadership in technology and assertive global presence were highlighted, positioning the country as a leader in the space sector. The article acknowledged the concerns raised by critics about the mission's significance in the face of ongoing challenges in India, but also highlighted its potential to enhance India's reputation for cost-effective space engineering.

France24: India's Rapid Progress in Space

France24 described the Chandrayaan-3 landing as a "historic moment for the world's most populous nation."¹ It recognized India's rapid progress in the aerospace domain, particularly considering the country's comparatively low-budget space program. The article highlighted India's frugal space engineering approach, which has allowed the country to achieve remarkable feats with limited financial resources. This cost-effective strategy has propelled India forward and positioned it as a global contender in space exploration and technology.

The successful soft landing of Chandrayaan-3 on the Moon's South Pole has significantly boosted India's soft power globally. Soft power refers to a country's ability to influence others through cultural, political, and technological means, rather than through coercion or force. By successfully landing a spacecraft on the Moon, India has demonstrated its scientific prowess, technological capabilities and commitment to exploration. This achievement has had several key impacts on India's soft power. The successful soft landing of Chandrayaan-3 has generated immense national pride among Indians. It has showcased India's scientific and technological capabilities to the world, fostering a sense of unity and pride among the Indian populace. This shared pride in India's achievements contributes to the country's soft power by bolstering its national identity and promoting a positive image of India as a rising global power. India's successful soft landing has garnered international attention and admiration. The global media coverage of the mission has highlighted India's emergence as a space power and its significant contributions to space exploration. The successful landing serves as a testament to India's technological advancements and its ability to achieve remarkable feats with limited resources. This enhances India's reputation as a competent and innovative nation, further boosting its soft power on the global stage.

¹ Swarajya Staff, "Here's How International Media Covered India's Chandrayaan-3 Moon Landing", *Swarajya*, 24 August 2023, Accessed On: <https://swarajyamag.com/world/heres-how-international-media-covered-indias-chandrayaan-3-moon-landing>

The Chandrayaan-3 mission has opened up avenues for scientific collaboration and outreach. The success of the mission has sparked interest from international partners and space agencies, leading to potential collaborations in future lunar explorations. This collaboration and exchange of scientific knowledge contribute to India's soft power by positioning the country as a hub of scientific excellence and promoting its scientific diplomacy efforts. The successful soft landing of Chandrayaan-3 also presents significant economic opportunities. India's space program has already established a reputation for cost-effective space engineering, attracting attention from commercial entities seeking affordable satellite launches and space-related services. The successful mission further enhances India's standing in the space industry, opening up possibilities for partnerships and economic growth. This economic potential adds to India's soft power by showcasing its technological capabilities and attracting international investments.

The successful soft landing of Chandrayaan-3 on the Moon's South Pole has propelled India's soft power to new heights. The international media coverage of this achievement has showcased India's scientific and technological prowess, enhancing its global reputation². The mission has instilled national pride, strengthened India's international standing, and created opportunities for scientific collaboration and economic growth³. As India continues to push the boundaries of space exploration, its soft power will continue to grow, positioning the country as a global leader in technology and innovation.

² "History Made: Scientists hail Chandrayaan-3's successful landing on lunar south pole", *The Hindu Business Line*, Accessed On: ['History made': Scientists hail Chandrayaan-3's successful landing on lunar south pole - The Hindu BusinessLine](#)

³ "History Made: Scientists hail Chandrayaan-3's successful landing on lunar south pole", *Udayavani*, Accessed On: ['History made': Scientists hail Chandrayaan-3's successful landing on lunar south pole | Udayavani – ಉದಯವಾಣಿ](#)



THE DURAND DYNAMICS



The relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan has been marked by a complex mix of love, hate, cooperation, and conflict over the years. This intricate relationship can be attributed to historical, geopolitical, cultural, and security factors. Pakistan has played a crucial role in the political evolution of Afghanistan right from the eviction of Soviet Forces to the establishment of the Taliban government. Over the decades, millions of Afghan refugees have sought shelter in Pakistan during times of conflict and instability in Afghanistan. While Pakistan has provided refuge, the sheer numbers have strained resources and sometimes created tensions between the two nations. The border issue, specifically the recognition of the Durand Line as the official border, has been a long-standing point of contention. Afghanistan relies on Pakistan as a transit route for imports and exports. Afghanistan has never officially recognized this border, leading to disputes and border clashes. The economic interdependence between the two nations creates a pragmatic incentive for cooperation. However, recurring clashes along and across the border between the locals, Afghan Forces, terrorists and Pak Forces have added volatility to their bilateral relations.

On 06 September 2023, at least four security men embraced martyrdom while more than 16 fighters were killed as militants' attempted to enter Pakistan from Afghanistan were foiled by troops deployed along the border with Afghanistan⁴. Militants had attacked two security check posts in the southern part of Chitral District, the valley in southern Chitral where the Kalash community resides⁵. Chitral's location holds strategic importance as it shares borders with Afghanistan



and is in close proximity to China's Xinjiang region. Additionally, it is separated from Tajikistan solely by the Wakhan Corridor⁶. The outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) had reportedly claimed responsibility for the attack through its spokesperson, Mohammad Khorasani. Anwaarul Haq Kakar, the caretaker PM, said the US leaving behind equipment of war in war-torn Afghanistan was a major factor in the recent surge in militancy.

⁴ "4 Pakistani Troops killed, 12 wounded in Chitral clash", *Pajhwok*, September 7 2023, Accessed On: [4 Pakistani troops killed, 12 wounded in Chitral clash – Pajhwok Afghan News](#)

⁵ Abdullah Momand, "Chitral attack 'isolated incident', not sanctioned by Afghan govt: FM Jilani", *Dawn*, September 8 2023, Accessed On: [Chitral attack 'isolated incident', not sanctioned by Afghan govt: FM Jilani - World - DAWN.COM](#)

⁶ Ibid.

The Torkham border was closed the same day after at least two people, including a Frontier Corps (FC) official, were injured when a gun battle erupted between Pakistan and Afghan border forces⁷. According to Pakistani officials, the midday firefight began after Afghan authorities started building a checkpoint near the main border crossing on their side. There was already a checkpoint in the vicinity, called the Larram Post, but the Afghan authorities started building another one over a small hill without consulting the Pakistanis.



On September 11, a meeting on reopening the border failed⁸. Political activists, transporters, traders, customs clearing agents, labourers, and representatives of local organizations protested the prolonged closure of the Torkham border a day earlier. There have been several border closures after clashes between Pakistan and Afghan forces since the Taliban returned to power in Kabul in 2021, but this one -- lasting nine days -- was one of the longest so far and ended on 15 September.

Afghanistan and Pakistan have a complex relationship characterized by a mixture of cooperation and conflict, driven by a range of historical, geopolitical, and cultural factors. The love-hate dynamics continue to shape their interactions and will play a crucial role in determining the future stability of the region. Finding a path to more stable and amicable relations is a challenge, but it is essential for the security and prosperity of both nations and the broader South Asian region.

⁷ Abdullah Momand, "Decision on reopening Torkham border to be taken in view of upcoming developments: FO", *Dawn*, 14 September 2023, Accessed On: [Decision on reopening Torkham border to be taken in view of upcoming developments: FO - DAWN.COM](#)

⁸ Ibid.



CHINA RECOGNISES THE TALIBAN



On 13 September, the newly appointed Chinese ambassador to Afghanistan⁹, Zhao Sheng, formally presented his credentials to the Prime Minister of the Taliban, Mullah Hassan Akhund, in the capital city of Kabul. This act effectively marks China as the first nation to establish diplomatic relations with Afghanistan subsequent to the radical organization's overthrow of the civilian government in August 2021 and its subsequent assumption of power. Ambassador Sheng further conveyed China's commitment to being a good neighbour and fully respecting Afghanistan's independence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty in decision-making. The newly appointed envoy has asserted that the Taliban regime has made significant strides in combating corruption, crime, and drug-related activities, while also ensuring economic stability and security¹⁰. Notably, Russia and China were among the first nations to recognize the Taliban's leadership in Afghanistan and have consistently advocated for strengthening ties with the country, despite its ongoing turmoil. China, in particular, has made substantial investments in Afghanistan, with the aim of expanding its influence in the region. In light of the West's decision to freeze its annual aid, which constitutes a significant portion of Afghanistan's GDP, Kabul has been actively seeking foreign investments. In January 2023, a Chinese company signed a \$450 million agreement to explore and develop oil reserves in northern Afghanistan¹¹, and in April, the Taliban regime announced that it was in talks with a Chinese firm to undertake the exploration and development of Afghanistan's lithium reserves.



China's approach to the Taliban and its human rights track record in Afghanistan is indeed influenced by its own interests, and it has been criticized for its apparent willingness to turn a blind eye to human rights concerns. Beijing definitely views the Taliban as a force that can help control extremist elements and maintain a certain level of stability as it seeks to prevent the spread of extremism and violence into its Xinjiang region. To achieve this, China is willing to engage with the Taliban and support a government that can maintain some semblance of order, even if it means tolerating human rights abuses. China has invested in Afghanistan's natural resources and infrastructure projects, and it is eager to protect its investments. To ensure the security of its economic interests, China may be inclined to work with whoever is in power, even if that means overlooking human rights violations. Afghanistan is rich in natural resources, including minerals like copper, lithium, and rare earth elements. China has a growing appetite for these resources to support its economic development and technological advancement. Chinese companies have invested in mining projects in Afghanistan and a stable Afghanistan could offer more opportunities

⁹ C. Krishnasai, "China becomes first country to send envoy to Afghanistan after Taliban takeover", *WION*, September 13 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/china-becomes-first-country-to-send-its-envoy-to-afghanistan-after-taliban-takeover-635591>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

for Chinese firms to access these resources. Afghanistan's location is strategically important for China's Belt and Road Initiative, which is a massive infrastructure and economic development project aimed at connecting China to Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Afghanistan's inclusion in the BRI could provide a potential corridor for trade and infrastructure development, enhancing China's connectivity to the region and beyond. By recognizing the Taliban and engaging in diplomatic relations, China can position itself as a key player in the Afghan peace process and regional stability discussions. Publicly criticizing the Taliban's human rights abuses may escalate tensions and hinder China's ability to protect its interests. China's pragmatic approach to the situation in Afghanistan is consistent with its broader foreign policy priorities, which prioritize stability, economic development, and regional influence over human rights concerns in many instances. China and India have a complex relationship marked by competition for influence in South Asia. Afghanistan, with its location at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, provides a strategic battleground for regional influence. China aims to prevent India from gaining a foothold in Afghanistan that could be used against China's interests in the region. Also, as the US had played a significant role in Afghan affairs for years, China may seek to wipe out any remnants of American influence in the country. By doing so, China aims to maintain a level of control and influence in Afghanistan that aligns with its strategic interests while reducing the influence of its regional rivals and the United States.



INDIA NEPAL DAI BHAI?



Nepal, a landlocked country nestled in the lap of the Himalayas, has found itself in a delicate balancing act between its two powerful neighbours, China and India. As one of the world's poorest countries, Nepal is seeking economic growth and development opportunities to uplift its population. However, this pursuit is entangled with the complex dynamics of its relationships with China and India. In this article, we will explore the evolving Nepal-China relations, their impact on India, and the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead



for Nepal. China's presence in Nepal dates back to the 1950s when it initially aimed to build an economic foothold in the country. However, the relationship between the two nations significantly strengthened in the post-1990s era. Over the years, China has made substantial inroads in Nepal's infrastructure, education, and health sectors. The Chinese government has also taken a soft policy approach, establishing Mandarin language training schools in the Terai region and providing Mandarin language training to the Madhesis, an ethnic group in Nepal. This move aims to position the Madhesis as potential laborers in China's expanding economy.

One of the key areas of cooperation between Nepal and China is infrastructure development. Nepal sees an opportunity to leverage China's rail infrastructure in Tibet by committing to building a railway line connecting Kathmandu and Pokhara, including the birthplace of Lord Buddha at Lumbini¹². Additionally, agreements have been signed for all-weather road connectivity between Kathmandu and the Tibet Autonomous Region. The Rasawagadi-Syabrubesi Road link is also of strategic importance¹³. Both countries are intensifying the implementation of projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, which will now be developed under the Trans-Himalayan Multidimensional Connectivity Network¹⁴. Nepal is also part of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, with a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) promised¹⁵. Nepal and China have been working on enhancing their economic ties through various agreements and collaborations. Chinese banks have been allowed to open branches and provide financial services in Nepal, while imports from China have increased. The two countries have signed multiple Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) on investment and cooperation in production capacity, human resource development, and economic and technical cooperation. China has expressed its willingness to facilitate Nepal's export to China, support product development and post-harvest technology in

¹² Prabin Kumar Yadav, "Nepal's relationship with India and China", *The Annapurna Express*, May 29 2023, Accessed On: [Nepal's relationship with India and China \(theannapurnaexpress.com\)](https://theannapurnaexpress.com)

¹³ "China factor in Indo-Nepal Relations", *Insight IAS*, August 2023, Accessed On: [China factor in Indo-Nepal Relations - INSIGHTSIAS \(insightsonindia.com\)](https://insightsonindia.com)

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Deepak Adhikari, "Nepal's new PM faces ever trickier China-US-India high wire act", *NIKKEI Asia*, January 4 2023, Accessed On: [Nepal's new PM faces ever trickier China-U.S.-India high wire act - Nikkei Asia](https://nikkei.com)

agro-products, and tap into Nepal's resources such as construction materials, water conservation, hydropower, and organic agriculture. Both sides have also been negotiating the China-Nepal Free Trade Agreement (FTA) to further boost bilateral trade¹⁶. Nepal is eyeing connections with the Chinese market, oil refineries, and the global supply chain via Chinese ports.

Apart from economic cooperation, Nepal and China have also strengthened their administrative and security ties. Nepal has signed a treaty with China on mutual legal assistance in criminal matters, enabling China to investigate cases of crime that might target Nepal¹⁷. Nepal has acknowledged Taiwan as an inalienable part of China and has promised not to allow any anti-China activities on its territory. The two countries have also engaged in joint military exercises, and China has offered training opportunities to Nepalese law enforcement officers¹⁸. As a mark of respect for the late leader of the Communist Party of Nepal, China has agreed to build the Madan Bhandari University for Science and Technology in Nepal.

What Pushes Nepal Away from India

Nepal's perception of India as "hawkish" and "selfish" in dealing with sensitive matters has strained their relationship¹⁹. Instances such as disputes over river treaties, border encroachments, trade and transit crises, and embargoes have created a sense of distrust and discontent among the Nepalese people²⁰. The open border between Nepal and India has been a contentious issue, with concerns raised about the impact of unregulated movement and cross-border activities. This has led to a growing skepticism among the Nepalese population toward India. Nepal's heavy reliance on India for trade and economic cooperation has hindered its ability to increase exports and compete with lower-priced Indian products. This imbalance has limited Nepal's economic growth and development. India's delay in implementing various development projects in Nepal, as compared to China's swift execution of agreed-upon projects, has created a perception that India is not fully committed to Nepal's progress. The prolonged delay in implementing projects, such as the Mahakali agreement²¹, has caused frustration and disillusionment among the Nepalese people. Nepal sees the Chinese railway as an opportunity to attract Chinese pilgrims and tourists to Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha. This could significantly boost tourism and bring economic benefits to the region. Nepal's communist parties have historically favoured China and criticized India. This ideological alignment has influenced Nepal's growing proximity to China, as even the Nepali Congress has shown a favourable stance towards China.

The Balancing Act

Nepal's engagement with China is not a new development, but its increasing significance warrants attention. While India may perceive China's presence in Nepal as a counterbalance to Indian influence, Nepal asserts that its relationship with China is purely economic and does not harm Indian strategic interests²². The growing Nepal-China cooperation signifies that the Himalayas are no longer a barrier. India must effectively compete with China to safeguard its interests and maintain its sphere of influence in Nepal. This requires a combination of factors,

¹⁶"China factor in Indo-Nepal Relations", *Insight IAS*, August 2023, Accessed On: [China factor in Indo-Nepal Relations - INSIGHTSIAS \(insightsonindia.com\)](https://www.insightsias.com/china-factor-in-indo-nepal-relations/)

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Derek Grossman, "India is Pushing Back Against China in South Asia", *The RAND Corporation Blog*, Accessed On: [India Is Pushing Back Against China in South Asia | RAND](https://www.rand.org/blog/2023/07/india-is-pushing-back-against-china-in-south-asia.html)

including India's capacity to challenge China, as well as addressing controversial approaches towards Nepal. While Nepal cannot completely dispense with its reliance on India, India's strategy of minimizing Nepal's engagement with China is no longer viable. India needs to introduce new economic, developmental, and infrastructure initiatives that bring tangible benefits to the Nepali citizens and address the vulnerabilities that may arise from Nepal's engagement with China. Nepal's relationship with China is driven by economic interests and regional dynamics.



Maldives at the Crossroads : Presidential Elections and Its Implications



Nestled in the tropical waters of the Indian Ocean, to the south of the sprawling Indian subcontinent, the Maldives is a stunning archipelago consisting of roughly 1,200 islands and home to nearly half a million people. The 2023 presidential election will be unlike any other in the Maldives' brief history of multi-party democracy, a journey that the people of this island country began in 2008. The Maldivian political wheel moves towards another critical crossroads. The presidential elections scheduled on September 9, 2023, ended with no candidates receiving the needed 50% of the votes. The country will now move on to the second round of elections for September 30, with the top two candidates, Mohamed Muizzu, the confidant of former leader Abdulla Yameen, of the Progressive Alliance—a coalition of the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and the People's National Congress (PNC) and incumbent Ibrahim Solih of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), contesting against each other.²³



Ranking	Candidate	Votes	% of Total Votes
1	Mohamed Muizzu (PPM-PNC)	101,635	46.06%
2	Ibrahim Solih (MDP)	86,161	39.04%
3	Illyas Labeeb (Democrats)	15,839	7.17%
4	Umar Naseer (Independent)	6,343	2.87%
5	Qasim Ibrahim (JP)	5,460	2.47%
6	Faris Maumoon (Independent)	2,979	1.35%
7	Mohamed Nazim (MNP)	1,907	0.86%
8	Hassan Zameel (independent)	327	0.14%
	Total	220,651	

Source: “Decoding Crucial Trends from the Maldives’ Presidential Elections.” Observer Research Foundation

As per the Maldives Election Commission, there are 282,395 eligible voters, including around 27,000 new voters aged 18. However, voter turnout hit a historic low of only 75%.²⁴ The

²³ Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy, “Decoding Crucial Trends from the Maldives’ Presidential Elections.” ORF, September 16, 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/decoding-crucial-trends-from-the-maldives-presidential-elections/>

²⁴ “Historic Low Voter Turn-out in the Maldives – What’s Really Ailing Politics in the Maldives?”, *Maldives Financial Review*, 10th September 2023, Accessed On: <https://mfr.mv/pre/historic-low-voter-turn-out-in-the-maldives-what-s-really-ailing-politics-in-the-maldives>

low turnout was a significant concern, amidst political turmoil and controversies related to the incumbent administration's housing scheme. The opposition coalition, consisting of the PPM and the PNC, has accused the government of improperly allocating land through the 'Binveriya' housing plan to sway the forthcoming presidential election. The opposition claims that President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih has handed recovered property to his allies, which was initially reclaimed by former President Yameen Abdul Gayoom, and this distribution was decided without an Environmental Impact Assessment and from regions where land reclamation has occurred.²⁵ Hence, the Election Commission allowed re-registration to address potential turnout issues.

The Maldives had an Executive Presidency since 1968, with a one-party system until 2008, where the President was elected through a referendum for five years. Gayoom held power from 1978 to 2008. In response to growing calls for reform and democratization in 2003, Gayoom began the reform process in 2004²⁶. This led to the registration of political parties in 2005 and the adoption of the third constitution in August 2008, allowing for Presidential elections under a multi-party system. In sharp contrast to the former government of Abdulla Yameen (2013-2018), India-Maldives ties have been on an upward trend since the new Ibrahim Solih government took office in 2018, as it marked a win for India and a setback for China. During the previous PPM-led administration under Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, the Maldives leaned towards China by joining the BRI, undertaking major projects like the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, and seeking a free trade agreement with China²⁷. The India-Out campaign, led by Yameen, has targeted the Solih government since its inception, alleging that it has compromised Maldivian sovereignty by permitting Indian military presence on the islands. In contrast, the Solih administration maintained a close relationship with India, following an "India First" foreign policy that aligns with India's "Neighbourhood First" approach. Therefore, the Maldives stands at a crossroads in terms of its foreign policy, and the direction it takes will be determined by the election's results.



The Maldives captivated India's interest due to its strategic geographical location as a critical junction for vital maritime routes. It is critical for India to ensure maritime security and the open passage of vessels in these waterways. The Maldives, like many other South Asian countries, has become a stage for the rivalry between India and China. This is due to the Maldives' strategic location at the heart of the Indian Ocean. This power struggle between big nations is now a visible

²⁵ Ibrahim Adam, "Opposition Accuses Government of Unfair Allocation of Land in Binveriya Housing Scheme, Alleges Political Manipulation for Presidential Election.", *The Maldives Journal*, June 27 2023, <https://themaldivesjournal.com/52314>

²⁶ Commonwealth Observer Group, "Maldives Presidential Election 1st Round of Voting", October 28 2008, Accessed On: <https://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/asia/MV/maldives-final-report-presidential-elections>

²⁷ Mimrah Abdul Ghafoor, "India-China Contest Looms over Maldives' Presidential Elections." *The Diplomat*. August 23, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/india-china-contest-looms-over-maldives-presidential-elections/>.

Accessed On: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/india-china-contest-looms-over-maldives-presidential-elections/>

fracture line in the country's internal affairs. Muizzu is widely perceived as favouring China and opposing India, like his imprisoned political ally, Abdulla Yameen, who established tighter connections with Beijing during his administration from 2013 to 2018. Solih, on the other hand, calls for improved relations with India. Under President Solih's leadership, both parties engaged in multiple Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs) with the goal of strengthening bilateral and economic relations. These agreements covered a wide range of areas, including but not limited to infrastructure improvement, disaster preparedness, and the advancement of women and child welfare.



India has initiated a major infrastructure venture in the Maldives called the Greater Male Connectivity Project, backed by a \$100 million grant and a significant \$400 million Line of Credit (LOC) from India. This project exceeds the scale of the China-assisted Sinamale Bridge Connectivity Project, and despite the challenges in its construction complexity, it is crucial for India to ensure its swift completion. In the forthcoming years, projects geared towards enhancing youth employability will prove immensely beneficial for the Maldives. A substantial segment of the Maldivian populace, exceeding 35 percent (comprising 36 percent females and 35 percent males), falls within the 15 to 35 age group, poised to enter the job market. Despite the Maldives' commendable economic growth, primarily propelled by tourism, the nation grapples with a pressing issue: a notable rate of youth unemployment, which stood at 15.13% as of 2022, according to the World Bank. India's High Impact Community Development Project (HICDP) in the Maldives, designed to foster socio-economic progress in local communities, empower youth, and safeguard cultural heritage, should also place special emphasis on creating employment avenues for the youth.²⁸ Despite potential challenges arising from the shifting political landscape in the Maldives, it remains of paramount importance for India to maintain its unwavering commitment to its priorities and continue its endeavours to propel development in the island nation. Since 2018, the Solih government has been diversifying the Maldives' foreign policy by joining the Indian Ocean Rim Association, re-joining the Commonwealth, and participating in the Colombo Security Conclave²⁹. These moves have strengthened regional partnerships. Geopolitical competition has also led to new alliances, including a defence agreement with the United States and increased engagement with Australia, particularly in maritime security and counterterrorism. More opportunities exist for enhancing development assistance and addressing climate change in this relationship.

The outcome of the presidential election will undoubtedly have an impact on the Maldives' ties. For Solih to secure victory in the upcoming election round, he must consider forming a coalition with the Democrats, who have become a significant player in the run-off. Their support could be pivotal, given their third-place position with 6,343 votes in the initial round. Nasheed expressed his

²⁸ A, Neelima, "Shifting Political Tides in the Maldives: Implications for India - Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR)." *Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR)*, September 9, 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.cppr.in/articles/shifting-political-tides-in-the-maldives-implications-for-india>

²⁹ David Brewster, Athaulla A Rasheed, "Maldives' Presidential Election: It's Not Just about India and China.", *Lowy Institute*, June 7 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/maldives-presidential-election-it-s-not-just-about-india-china>

dissatisfaction with the MDP and desired a change in government structure to a parliamentary form of government. Despite an agreement made before the 2018 elections, Ibu Solih failed to honour it. Ibu Solih faces a challenging task in bridging the more than 10% vote gap required for victory. If Nasheed declines to support him, garnering enough votes from smaller parties and independent candidates will prove exceedingly difficult.³⁰In the run-off, both remaining candidates and most political parties will need to navigate the India-China dynamic and face pressures from geopolitical actors. The Maldives' ever-changing political landscape, coupled with the current electoral system, allows for political parties to forge alliances and change allegiances during elections, making it challenging to forecast a definite victor. The Maldives should maintain its enduring approach of striking a balance in its relationship with India, its significant neighbouring power, while also fully preserving its autonomy.

³⁰R.K. Radhakrishnan, "Maldivian Presidential Election Heads for a Crucial Runoff.", *Frontline*, September 11, 2023, Accessed on: <https://frontline.thehindu.com/news/maldives-presidential-election-runoff-former-president-nasheed-emerges-kingmaker/article67291166.ece>



India-Bangladesh Bilateral Meeting at G-20: Exploring New Horizons



Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi held a bilateral meeting with H.E. Sheikh Hasina, the Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. PM Hasina was on an official visit to India as a guest for the G-20 Leaders' Summit scheduled for September 9-10, 2023. During their discussions, the two leaders explored a wide

range of topics related to their bilateral partnership. These included matters concerning political and security collaboration, effective border management, trade and connectivity initiatives, the utilization of water resources, developments in the power and energy sector, joint development projects, and fostering cultural and people-to-people exchanges. Although not formally a part of the G20, Bangladesh achieved a significant milestone by receiving an invitation to attend the G20 Summit as a guest nation. This



marks the inaugural participation of Bangladesh in this noteworthy gathering, highlighting the nation's growing importance on the global stage. It's noteworthy that Bangladesh is the only South Asian country to have received this prestigious invitation to the summit.³¹ Both nations signed several Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs) aimed at enhancing their bilateral cooperation. These agreements encompass various significant areas of collaboration. Firstly, they endorsed the MoU Understanding on Cooperation in Digital Payment mechanisms, marking a collaboration between the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) and Bangladesh Bank, which is expected to bolster digital payment systems between the two countries. Secondly, they welcomed the renewal of the Cultural Exchange Program (CEP) MoU for the years 2023-2025, underscoring the importance of cultural ties and exchanges between India and Bangladesh³². Lastly, the MoU between the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) and the Bangladesh Agriculture Research Council (BARC) signifies a commitment to cooperation in agricultural research encompasses exchange of scientists, scientific equipment, scientific literature, germplasm and breeding material, sources reflecting their shared interest in agricultural development and innovation³³. These MoUs signify the intent of both nations to strengthen their partnership across various vital domains.

³¹Rohan Narula, "Is Bangladesh a Member of the G20? The 2023 Summit in New Delhi.", *Coopwb*, September 2023, Accessed On: <https://coopwb.in/info/is-bangladesh-part-of-g20/>

³²"Prime Minister Meets Bangladesh Prime Minister H.E. Sheikh Hasina." *Prime Minister of India's Office*, September 2023, Accessed On: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaselframePage.aspx?PRID=1955656>

³³"India, Bangladesh Sign MoU on Smoother Cross-Border Payment Transactions.", *The Economic Times*, September 9, 2023, Accessed On: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-bangladesh-sign-mou-on-smoother-cross-border-payment-transactions/articleshow/103517972.cms>

Cross-Border Commerce: Digital Payments and Transforming Agriculture

The MoU on Cooperation in Digital Payment mechanisms between Dhaka and New Delhi reduced reliance on the US dollar and enhancing regional currency usage in trade. Bangladesh Bank Governor Abdur Rouf Talukder described the introduction of rupee-based trade settlement as the "initial phase of a lengthy journey." He emphasized that the trade relationship between India and Bangladesh has experienced substantial expansion, with both nations reaping the rewards of their economic collaboration³⁴. Bangladesh has been trying to replenish its depleting foreign currency reserves. Historically, all commercial transactions in Bangladesh have been conducted entirely in US dollars. Sonali Bank and Eastern Bank have recently opened "nostro" accounts in Indian rupees with India's State Bank of India and ICICI Bank, respectively.³⁵ These newly constructed nostro accounts would allow banks to maintain rupee cash in foreign currency, easing international commerce and foreign currency transactions. The inclusion of Indian rupee trade transactions is expected to alleviate pressure on Bangladesh's foreign reserves. The agreement between NPCI International Payments Limited and Bangladesh Bank includes the issuance of RuPay Prepaid Cards from Bangladesh, the acceptance of RuPay Cards in Bangladesh at ATMs and in commercial transactions, cross-border remittance, and the acceptance of UPI via QR code in Bangladesh at Merchant locations³⁶. It will further strengthen the economic cooperation between the two nations as India is the Bangladesh's second largest import source after China. Moreover, the renewal of CEP will also foster people-to-people ties, linguistic and cultural ties, passion for music, literature and the arts. Recently, in August 2023 the Indian government has decided to build a statue of famous Khasi independence fighter U. Tirot Singh within the premises of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) complex in Dhaka, Bangladesh. This decision corresponds with the central government's pledge to honour and memorialise the contributions of liberation fighters³⁷.



A significant portion of South Asia continues to rely on agriculture as the primary source of livelihood and sustenance. Roughly 60% of the populations in both India and Bangladesh are engaged in agricultural pursuits to support themselves. Among these individuals, a substantial 87% in Bangladesh and 70% in India predominantly depend on the agrarian sector for their income.³⁸ Agriculture assumes a pivotal role in the economies of these developing nations. As a result, the

³⁴ "Bangladesh, India Launch Trade Transactions in Rupees." *Outlook India*, July 11, 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.outlookindia.com/business/bangladesh-india-launch-trade-transactions-in-rupees-news-302121>

³⁵ "Two Bangladeshi Banks Introduce Indian Rupee Trade Transactions to Bolster Foreign Reserves.", *WION*, July 7, 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.wionews.com/business-economy/two-bangladeshi-banks-introduce-indian-rupee-trade-transactions-to-bolster-foreign-reserves-613220>

³⁶ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury "India, Bangladesh Sign MoU on Smoother Cross-Border Payment Transactions" *The Economic Times*, September 9, 2023, Accessed On: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-bangladesh-sign-mou-on-smoother-cross-border-payment-transactions/articleshow/103517972.cms>

³⁷ Swarajya Staff, "Statue Of Khasi Freedom Fighter To Be Installed At Indian Cultural Centre In Dhaka.", *Swarajyamag*, August 2023, Accessed On: <https://swarajyamag.com/heritage/statue-of-khasi-freedom-fighter-to-be-installed-at-indian-cultural-centre-in-dhaka>

³⁸ Mozammil Ahmad, "How the India-Bangladesh Cooperation Can Overcome Challenges in the Agricultural Sector.", *Modern Diplomacy*, October 2020, Accessed On: <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2020/10/16/how-the-india-bangladesh-cooperation-can-overcome-challenges-in-the-agricultural-sector/>

MoU between ICAR and BARC will promote scientific and agricultural developments between the nations. Pranay Verma, the Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh, has expressed that there is significant potential for collaboration between India and Bangladesh in the realms of knowledge exchange, sharing best practices, and advancing research and development efforts concerning millets. During his address at the opening of the exhibition titled 'Food Security and the Significance of Millets,' hosted by the Indian



High Commission in Dhaka on May 2023, High Commissioner Verma underscored the crucial role played by millets in ensuring food security, promoting healthy diets, fostering sustainable agriculture, and empowering farmers financially.³⁹ Agricultural cooperation can foster the development of both the countries.

Inviting Bangladesh

The relationship between India and Bangladesh is marked by deep-rooted historical, cultural, linguistic, and economic ties. India views Bangladesh as a crucial partner in the region and a key player in its Indo-Pacific strategy. Moreover, India aimed to underline its prominent role on both regional and global stages by extending an invitation to Bangladesh, a nation with memberships in numerous international organizations like the Commonwealth, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation⁴⁰. By participating in a prospective G20 Plus framework, Bangladesh's engagement would advance a more inclusive and representative approach to tackling global issues. This would help ensure that the perspectives and issues of the Global South are given due attention and consideration, contributing to a more balanced and effective response to global challenges. Bangladesh holds great importance for India as Bangladesh's proximity to landlocked states in north-eastern India serves to greatly alleviate connectivity challenges in the tumultuous north-eastern region and Dhaka's steadfast commitment to a "zero-tolerance" stance against terrorism aids India in quelling separatist movements in north-eastern territories. Furthermore, Bangladesh's strategic location at the confluence of South and Southeast Asia makes it a fundamental element of India's Act East policy as it serves as a vital link between South and Southeast Asia, two regions that hold increasing significance in political and strategic considerations.

Strengthening Partnerships

The G-20 summit offered Bangladesh an opportunity to strengthen its existing alliances and extend friendly gestures to new, non-traditional partners. This holds particular importance for Dhaka as it aims to diversify its partnerships across the global stage. With the increase in bilateral trade and cooperation between both the countries, India and Bangladesh are in process of designing a roadmap for the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). It could

³⁹ "India and Bangladesh have immense scope to cooperate in R&D initiatives related to millets- High Commissioner Pranay Verma", *DD News*, 21 June 2023, Accessed On: <https://ddnews.gov.in/international/india-and-bangladesh-have-immense-scope-cooperate-rd-initiatives-related-millets-high>

⁴⁰ Aishwarya Sanjukta Roy Proma, "Bangladesh at the G-20 Summit: Strengthening Its Relations with Key Global Players." *Modern Diplomacy*, September 2023. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/09/12/bangladesh-at-the-g-20-summit-strengthening-its-relations-with-key-global-players/>

double India's export to Dhaka to over \$32 billion.⁴¹This ongoing collaboration between India and Bangladesh reflects their shared commitment to economic growth, cultural exchange, and scientific advancement, further cementing their multifaceted partnership on the world stage.

⁴¹Huma Siddiqui, "India-Bangladesh to Start CEPA Negotiations, Bilateral Trade to Touch \$32 Billion." *Financial Express*, December 19 2022, Accessed On: <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-india-bangladesh-to-start-cepa-negotiations-bilateral-trade-to-touch-32-billion-2919678/>



Strengthening Maritime Security between India and Sri Lanka



The cutting-edge Indian Naval Ship (INS) Nireekshak and Submarine Rescue Vessel DSRV, designed to support advanced diving operations, recently concluded its formal visit to Trincomalee, Sri Lanka, where it provided specialized training in Mixed Gas Diving to the Sri Lanka Navy (SLN⁴²). The vessel arrived on September 14, 2023, and departed the island on September 21. This activity was perceived as an integral component of India's enduring dedication to strengthening regional capabilities and promoting closer relationships as part of its 'Neighbourhood First' policy. During the one-week collaborative training initiative, the primary emphasis will be on enhancing interoperability, coordination, and the sharing of best practices among the naval diving teams of both nations⁴³. Both countries participated in dialogues covering a range of shared concerns. Alongside the professional engagements, the visit encompassed scheduled social interactions, sporting events and collaborative yoga sessions. These endeavours are intended to deepen the bonds of friendship and solidarity between the Indian and Sri Lankan Navies.⁴⁴ This collaboration enables both naval forces to effectively tackle mutual maritime security challenges in the region. The joint diving training not only advances maritime security but also cultivates increased cooperation and mutual understanding between the two countries. It signifies a substantial stride towards upholding peace and stability in the area.



China's Growing Influence

As China intensifies its endeavours to expand its influence in the Indian Ocean region, it becomes imperative for India and Sri Lanka to enhance the scale of their joint military and naval exercises, leveraging each other's strengths and capabilities. The heightened apprehensions regarding the arrival of the Chinese vessel Shi Yang 6, docked at Colombo⁴⁵ and the recent cancellation of Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's visit to Sri Lanka under certain unavoidable

⁴² High Commission of India, Colombo, Sri Lanka, "INS Nireekshak visits Trincomalee for SLN Driver Training", September 14 2023, Accessed On:

<https://hicolombo.gov.in/press?id=eyJpdil6lmdUczl5bWFKMmMrQXRnczJVeWdDTFE9PSIsInZhbHVlIjoiYng3VmtQT3MxWdVZMIR6UjZRMG4rZz09liwibWFjIjoiYmEzYmQwYzBkYjQyMWJkZDM1OTIkOTk4ZDNhY2UzNzY0ODNINzUxM2I0OGE0Yjg2NmYyZmM3ZjhmMWE3MGQ5MyJ9>

⁴³ "IND Nireekshak Promotes India-Sri Lanka Naval Camaraderie Through Joint Dive Training", *Force*, September 19 2023, Accessed On: <https://forceindia.net/ins-nireekshak-promotes-india-sri-lanka-naval-camaraderie-through-joint-dive-training/#:~:text=The%20joint%20dive%20training%20not,and%20stability%20in%20the%20region.>

⁴⁴ Ministry of Defence, Government of India, "INS Nireekshak Departs Trincomalee", *Press Release*, September 22 2023, Accessed On: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1959604>

⁴⁵ Dalip Singh, "Rajnath Singh to Visit Sri Lanka amidst concern over Chinese vessel getting nod to dock at Colombo", *The Hindu*, September 1 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/rajnath-singh-to-visit-sri-lanka-amidst-concern-over-chinese-vessel-getting-nod-to-dock-at-colombo/article67260045.ece>

circumstances,⁴⁶ prompt a deeper examination of the relationship between the two countries. The last-minute postponement appears to convey New Delhi's unspoken dissatisfaction with Colombo for permitting another Chinese vessel to access the waters of the island nation.⁴⁷ However, Beijing has continuously denied that the new ship was involved in any spying activities, instead claiming that it is part of a long-term maritime research mission aimed at discovering the sunken vessel of Chinese Admiral Zheng He from the 15th century. The bilateral agreement for this mission was signed during a visit to Sri Lanka by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2014, when the government was led by Mahinda Rajapaksa. Three similar surveys were done between 2015 and 2019, when the current President, Ranil Wickremesinghe, was Prime Minister. This is the third visit by a Chinese 'research vessel' on a comparable mission (excluding the Yuan Wang-5), with at least one more scheduled until the mission agreement expires in 2026.⁴⁸

India's Strategic Partnership with Colombo

India has been deepening its strategic partnership with Sri Lanka in response to concerns about China's efforts to expand its influence in the island nation. In August 2022, India handed over a Dornier maritime surveillance aircraft to Sri Lanka. This aircraft was provided from the Indian

Navy's inventory to assist Sri Lanka in meeting its immediate security needs. India has also actively supported several capacity-building programmes for Sri Lankan armed services, such as the delivery of domestically made Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs). Both parties underlined their resolve to continue enhancing their defence and



strategic cooperation during Sri Lankan President Wickremesinghe's July visit to India. This is the first visit to India by a Sri Lankan leader since the island nation's terrible economic crisis last year. In response to the economic crisis, India provided Sri Lanka with around USD 4 billion in financial aid, including lines of credit for food and gasoline purchases. In addition, New Delhi gave assurances to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in order to assist Sri Lanka in obtaining a USD 2.9 billion rescue package.⁴⁹ During his visit, he tried to ease New Delhi's concerns about the Chinese naval presence in Sri Lankan waters. He mentioned that Sri Lanka had introduced a new set of rules to determine which ships and aircraft, military or non-military, could visit the country. These rules were established at India's request, although their specific details remain undisclosed. The United States has also been pressuring Sri Lanka to restrict Chinese naval access, citing security and strategic concerns. While Wickremesinghe claims that Sri Lanka maintains a neutral

⁴⁶ "Ranjath Singh defers visit to Sri Lanka", *Hindustan Times*, September 1 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/defence-minister-rajnath-singh-s-visit-to-sri-lanka-deferred-bilateral-ties-to-be-reviewed-101693585981208.html>

⁴⁷ "Rajnath Singh's Sri Lanka visit postponement: Has New Delhi sent a subtle message to Colombo?", *ETV Bharat*, September 3 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.etvbharat.com/english/state/delhi/rajnath-singhs-sri-lanka-visit-postponement-has-new-delhi-sent-a-subtle-message-to-colombo/na20230903132637629629344>

⁴⁸ Shamindra Ferdinando, "Bid to locate Admiral Zheng's sunken vessels runs into controversy", *Sunday Island*, August 28 2023, Accessed On: <https://island.lk/bid-to-locate-admiral-zheng-s-sunken-vessels-runs-into-controversy/>

⁴⁹ "Defence Minister Rajanath Singh's Sri Lanka Visit 'Important' Landmark in Relations", *NDTV World*, September 1 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/defence-minister-rajnath-singhs-sri-lanka-visit-important-landmark-in-relations-centre-4348303>

foreign policy focused on Asia without engaging in major power conflicts, the country's economic situation and debt obligations necessitate maintaining good relations with both New Delhi and Beijing. However, Sri Lanka cannot afford to decline China's requests for access to its waters due to substantial Chinese investments and debt to the country. India, as part of the Quad with the US, Japan, and Australia, is committed to promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific region in response to China's regional influence, which underscores the strategic significance of security in the Indian Ocean, not only for India but for other major powers seeking access to this vital region.⁵⁰

Sri Lanka's Balancing Act

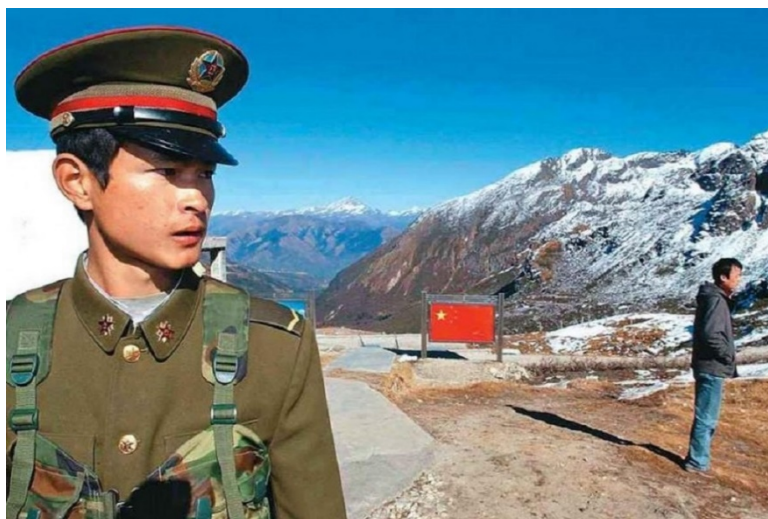
Sri Lanka will have to maintain an equilibrium between its two giants and influential Asian neighbours. India's support for Sri Lanka, including military aid and financial assistance during the economic crisis, highlights the importance of their partnership. However, Sri Lanka's debt obligations to China make it challenging to deny Beijing's requests for access. In the face of China's growing regional presence, India and Sri Lanka are strengthening their naval cooperation to safeguard their interests. The recent developments and challenges highlight the complex geopolitical landscape in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka's foreign policy choices will continue to have significant ramifications for major powers' access to this vital region, underscoring the delicate equilibrium it must maintain between its two influential neighbours.



The High Stakes in Bhutan-China Negotiations



Bhutan, a landlocked nation spanning 38,394 sq. km², is nestled between India to its south and China to its north. This unique geographical position, once viewed as a drawback, has turned into an advantage. As Paul Collier notes in his book "The Bottom Billion," landlocked countries primarily serve their neighbouring nations, while coastal countries connect to the world at large⁵¹. China and Bhutan have accelerated their efforts to settle their long-standing border dispute, which could have strategic implications for India. Both nations recently concluded their 13th Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on boundary issues and established a Joint Technical Team to advance the implementation of a 'three-step roadmap' signed in 2021 leading to boundary demarcation.⁵² This



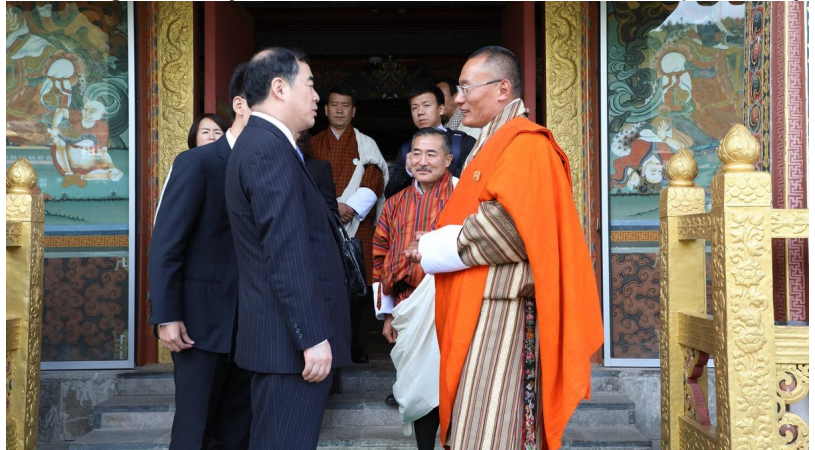
⁵⁰ "Rajnath Singh's Sri Lanka visit postponement: Has New Delhi sent a subtle message to Colombo?", *ETV Bharat*, September 3 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.etvbharat.com/english/state/delhi/rajnath-singhs-sri-lanka-visit-postponement-has-new-delhi-sent-a-subtle-message-to-colombo/na20230903132637629629344>

⁵¹ Indrani Talukdar, "Bhutan and China Relations: Its Impact On India", *CAPS India*, August 2023, Accessed On: <https://capsindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Indrani-Talukdar-1.pdf>

⁵² Kritika Rajput, "China-Bhutan inch closer to demarcation of disputed border, India watches closely", *ThePrint.*, September 1 2023, Accessed On: <https://theprint.in/theprint-essential/china-bhutan-inch-closer-to-demarcation-of-disputed-border-india-watches-closely/1742006/>

dispute, dating back several decades, involves China's claims to approximately 495 sq km in northcentral Bhutan, 269 sq km in western Bhutan, and an additional 740 sq km in eastern Bhutan since 2020, including the strategically important Doklam Plateau, which holds significance for India.⁵³ Bhutan and China have mutually committed to preserving peace and calm along their border regions while awaiting a final resolution of their boundary dispute. Initiated in 1984, the Boundary Talks between Bhutan and China led to the signing of the Guiding Principles on Boundary Issue Resolution in 1988 and the Agreement on Sustaining Peace and Serenity in border areas in 1998. These two agreements serve as the cornerstone of the ongoing boundary negotiations between the two nations.⁵⁴

The China-Bhutan boundary talks are causing security concerns for India due to their proximity to the critical Siliguri Corridor, linking India's Northeast with the rest of the country. The dispute centres on the strategic Doklam plateau near the tri-junction of India, Bhutan, and China. China's control of Doklam could enhance its military mobility in any potential conflict with India. The 2017 Doklam standoff was triggered by Chinese efforts to build a road in the region. Despite initial tensions, both countries eventually withdrew their troops. Doklam holds strategic importance for all three nations, especially for China's access to the Chumbi Valley and its potential impact on the Siliguri Corridor.⁵⁵ The Chumbi Valley holds strategic importance for China due to its proximity to Tibet, Sikkim, and several neighbouring regions. Mao Ze Dong once likened Tibet to a hand with five fingers, representing Ladakh, Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh. China's interest in the Chumbi Valley can be attributed to three key factors:



- Proximity to India's North-East and the Siliguri Corridor is vital for connecting North-Eastern states to India and Nepal to Bhutan.
- Enhanced proximity to the northern border of Bangladesh, with only a narrow land stretch separating it from Bhutan.
- Strategic corridors on either side of India, including the Trans-Karakoram corridor to Gwadar and the Irrawaddy Corridor linking Yunnan to Myanmar benefit from well-developed road and railway infrastructure.

⁵³ Sudha Ramachandran, "Medha Bist on Understanding the China-Bhutan Boundary Dispute", *The Diplomat*, May 1 2023, Accessed On: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/medha-bisht-on-understanding-the-china-bhutan-boundary-dispute/>

⁵⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, Royal Government of Bhutan, "Joint Press Release", April 9 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.mfa.gov.bt/joint-press-release/>

⁵⁵ "India has cause for worry at the outcome of latest China-Bhutan border talks", *Northlines*, August 26 2023, Accessed On: <https://thenorthlines.com/india-has-cause-for-worry-at-the-outcome-of-latest-china-bhutan-border-talks/>

China's construction of six roads near Bhutan's North and North-West areas further strengthens its military positioning. Ultimately, China's increased access to Tibet and Bhutan could potentially undermine India's strategic position.⁵⁶

The foundation of India and Bhutan's relationship was established through the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation of 1949. This treaty allowed India to provide guidance on Bhutan's foreign policy while ensuring Bhutan's sovereignty. Despite this, Bhutan maintained its self-imposed isolationist stance. Additionally, the treaty solidified the principle of "common security" in their partnership. Considering the growing Chinese presence, both countries must enhance connectivity to counter Beijing's influence in the Himalayan region. Bhutan's fifth king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, recently visited India at the invitation of President Droupadi Murmu, which culminated in a meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Bhutan's Foreign Minister, Tandi Dorji, reassured that Bhutan and China's three-step "road map" to resolve their border disputes would not harm or compromise India's interests in the Doklam tri-junction. During their discussions, the two foreign secretaries assessed the entirety of their bilateral cooperation and explored ways to further fortify it across various sectors. The result of negotiations between China and Bhutan will have significant implications for future peace along the China-India border and broader geopolitical tensions. While talks are advancing, a specific date for the crucial 25th round of boundary negotiations, where a breakthrough is expected, has not been set by China and Bhutan. Given the high stakes involved, New Delhi should encourage Thimphu to maintain the current status quo in Doklam despite ongoing pressure from Beijing.⁵⁷

Bhutan finds itself in a delicate balancing act, aiming to normalize and enhance relations with both its neighbours. The Bhutanese government is also hopeful for a prompt resolution to the India-China boundary disputes, especially concerning the Doklam tri-junction situation.

⁵⁶Indrani Talukdar, "Bhutan and China Relations: Its Impact On India", *CAPS India*, August 2023, Accessed On: <https://capsindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Indrani-Talukdar-1.pdf>

⁵⁷ Marcus Andreopoulos, "China's Border Talks With Bhutan Are Aimed At India", *Foreign Policy*, July 10 2023, Accessed On: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/18/china-bhutan-border-talks-india-dispute-security/>



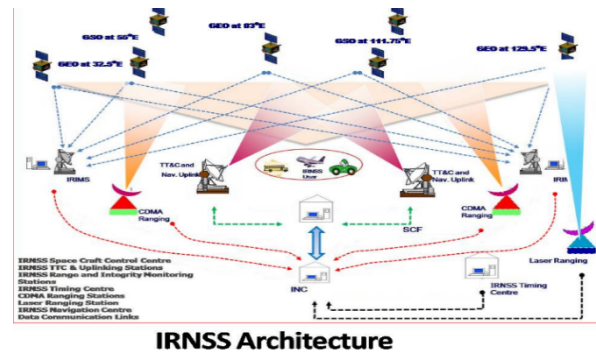
NavIC: Navigating South Asia’s Technological Sovereignty



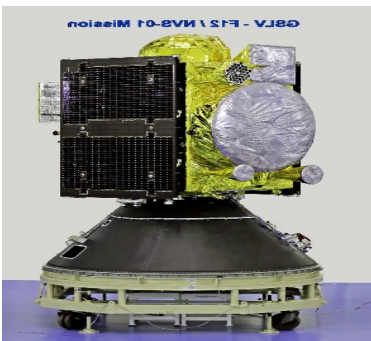
After being denied the crucial GPS information by the US during the 1999 Kargil War⁵⁸, India decided to be self-reliant to meet the Positioning, Navigation and Timing requirements of the nation, which led to the beginning of the Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System (IRNSS) in 2006 which became fully operational in 2016 and was renamed as Navigation with Indian Constellation or more popularly as NavIC. China being self-reliant on their Beidou GNSS has eliminated the dependency on US GPS. The conflict⁵⁹ between Russia and Ukraine is another example of the value of a reliable Satellite Navigation System for nations.



With the new space policy⁶⁰ allowing Non-Governmental Entities to actively participate in the rapidly growing Indian space sector, there are now more opportunities for Indian industry, start-ups and academia to collaborate on innovations in the area of satellite-based navigation services, also attributed to government programmes like Digital India, smart cities, Make in India and other significant flagship programmes.



Currently, NavIC has 7 operational navigation satellites in the constellation, 3 satellites in Geo Synchronous Orbit and 4 Satellites in Geostationary Transfer Orbit providing coverage over India and over 1500km around the mainland. NavIC has previously supported only L5 and S bands, but recently, NVS-01⁶¹, the first second-generation NavIC satellite with L1 Band compatibility was successfully launched to replace the IRNSS-1G Satellite. Including the secondary region, NavIC’s Service Area spans the majority of the Middle East, East Africa, most of South and Northeast Asia (apart from Japan), and northwest Australia. NavIC provides Position Accuracy better than 20 m and Time Accuracy better



⁵⁸ Lieutenant Commander Nicholas Monacelli, “Regaining the GPS Strategic Advantage”, American Sea Power Project: What is a Navy for? (Vol. 147/4/1, 418), U.S. Naval Institute, April, 2021, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/april/regaining-gps-strategic-advantage>

⁵⁹ Mark Krutov, Sergei Dobrynin, “In Russia's War On Ukraine, Effective Satellites Are Few And Far Between”, RadioFreeEuropeRadioLiberty, April 11, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-satellites-ukraine-war-gps/31797618.html>

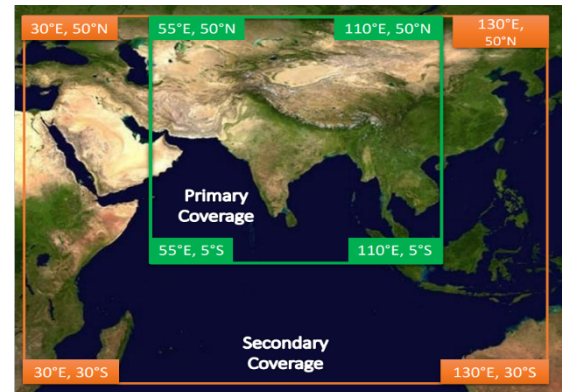
⁶⁰ Government of India, “Indian Space Policy 2023”, Department of Space, April 20, 2023, https://www.isro.gov.in/media_isro/pdf/IndianSpacePolicy2023.pdf

⁶¹ ISRO, May 29, 2023, https://www.isro.gov.in/GSLV_F12_Landingpage.html

than 50 ns in the Primary Region. NavIC offers two services - Standard Position Service (SPS) for civilian users and Restricted Service (RS) for strategic users with authorized access only.

NavIC's Role in South Asia: The Importance of Navigation & Technological Sovereignty

Navigation sovereignty refers to a region's ability to independently and autonomously control its navigation and positioning capabilities within its geographical boundaries, without relying heavily on external or foreign navigation systems. As these countries strive to tackle their distinct challenges and developmental requirements, NavIC's expanding range of applications, spanning from precision agriculture to disaster management, equips them with the tools to advance towards self-reliance and sustainability. India's leadership as the G20 chair, where it has championed the concerns of the Global South, amplifies the region's influence on global navigation policies. This convergence of regional navigation sovereignty and global representation underscores a collective dedication to leveraging technology for fair and comprehensive progress, ultimately fostering a more balanced and empowered Global South not only in the realm of navigation but also in broader spheres of influence. Additionally, collaborative initiatives like ISRO-Bhutan INS-2B Satellite demonstrate the potential for smaller nations to benefit from such advancements, promoting equitable access to technology.



NavIC's international recognition and collaboration with other global navigation systems can strengthen South Asia's position in the global technical landscape. In the finalised version of the 2020 National Defence Authorization Act (NDAA)⁶², the legislative bill, the United States Congress legally recognised the NavIC navigation satellite system as an "allied system". The International Maritime Organization (IMO) has also approved⁶³ NavIC as a part of the World-Wide Radio Navigation System (WWRNS) for use in the Indian Ocean Region. For differential GNSS applications, NavIC L5 has been integrated into the Radio Technical Commission for Maritime Services (RTCM) standard 10403.3 as of April 2020 and NavIC S-band was incorporated in RTCM standard 10403.3 amendment-3⁶⁴ allowing for incorporation into high-accuracy receivers. NavIC has been adopted for assisted GNSS by the Global standards body 3GPP⁶⁵ (3rd Generation Partnership Project) which brings together National Standards Development Organizations (SDOs) from around the globe for Assisted- Global Navigation Satellite System (A-GNSS).

In contrast to other global navigation systems such as GPS, Beidou, Galileo, and GLONASS; NavIC provides focused regional coverage encompassing India and its surrounding territories, extending up to 1500 km from its borders. Furthermore, the International

⁶² U.S. Congress, National Defense Authorization Act 2020, December 20, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/116/plaws/publ92/PLAW-116publ92.pdf>

⁶³ Maritime Safety Committee, 102nd meeting of Maritime Safety Committee of IMO (MSC-102), International Maritime Organization (IMO), November 2020, <https://www.imo.org/en/MediaCentre/MeetingSummaries/Pages/MSC-102nd-session.aspx>

⁶⁴ RTCM 10403.3, Differential GNSS (Global Navigation Satellite Systems) Services - Version 3 + Amendment 3, August 19, 2022, <https://rtcm.myshopify.com/collections/differential-global-navigation-satellite-dgnss-standards/products/rtcm-10403-3-differential-gnss-global-navigation-satellite-systems-services-version-3-amendment-2-may-20-2021>

⁶⁵ 3GPP Release 16 Description – TR21.916, 2021, <https://www.3gpp.org/specifications-technologies/releases/release-16>

Telecommunication Union (ITU) has specifically designated the S-band spectrum for use in the Asia and Oceania regions. This targeted allocation minimizes the likelihood of interference from concurrent navigation systems operating within the same frequency range. Importantly, the utilization of both the L5 and S bands in conjunction enhances NavIC's data accuracy by providing superior ionospheric and tropospheric correction capabilities.

Strategic & Economic Impact

NavIC holds significant potential for South Asian countries' defence sectors, although with some challenges and security concerns to address. NavIC's advanced precision and timing capabilities can greatly enhance military operations, but ensuring the system's resilience against potential disruptions and cyber threats will be essential. However, addressing the intricate web of geopolitical tensions and security vulnerabilities will be imperative. South Asian nations will need to collaborate closely to navigate these challenges successfully and establish robust safeguards to ensure the technology's integrity and security in a dynamic and often unpredictable regional landscape. Despite these challenges, NavIC has the potential to enhance defence capabilities in the region, ensuring precise navigation, coordinated military operations, and strategic autonomy while simultaneously addressing security concerns to maintain a robust defence infrastructure.

The potential of the blue economy in South Asia, combined with the capabilities of NavIC (Navigation with Indian Constellation), holds immense promise for the region. South Asian countries have extensive coastlines and access to rich maritime resources. The third-largest ocean basin in the world, the Indian Ocean, is covered by NavIC. It has important sea lanes linking the Middle East, Africa, and East Asia with Europe and the Americas, and it also offers a maritime route for almost 40% of the world's offshore oil transportation. NavIC supports maritime navigation and port operations, enhancing the safety and efficiency of shipping routes. South Asian ports serve as vital hubs for international trade, and NavIC's contributions in this sector help drive economic growth.

NavIC provides vital support for digital services and location-based applications. The continued growth of sectors such as e-commerce, ride-sharing, and delivery services hinges on the availability of precise navigation data. NavIC's precision will play a pivotal role in ensuring the seamless functioning and efficiency of these digital platforms, thus nurturing the digital economy's development across the South Asian region. SMEs form a significant part of South Asia's economic landscape, they will be instrumental in manufacturing NavIC-compatible devices, fostering regional connectivity, providing training, and creating business opportunities in sectors such as data analytics and software development. As NavIC applications continue to expand across various sectors, SMEs are expected to drive innovation and adapt the technology to meet specific regional needs.

Challenges and Future Prospects of NavIC in South Asia

One of the major challenges in the adoption of NavIC in India has been the lack of infrastructure - ground stations, and receivers, which will again pose a challenge in other South Asian countries because most neighbouring countries in the region do not have any space programs and thus no existing infrastructure and technical expertise to build or operate NavIC Systems. However, this challenge also presents opportunities for India, offering avenues for resource sharing, knowledge transfer, and capacity building within the region. Beyond the technical area, there are complex policy and legal considerations to address, particularly concerning signal interferences and

security concerns in geopolitically sensitive areas, these multifaceted challenges, include potential budgetary implications.

In spite of the numerous challenges, the adoption of NavIC in South Asian countries holds greater promise than the obstacles it presents. To completely embrace the NavIC's potential, the nations must tackle these challenges, through trade agreements, private sector participation, industry bodies, and government initiatives. In 1994, the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA) formed the Centre for Space Science & Technology Education in Asia and the Pacific (CSSTEAP)⁶⁶ with India as the host country, with the vision of human resource development in the Asia-Pacific region in applying space science and technology for sustainable development of the region. Considering this cooperative framework, establishing a consortium or committee focused on the peaceful utilization of NavIC could be a constructive step forward. Such an entity could facilitate coordination and collaboration involving international organizations such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA), and International Committee on GNSS (ICG) in line with the objectives of the UN Space 2030 Agenda⁶⁷, as we all commonly share One Earth, One Space, and One Future as one 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (One Family).

⁶⁶ UNOOSA Project Document (A/AC. 105/534), <https://cssteapun.org/international-linkages>

⁶⁷ UNISPACE+50, The "Space2030" Agenda: Space as a driver of Sustainable Development, UNOOSA, October 25, 2021, https://www.unoosa.org/res/oosadoc/data/resolutions/2021/general_assembly_76th_session/ares763_html/A_RES_76_3_E.pdf



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