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Nawaz Is Back: Back From the Back Burner

By Col Maneesh Parthsarthy, VSM



Nawaz Sharif, the former prime minister of Pakistan, returned to his home country on Friday, October 21. He did not land in Lahore, but instead chose Islamabad as his likely destination, as he had to appear before the court being an absconder in corruption cases.¹ His return to Pakistan before the general elections, is no surprise, but is a carefully crafted political strategy by the PML-N. It is also very obvious that the return could not



have been possible without the blessings of the most powerful organisation in Pakistan, that is the Pak Army. Only the Army could ensure a warm welcome and preferential treatment by the Judiciary. Even the judges, who had been against him and had removed him in a judicial coup in 2017, were prepared to accept his return and make sure he wasn't detained the moment he set foot in Pakistan again. But the Pakistan that Nawaz Sharif is returning to is substantially different from the one he left behind in 2019. The nation is deeply divided, insolvent financially, and experiencing a serious jihadist insurgency. In the last few years, the PML-N has considerably lost ground to Imran Khan and the PTI. According to a recent survey, Imran has more popularity than Nawaz, and the PTI would rout the PML-N in elections.²



After visiting United Kingdom for medical attention in 2019 while serving a 14-year prison sentence for corruption, Sharif had not set foot in Pakistan. On October 24, the Islamabad High Court granted Sharif bail in two corruption cases; the prosecution did not contest, believing that Sharif would appear for the trial.³

¹ Ayesha Siddiqi, "Nawaz Sharif will be the face without power. He returns to Pakistan with limited space to play", *ThePrint*, October 24 2023, Accessed On: [Nawaz Sharif will be the face without power. He returns to Pakistan with limited space to play \(theprint.in\)](https://www.theprint.in/nawaz-sharif-will-be-the-face-without-power-he-returns-to-pakistan-with-limited-space-to-play/)

² Sushant Sareen, "With Nawaz Sharif's return, politics comes full circle in Pakistan", *Observer Research Foundation*, October 23 2023, Accessed On: [With Nawaz Sharif's return, politics comes full circle in Pakistan | ORF \(orfonline.org\)](https://www.orfonline.org/research/with-nawaz-sharif-s-return-politics-comes-full-circle-in-pakistan/)

³ "Former Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif gets bail in corruption cases", *Al Jazeera*, October 24 2023, Accessed On: [Former Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif gets bail in corruption cases | Nawaz Sharif News | Al Jazeera](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/24/former-pakistan-prime-minister-nawaz-sharif-gets-bail-in-corruption-cases/)

The ongoing corruption cases against Nawaz Sharif might make his comeback more legally challenging. The way these lawsuits are resolved could have an impact on public opinion and the legality of his electoral participation. One important factor would be public opinion on Nawaz Sharif's homecoming and his political aspirations. There is likely to be a wide range of opinions over his return; some may see it as a move back towards democratic politics, while others may see it as an attempt to avoid facing



legal repercussions. Pakistan's international relations may be affected by Nawaz Sharif's homecoming. His return may elicit differing responses from other nations, which might have an impact on Pakistan's regional foreign policy. As of now, the majority believes that with Imran Khan fallen out of favour with the military establishment, Nawaz is the new puppet of the Army. However, there is a strong undercurrent that Nawaz may remain the face of the party but his younger brother Shehbaz Sharif will be the PM, being the favourite of the Army.

The return of Nawaz Sharif would probably make Pakistani politics more divisive. His attendance and involvement in the elections may invigorate his followers and forge a more formidable alternative to the opposing parties. Politics could become more combative as a result. The general elections' dynamics would be altered by Sharif's comeback. His party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), would probably rise to prominence and endeavour to be a serious competitor, possibly upending the PTI's grip and tipping the scales.

If Nawaz Sharif's party were to win the elections or become a significant part of a coalition government, his return could impact governance. However, given the present state of Pakistan, it would be an uphill task for him to revive the economy, ensure social liberties, manage the borders and keep radicalisation and terrorist organisations in check. With his arch rival already in jail, may give Nawaz some hope but the public and the world will be keenly monitoring how Pakistani courts handle the corruption cases against Nawaz Sharif. This may serve as a litmus test for the nation's dedication to maintaining the rule of law and guaranteeing accountability of political leadership.



Afghanistan Humbles the Greats of Cricket

By Col Maneesh Parthasarthy, VSM



In the history of One Day International (ODI) cricket, Afghanistan's incredible 69-run triumph over the reigning champions, England, is a momentous occasion. This incredible upset highlights the competitive and erratic nature of cricket while also showcasing the increasing skill of Afghanistan's cricket team. It's a credit to the skill, tenacity, and hard work of the Afghan cricket players, and it will surely be marked as a significant turning point in their career. This victory shows that underdogs can rise to the occasion and do the spectacular in both cricket and life.⁴



Afghanistan cricket team beating any of the top teams in the world in the Cricket World Cup ODI would have been a hypothetical scenario but surely a significant and historic moment for Afghan cricket. However, Cricket World Cup 2023 has been a different story altogether. Afghanistan beat England followed by Pakistan, catapulting Afghanistan into the league of extraordinary teams.⁵

Afghanistan's victory over England and Pakistan not only highlights the evolution of the Team but also the resilience of the nation which is undergoing an unprecedented human crisis worsened by a tyrannical regime. Under such duress, sports can become a unifying force if mobilised in a prudent manner. Sports-related events can foster diplomatic engagement and frequently transcend politics. It promotes communication and collaboration between the two nations on a number of fronts, notwithstanding geopolitical difficulties.

The Taliban's attitude towards sports differs greatly. In the past, they have opposed a variety of entertainment, including sports. They have, nevertheless, indicated a degree of flexibility to permit sports to continue under specific circumstances. The Afghan cricket team's success instils the much-needed pride in the country and its identity, which could have an impact on how the Taliban views sports in the nation. Afghans' morale will surely be lifted by international sporting success, which gives them a sense of accomplishment and hope. In difficult times for the nation, it can also act as a unifying factor and provide a sense of achievement.

Afghanistan may see a rise in interest and funding for sports as a result of these historic World Cup wins. Long-term gains in skill development and encouraging young people to lead active, healthy lifestyles may result from this. But it's important to remember that things are dynamic and complicated in Afghanistan. The importance of sports and the Afghan cricket team's capacity to

⁴ Simon Burton, "England humbled by Afghanistan in historic cricket World Cup Shock", *The Guardian*, October 15 2023, Accessed On: [England humbled by Afghanistan in historic Cricket World Cup shock | Cricket World Cup 2023 | The Guardian](#)

⁵ "Afghanistan shock rivals Pakistan in historic Cricket World Cup win", *Al Jazeera*, October 23 2023, Accessed On: [Afghanistan shock rivals Pakistan in historic Cricket World Cup win | ICC Cricket World Cup News | Al Jazeera](#)

compete internationally will be influenced by a number of variables, such as the nation's security state, political atmosphere and Taliban policies. These more general advancements will have a significant impact on how sport develops in Afghanistan.



India China Nepal: The Geopolitical Triptych

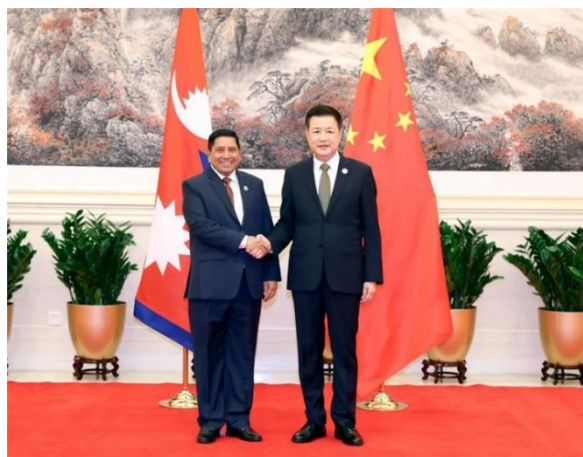
By Col Maneesh Parthsarthy, VSM



On 23 September 2023, President Xi Jinping met with Prime Minister of Nepal Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda at the West Lake State Guesthouse in Hangzhou, who was in China to attend the opening ceremony of the 19th Asian Games and pay an official visit. Prachanda expressed heartfelt gratitude to China for its altruistic aid in economic development, poverty alleviation, pandemic response, and other sectors. Nepal is steadfast in its support for the one-China policy. Taiwan and Xizang are unalienable Chinese territories. Nepal will not allow any force to use its territory to engage in operations that undermine China's sovereignty and security, and this attitude is firm and unwavering. Nepal values and will actively participate in Belt and Road cooperation, including the advancement of the trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network, which it believes would significantly benefit Nepal's national economic development.⁶



After taking office as prime minister in December of last year, Prachanda distanced himself from the KP Oli-led Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), which supported China and this was his first trip to China after visiting India and the US. Extensive road and rail connections are being built across the untamed Himalayan mountains to link Tibet and Nepal as part of the trans-Himalayan connectivity initiative. Since Nepal is a landlocked nation, India is its primary import route. As part of its efforts to increase its own influence, China aims to help Nepal become less dependent on India. However, due to prolonged border closures during the Covid-19 outbreak, the majority of Chinese initiatives in Nepal—including the border infrastructure have been



delayed.

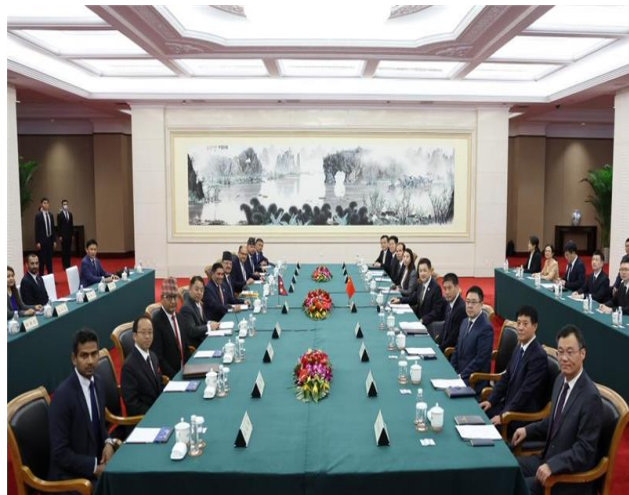
Soon after Prachanda's visit, on October 17, the Nepalese Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Home Affairs Narayan Kaji Shrestha was in China for the 3rd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.⁷ As a prelude to the forum he interacted with Mr Wang Xiaohong, the

⁶ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Accessed on: http://gb.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202310/t20231017_11162047.htm<https://www>

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kathmandu, Nepal, Government of Nepal, "Day- 2, Meeting of Hon. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs with H.E. Minister of Public Security of China", Press Release, October 17

Minister of Public Security & State Councillor. They discussed the state of cooperation between the two countries in border management and training of the Police Forces of Nepal.⁸ However, the Nepalese Deputy PM could not make the most from the visit due to a cardiac arrest during the BRI Forum discussions. He was immediately taken to the hospital and administered intensive care. The quick implantation of a stent in the obtuse marginal branch at Peking Union Medical College Hospital immediately relieved his chest pain.⁹

China's increasing influence in Nepal further fuels the Indo Chinese competition in South Asia. Such competition has adverse effect on the relations between these two South Asian Giants. Chinese initiatives in Nepal coupled with its investments in Pakistan and Sri Lanka gives India a feeling of Chinese strategic encirclement. The security and influence of India in the region are thought to be threatened by this strategic encirclement. Although there has always been a strong bond between India and Nepal, territorial conflicts like the Kalapani and Lipulekh issues have strained relations. China's involvement in Nepal has the potential to exacerbate these problems and spark conflicts that would be detrimental to India.



China now has a significant presence in Nepal thanks to its BRI investments. India's historic influence and interests in Nepal might be undermined by using this greater influence to reshape Nepal's foreign policy and bring it more closely into China's orbit. India might find it difficult to collaborate with Nepal, if it becomes more and more dependent on China for its economy as well as foreign policy. Infrastructure development is part of the BRI projects close to India's borders, which may cause security issues. Since that these advancements may enable China to deploy its military hardware throughout the region more quickly, India may view them as possible security risks.

Deeper economic relationship between China and Nepal may foster trade imbalance with India thereby adversely affecting the Indian economy. Greater collaboration between China and Nepal via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) could impede regional endeavours such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), in which India is a key player. Nepal's closer ties to China could make India less of a leader in these regional organisations.

India is concerned about the BRI's progress in South Asia and has been working on its regional initiatives to improve relations with its neighbours and counterbalance Chinese influence. Astute foreign policy and crafty diplomacy will be the tools to manage these challenges and promote regional stability.

2023, Accessed On: <https://mofa.gov.np/press-release-day-2-meeting-of-hon-deputy-prime-minister-and-minister-for-home-affairs-with-h-e-minister-of-public-security-of-china/>

⁸ The State Council, People's Republic of China "China's Police chief meets Nepalese deputy prime minister", October 17 2023, Accessed On: [China's police chief meets Nepalese deputy prime minister \(www.gov.cn\)](http://www.gov.cn)

⁹ Narayan Kaji Shrestha, "Nepal Deputy PM Suffers heart attack during China visit, admitted to ICU", *MetroVaartha*, October 19 2023, Accessed On: [Nepal Deputy PM suffers heart attack during China visit, admitted to ICU \(metrovaartha.com\)](http://metrovaartha.com)



SAMPRITI: Joint Military Exercise Between India and Bangladesh

By Tanya Jain



India and Bangladesh conducted the 11th annual edition of the SAMPRITI, a joint military exercise on 3rd Oct 2023 to 16th October at Umroi, Meghalaya, symbolising their strong bilateral defence cooperation, symbolising their strong bilateral defence cooperation. This exercise is hosted by both countries alternating as hosts and has undergone ten successful editions since 2009 when it was first held in Jorhat, India.¹⁰The



concluding ceremony of the SAMPRITI-XI was held at Joint Training Node, Umroi which provided an opportunity for both armies to share vital battle experiences and best practises, as well as a friendly volleyball competition and a campfire was organised on the last day to develop squad cohesion.¹¹ The successful completion of this joint training represents an important milestone in the development of cordial relations between New Delhi and Dhaka, improving mutual understanding and interoperability among their militaries while boosting relationships.¹² The 14-day SAMPRITI-XI exercise, which involved roughly 350 soldiers from both armies, emphasises the need of increasing cooperation between the two forces, exchanging tactical experience, and encouraging best practises. It aimed at strengthening India-Bangladesh defence cooperation by promoting stronger bilateral connections, cultural understanding, and mutual advantages arising from shared experiences in Sub Conventional Operations.¹³

The primary purpose of the exercise was to foster interoperability and familiarise the personnel with the application of a combined task force in Sub-Conventional Operations, as defined in Chapter-VII of the United Nations [UN] Mandate of UN Peace Keeping Operations.¹⁴According to this chapter, 'Integrated missions are designed to facilitate a coherent, system-wide

¹⁰ Ministry of Defence, Government of India, "India and Bangladesh Armies Begin Joint Exercise", *Press Release*, October 3 2023, Accessed On: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaselframePage.aspx?PRID=1963629>

¹¹ Bikas Singh, "Eleventh edition of SAMPRITI-XI bilateral military exercise takes place between India and Bangladesh", *The Economic Times*, October 17 2023, Accessed On: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/eleventh-edition-of-sampriti-xi-bilateral-military-exercise-takes-place-between-india-bangladesh/articleshow/104486805.cms>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ministry of Defence, Government of India, "India and Bangladesh Armies Begin Joint Exercise", *Press Release*, October 3 2023, Accessed On: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaselframePage.aspx?PRID=1963629>

¹⁴ Bikas Singh, "Eleventh edition of SAMPRITI-XI bilateral military exercise takes place between India and Bangladesh", *The Economic Times*, October 17 2023, Accessed On:

approach to the United Nations' involvement in conflict-affected countries.¹⁵ To support fragile peace processes, the UN has the unique capability of deploying a combination of civilian, police, and military forces under unified course. UN peacekeeping operations are usually carried out in collaboration with a variety of external forces with varying mandates, goals, and schedules. The management of an integrated operation adds another layer of complexity, necessitating coordination between the UN and the diverse range of non-UN entities that are usually present in conflict and post conflict zones.¹⁶

SAMPRITI-XI included 170 Bangladesh contingent forces of 170 personnel headed by Brigadier General Mohammed Mafizul Islam Rashed, Commander, 52 Bangladesh Infantry Brigade. The 27 Bangladesh Infantry Regiment is the main regiment on the Bangladesh Army side.¹⁷ The Indian contingent consisted primarily of troops from the Rajput Regiment, led by Brigadier SK Anand, Commander of a Mountain Brigade. Furthermore, the exercise encompasses personnel from various units, including artillery, engineers, and other supporting arms and services, from both sides. SAMPRITI-XI consists of two exercises: a Command Post Exercise (CPX) and a Field Training Exercise (FTX), followed by a Validation Exercise.¹⁸

- Command Post Exercise (CPX)

During the CPX, 20 officers from each contingent will focus on decision-making after extensive discussions. This phase of the exercise aims to improve strategic planning and cooperation between Indian and Bangladeshi military leadership.¹⁹ Bangladesh is India's closest neighbour and a key component of the 'Indian Neighbourhood Policy'. It is also an important ally of India.²⁰ Among other things, the recent 5th Annual Defence Dialogue emphasised the significance of conversation in shaping the future of their military and defence cooperation.



- Field Training Exercise (FTX)

The FTX will validate grassroots operations by including a series of collaborative tactical simulations for counter-terrorist operations such as hostage rescues, crowd control measures, and SHBO in counter-terrorist scenarios. In high-stress situations, the FTX emphasises the need of flawless

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/eleventh-edition-of-sampriti-xi-bilateral-military-exercise-takes-place-between-india-bangladesh/articleshow/104486805.cms>

¹⁵ United Nations, "United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Principles and Guidelines", 2008, Accessed On: https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/capstone_eng_0.pdf

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Building bonds: India and Bangladesh SAMPRITI XI Joint Military Exercise Begins", *Financial Express*, October 4 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-building-bonds-india-bangladesh-sampriti-xi-joint-military-exercise-begins-3262192/>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "SAMPRITI 11: Indian Army and Bangladesh Army commence joint exercise", *Economic Times*, October 3 2023, Accessed On: <https://government.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/sampriti-11-indian-army-and-bangladesh-army-commence-joint-exercise/104131953>

²⁰ Jubeda Chowdhury, "Strategic importance of Indo-Bangla 'military diplomacy'", *dailyobserver*, May 1 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.observerbd.com/news.php?id=417482>

coordination between the two forces.²¹ The Validation Exercise took place on 14 and 15 Oct at the Darranga Field Firing Range in Assam. This last phase gave both the Indian and Bangladeshi contingents the opportunity to put their newly acquired knowledge and abilities to the test in a realistic and difficult setting. Throughout the exercise, participants were able to see the potential of the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' equipment.²²

The military defence ties between New Delhi and Dhaka have been growing rapidly. Recently, both the nations held their 5th Annual Defence Dialogue in Dhaka which was co-chaired by Defence Secretary Shri Giridhar Aramane and his Bangladeshi counterpart, Lt Gen Waker-Uz-Zaman, Principal Staff Officer of the Armed Forces Division. This discourse, which took place during Defence Secretary Aramane's two-day visit to Bangladesh on Aug 27-28, 2023, is the most important institutionalised forum for interaction between the two countries. The dialogue underlined the importance in determining the future of their military and defence cooperation.²³ The two countries reviewed their continuing defence cooperation efforts, increased level of engagement, addressed existing bilateral exercises, and agreed to enhance the complexity of these exercises sectors, and the increased interactions are a hopeful indication for the future of their bilateral ties.²⁴ Considering the region's changing dynamics and China's expanding influence in the Indo-Pacific, these initiatives will further enhance the defence cooperation between New Delhi and Dhaka. To reiterate the strong foundational relationship between both the nations, Dr AK Abdul Momen, Bangladesh's Foreign Minister, during the inaugural session of the 11th Bangladesh-India Friendship Dialogue in Sylhet emphasised the need of a strong collaboration between India, the most powerful South Asian nation, and Bangladesh, a confident growing country, in fostering regional peace and development.²⁵ He described the current state of ties between Bangladesh and India as a "Golden Chapter" or "*Sonali Adhyay*," emphasising their position as an example for efficient "Neighbourhood Diplomacy".²⁶

²¹ "SAMPRITI: India, Bangladesh armies commence joint military exercise", *Business Standard*, October 3 2023, Accessed On: https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/sampriti-indian-bangladesh-armies-commence-joint-military-exercise-123100301497_1.html

²² "Building bonds: India and Bangladesh SAMPRITI XI Joint Military Exercise Begins", *Financial Express*, October 4 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-building-bonds-india-bangladesh-sampriti-xi-joint-military-exercise-begins-3262192/>

²³ Ministry of Defence, Government of India, "India and Bangladesh hold the fifth Annual Defence Dialogue in Dhaka", *Press Release*, August 28 2023, Accessed On: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaselframePage.aspx?PRID=1952947#:~:text=India%20and%20Bangladesh%20held%20the,Staff%20Officer%2C%20Armed%20Forces%20Division.>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "Bangladesh India partnership to bring regional, peace, prosperity: Momen", *The Business Standard*, October 6 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/bangladesh-india-partnership-bring-regional-peace-prosperity-momen-713218>

²⁶ Ibid.



Connecting Nations: The Impact of Revived Maritime Connectivity on India-Sri Lanka Relations



By Tavishi Sharma

After an almost four-decade long hiatus, the international passenger ferry service between India and Sri Lanka was reestablished on the 14th of October, 2023.²⁷ The resumption, presided over by Indian Shipping Minister Sarbananda Sonowal and Tamil Nadu Public Works Minister E V Velu, involved the ceremonial inauguration of the Nagapattinam-Kankesanthurai route at the Nagapattinam harbour, with an



initial complement of 50 passengers and 12 crew members.²⁸ Facilitated by the collaborative efforts of the Tamil Nadu Maritime Board and the Shipping Corporation of India, this ferry service traverses the 110-kilometer expanse between Nagapattinam and Kankesanthurai, with the duration of the journey spanning three to four hours contingent upon prevailing sea conditions.²⁹ This renewed ferry connection holds the promise of fortifying both travel and trade with Kankesanthurai, positioned as the Sri Lankan port nearest to India's western coastline.

The initiative's groundwork was laid out during virtual deliberations conducted by the India-Sri Lanka Joint Committee on the 14th of July this year, in accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Passenger Transportation by Sea.³⁰ Consequently, travellers can now access the northern and eastern regions of Sri Lanka in only four hours. The ferry service will remain operational until the 23rd of October 2023, but operations are slated for resumption during fairer weather conditions in January of 2024.³¹

A Step Towards Enhanced Maritime Cooperation and Connectivity

²⁷ Rezaul H Laskar, "India, Sri Lanka launch ferry service across Palk Strait after four decades", *Hindustan Times*, October 14 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-sri-lanka-launch-ferry-service-across-palk-strait-after-four-decades-101697293597392.html>

²⁸ N. Sai Charan, "Passenger ferry service between India and Sri Lanka begins again after nearly 40 years", *The Hindu*, October 14 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/passenger-ferry-service-between-india-and-sri-lanka-begins-again-after-nearly-40-years/article67419707.ece>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ High Commission of India, Colombo, Sri Lanka, "MoU on passenger transportation by sea between India and Sri Lanka initialled", July 2023, Accessed On: <https://hccolombo.gov.in/press?id=eyJpdil6llhQYnNCMFhPOUFoSWFIWVNVZ2F1Zmc9PSIsInZhbHVlljoiZitUY2EwQjNVZ0tadng1YUo4NEs2Zz09liwibWFjIjoiMTBkNDNmNDA1NWQ2YjMzMTY1NDY3YjI3M2Q4OTE5YzI4ODVlYzNlMWFjMGYzOWFIYWE5M2ZmNGE3YjZmZjlxMyJ9>

³¹ "India-Sri Lanka ferry service: "Embarking new diplomatic chapter" says PM Modi", *mint*, October 14 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/indiasri-lanka-ferry-service-nagapattinam-tamil-nadu-diplomatic-chapter-pm-modi-new-delhi-colombo-india-sri-lanka-rela-11697251783692.html>

During a ceremony in Nagapattinam, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Wickremesinghe reflected on the long-established cultural and trade ties between India and Sri Lanka, underscoring the significance of connectivity. In video messages, they celebrated the initiation of a new chapter in diplomatic and economic relations, characterizing the ferry service as a pivotal driver of these ties.³² Prime Minister Modi



articulated that connectivity stands as the cornerstone of the economic partnership vision, serving to bolster trade, tourism, and person to person ties.³³ Additionally, Prime Minister Modi highlighted the inception of direct flights between Delhi and Colombo in 2015, followed by flights between Chennai and Jaffna in 2019.³⁴ This enhanced connectivity, he emphasized, encompasses areas beyond transportation, extending into collaboration in domains such as fintech and energy.³⁵

President Wickremesinghe, echoing these sentiments, acknowledged that travel across the Palk Strait has historically played a pivotal role in nurturing trade and cultural exchanges between the two countries.³⁶ He highlighted the recent return to peace, enabling the restoration of sea connectivity.³⁷ The reintroduction of the ferry service, as External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar pointed out, contributes to India's overarching "Neighbourhood First" policy, emphasizing connectivity and cooperation.³⁸ This approach encompasses the ferry service, Chennai-Jaffna flights, housing initiatives, cultural centres, and healthcare facilities in Sri Lanka. Minister Jaishankar further alluded to the prospect of grid connection, pipelines, and economic corridors, while emphasizing India's commitment to the equal dignity and rights of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority.³⁹ Moreover, the resumption of ferry services exemplifies India's "Security and Growth For All in the Region" (SAGAR) policy, which underscores India's dedication to maritime security, disaster response, and environmental preservation.⁴⁰ India has extended its support by not only upgrading the Kankesanthurai harbour, but also reinstating railway lines connecting north and south Sri Lanka,

³² Press Office, Prime Minister of India, "PM's address at launch of ferry services between Nagapattinam, India and Kankesanthurai, Sri Lanka", October 14 2023, Accessed On: https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-address-at-launch-of-ferry-services-between-nagapattinam-india-and-kankesanthurai-sri-lanka/

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ "India and Sri Lanka resume ferry service after forty years", *NewsOnAir*, October 14 2023, Accessed On: <https://newsonair.gov.in/Main-News-Details.aspx?id=469403>

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Remarks of EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar at the inauguration of the ferry service between Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu and Kankesanthurai in Sri Lanka", October 14 2023, Accessed On: https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37189/Remarks_by_EAM_Dr_S_Jaishankar_at_the_inauguration_of_the_ferry_service_between_Nagapattinam_in_Tamil_Nadu_and_Kankesanthurai_in_Sri_Lanka

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

and initiating an emergency ambulance service nationwide.⁴¹ Prime Minister Modi complemented these efforts by referencing various completed projects in Sri Lanka's Northern Province, primarily inhabited by the Tamil community, encompassing housing, water supply, healthcare, and livelihood support.⁴² The resumption of the ferry service, as articulated by Minister Sonowal, not only strengthens cultural bonds but also eases the pilgrimage travel of individuals from Sri Lanka to sacred sites proximate to Nagapattinam, including Thirunallar, Nagore, and Velankanni.⁴³ This development signals the commitment of both nations to fostering deeper connections, thereby heralding a promising era of bilateral cooperation and mutual development.

Tensions Among the Fishing Communities

The geopolitical complexity surrounding the waters of the Palk Strait, the contentious Kachchativu Accord of 1974, and the Modified International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) Accord of 1976 have been ongoing issues impacting Indian fishers, primarily those from southern Tamil Nadu and the Karaikal enclave of the Puducherry Union Territory. The situation remains sensitive in Tamil Nadu, with New Delhi repeatedly asserting that Kachchativu belongs to Sri Lanka, as stipulated in the 1974 Accord, while emphasizing the importance of protecting the livelihoods of fishers from both nations.⁴⁴ Recent months have witnessed escalating tensions, with reports of Sri Lankan fishers from the north raiding Indian vessels and plundering their catches and equipment.⁴⁵ Simultaneously, Sri Lankan Tamil fishers have experienced the long-standing challenge of bottom-trawlers from across the Palk Strait decimating their resources. Additionally, the Sri Lanka Navy has apprehended Indian fishers and their vessels under newly enacted laws, releasing the former only after governmental intervention while allowing the boats and gear to deteriorate in the open.⁴⁶

In light of the current amicable bilateral relations and the shared aspiration to expedite connectivity projects, such as the proposed land bridge, both nations need to exercise greater sensitivity. Disrupting the waters of the Palk Strait could jeopardize the safety of ferry travellers and hinder tourism, particularly for religious pilgrims and pleasure-seekers. The ferry service, when fully resumed, could attract tour operators from southern Sri Lanka. This development would also benefit pilgrims of other faiths and traders in Sri Lanka's North and East, who would utilize the affordable ferry service to transport goods from Tamil Nadu, reducing transport costs compared to air travel. Furthermore, it would facilitate tourism between the two countries, offering travellers the opportunity to explore destinations and engage in shopping excursions. Therefore, the delicate issue of fishing rights and the broader implications of maritime cooperation between India and Sri Lanka necessitate a diplomatic and collaborative approach to ensure the success of the ferry service and associated connectivity projects, while safeguarding the interests and livelihoods of the involved communities.

⁴¹ Press Office, Prime Minister of India, "PM's address at launch of ferry services between Nagapattinam, India and Kankesanthurai, Sri Lanka", October 14 2023, Accessed On: https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-address-at-launch-of-ferry-services-between-nagapattinam-india-and-kankesanthurai-sri-lanka/

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ "India and Sri Lanka resume ferry service after forty years", *NewsOnAir*, October 14 2023, Accessed On: <https://newsonair.gov.in/Main-News-Details.aspx?id=469403>

⁴⁴ N Sathiya Moorthy, "How Sri Lankan hurdles can hamper connectivity projects to India", *Colombo Gazette*, October 22 2023, Accessed On: <https://colombogazette.com/2023/10/22/how-sri-lankan-hurdles-can-hamper-connectivity-projects-to-india/>

⁴⁵ J Sam Daniel Stalin, "Sri Lanka Arrests 27 Indian Fisherman Allegedly Fishing in Its Waters", *NDTV*, October 16 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/sri-lanka-arrests-27-indian-fishermen-for-allegedly-fishing-in-its-waters-4484700>

⁴⁶ "22 Indian Fisherman Who Crossed Into Sri Lankan Waters To Be Released", *NDTV*, July 5 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/22-indian-fishermen-who-crossed-into-sri-lankan-waters-to-be-released-4180165>



The Bhutan-India Hydropower Conundrum: A Delicate Balance Between Ecology and Strategic Interests



By Tavishi Sharma

The breach of the Chungthang dam (Sikkim Urja Limited's 1,200 MW Teesta-III hydroelectric endeavour) on the Teesta River, resulting in the tragic loss of a minimum of 94 lives in the downstream regions of Sikkim and West Bengal on October 4, has triggered a resurgence of concerns surrounding two of the three massive hydropower ventures in Bhutan that receive India's support and are presently under construction.⁴⁷ The concerns centre around the Punatsangchhu Stage-I (Puna-I) and the Punatsangchhu Stage-II (Puna-II), calling for changes in their design.⁴⁸ The projects in question, the 1,200 MW Puna-I and the 1,020 MW Puna-II, are located on the Punatsangchhu River, less than 100 km from Bhutan's capital, Thimphu⁴⁹ and are being financially supported by India, primarily to benefit northern and eastern Indian states.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the disaster at the Teesta dam underscores the impact of hydropower undertakings on local communities and the environment.



India and Bhutan have maintained a longstanding and robust bilateral relationship, with India playing a pivotal role in aiding Bhutan's hydropower development over the years. Bhutan possesses a substantially economically viable hydropower potential of 24,000 mw, of which it now harnesses only 1416 mw.⁵¹ This renewable hydropower exportation is integral to Bhutan's long-term economic prosperity. Bhutan's energy export strategy has facilitated substantial economic growth and has been instrumental in elevating the well-being of its populace. Commencing with the Jaldhaka Agreement of 1961, India has consistently extended support to Bhutan in accomplishing power project agreements.⁵² The India-Bhutan partnership is being further solidified as the Indian government embarks on a series of new projects, combining grants and loans, with India as the primary beneficiary of subsidized power from these ventures.⁵³ Nevertheless, the projects face a

⁴⁷ Rahul Karmakar, Suhasini Haidar, "Shadow from fallen Sikkim dam falls on India's hydroelectric projects in Bhutan", *The Hindu*, October 15 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/the-shadow-from-the-fallen-sikkim-dam-falls-on-indias-hydroelectric-projects-in-bhutan/article67420574.ece>

⁴⁸ "India- Funded Hydro Projects in Bhutan Under Scanner After Sikkim Teesta Disaster: Report", *The Wire*, October 15 2023, Accessed On: <https://thewire.in/south-asia/india-funded-hydro-projects-bhutan-scanner>

⁴⁹ Rahul Karmakar, Suhasini Haidar, "Shadow from fallen Sikkim dam falls on India's hydroelectric projects in Bhutan", *The Hindu*, October 15 2023, Accessed On <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/the-shadow-from-the-fallen-sikkim-dam-falls-on-indias-hydroelectric-projects-in-bhutan/article67420574.ece>

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Sohini Nayak, "India Bhutan hydropower cooperation: Assessing the present scenario", *Observer Research Foundation*, July 7 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-bhutan-hydropower-cooperation/>

⁵³ Royal Bhutanese Embassy, New Delhi, India, "Bhutan India Hydropower Relations", Accessed On: <https://www.mfa.gov.bt/rbedelhi/bhutan-india-relations/bhutan-india-hydropower-relations/>

looming shadow of concern emanating from the relevant authorities and civil society, primarily due to infrastructure and environmental apprehensions, detracting from their otherwise commendable nature and scale of operation.

Relevant Authorities Chime In

In February, the Central Electricity Authority (CEA) published a document, subsequently updated in August, detailing the status of hydroelectric power projects undertaken within the framework of a 2006 cooperative agreement between India and Bhutan.⁵⁴ Per the CEA note, the Puna-I project is expected to be commissioned in 2024-25, but its commissioning is experiencing delays “due to movement/subsidence of right bank hill mass in the dam area”.⁵⁵ The CEA report also added that: “Treatment/stabilisation of the right bank and completion of dam work under progress. The option of providing a barrage in the upstream and abandoning of the dam is being studied.”⁵⁶



Moreover, the Puna-II, as outlined in the CEA note, is slated for commissioning in 2023-24. In light of the Teesta disaster and its subsequent impact on the India-Bhutan hydropower projects, both governments have entrusted an eight-member Technical Coordination Committee (TCC) with the task of reviewing and proposing a course of action for the Puna-I dam.⁵⁷ According to Bhutan’s power sector officials, a mutual decision was made to initiate geological investigation studies at the project site, indicating that the TCC would determine the extent of additional geotechnical investigations required at the dam site.

Bhutan’s Prime Minister, Lotay Tshering, noted that has emphasized the necessity of revisiting the geological survey for the Puna-I dam, highlighting various factors contributing to the project's delays, including technical challenges and the impact of COVID.⁵⁸ In light of these findings, the Prime Minister underscores the reluctance of experts to proceed with a project that lacks both technical and scientific feasibility. While, Indian government officials have commented on the state of the project, noting that “no final decision has been taken on the Bhutan projects”, they acknowledge the re-examination of technical aspects by expert geologists.⁵⁹ In contrast, Prime Minister Lotay Tshering remains optimistic about resolving the issues. Bhutanese technical experts suggest that if the dam proves infeasible, an alternative solution, such as a smaller dam or barrage,

⁵⁴ Central Electricity Authority of India, “Cooperation with Bhutan”, February 2023, Accessed On: https://cea.nic.in/wp-content/uploads/hpi/2023/02/Bhutan_02.pdf

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ “India- Funded Hydro Projects in Bhutan Under Scanner After Sikkim Teesta Disaster: Report”, *The Wire*, October 15 2023, Accessed On: <https://thewire.in/south-asia/india-funded-hydro-projects-bhutan-scanner>

⁵⁸ Rahul Karmakar, Suhasini Haidar, “Shadow from fallen Sikkim dam falls on India’s hydroelectric projects in Bhutan”, *The Hindu*, October 15 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/the-shadow-from-the-fallen-sikkim-dam-falls-on-indias-hydroelectric-projects-in-bhutan/article67420574.ece>

⁵⁹ Ibid.

may present itself.⁶⁰ Conversely, Indian government experts maintain that the dam remains "feasible." The situation is marked by ongoing assessments and discussions aimed at ensuring the success and viability of these important projects.⁶¹

Concerns Raised by Environmentalists and Locals

These projects, however, have not garnered confidence within the global environmentalist community. Environmental activist and water and dam safety expert Himanshu Thakkar notes that the alteration in project design represents an "admission of a major failure by these agencies".⁶² Thakkar emphasises the imperative need for meticulous deliberation in the planning of such large-scale infrastructural projects. He further observes, "The Puna-I project is more or less a washout and hence they are considering the alternative of a barrage there. But that also does not seem to have been finalised".⁶³ Additionally, international landslide experts including Dave Petley have pointed out that it was "a blunder to start a dam at the location that seems to be on the debris of past landslides". Local communities residing near dam sites in Bhutan have encountered issues similar to those observed in houses near dams in the Indian Himalayas.⁶⁴ These issues include structural damage such as cracks in their houses and shaky foundations, which typically manifest soon after the commencement of dam construction.⁶⁵

The Puna-I and Puna-II projects are integral components of Bhutan's initiative to generate 10GW of hydropower with support from India. Scholars argue that in their pushing for dams, several agencies and engineers have demonstrated a deficiency in comprehensively assessing fragile Himalayan geology, which is similar to Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh bordering Bhutan.⁶⁶ Moreover, the Bhutanese population too has several grievances concerning the limited employment opportunities created by these projects. The development of hydropower projects is highly capital-intensive, yet it provides limited employment opportunities for the local populace as cheap labour is easily accessible from India, leading to discontentment.

While these projects hold great potential for both Bhutan's economic growth and India's energy needs, it is imperative to address the engineering challenges, design modifications, and environmental concerns to ensure their success. The dialogue between the two nations, the involvement of technical experts, and ongoing consultancy with environmental activists is a testament to Bhutan and India's commitment to finding a sustainable solution. As the two nations continue to work together, it is imperative that they prioritize the welfare of local communities and the preservation of delicate Himalayan ecology. Only through a holistic approach can these ambitious hydropower projects become a source of prosperity while respecting the environment and the people.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Rahul Karmakar, Suhasini Haidar, "Shadow from fallen Sikkim dam falls on India's hydroelectric projects in Bhutan", *The Hindu*, October 15 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/the-shadow-from-the-fallen-sikkim-dam-falls-on-indias-hydroelectric-projects-in-bhutan/article67420574.ece>

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.



Balancing India-Maldives Relations: Presence of Indian Troops in Maldives



By Tanya Jain

This month, the Maldives, a small island nation strategically positioned along maritime lanes connecting East Asia and the Middle East, played a crucial role in the Indian Ocean's geopolitical landscape. This shift in importance was prompted by the Maldives' presidential election, in which Mohamed Muizzu defeated incumbent President Ibrahim Solih in a second-round runoff. This outcome potentially signifies a shift toward closer ties with China, departing the Maldives' traditionally strong partnership with India.⁶⁷ The Maldives



Elections Commission report stated that Muizzu received 54 per cent of the votes cast in election, while Solih received 46 per cent.⁶⁸ With geopolitical competition between the US and China intensifying in the Western Pacific, China and India compete for dominance in the Indian Ocean and the small island nations play an essential role in balancing global powers' interests and sway. Hence, the Maldives' election results were seen as a possible shift in China's position in the Indian Ocean.⁶⁹

After winning the Maldives' fourth multiparty presidential elections, Dr. Mohamed Muizzu interacted with Indian High Commissioner Munu Mahawar and Ambassador Mahawar assured President-elect Dr. Muizzu of India's steadfast support to the Maldives' sovereignty and independence⁷⁰. The Indian Ambassador also vowed to engage in interactions aimed at potentially alleviating the burden of Maldives debt, stressing India's desire for strengthening bilateral relations with the Maldives, a relationship that has survived throughout years.⁷¹ It is worth mentioning that Dr. Muizzu earlier stated that dealing with international affairs concerns, particularly those concerning India, was a major priority. However, during the presidential campaign, Dr. Muizzu and the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and People's National Congress alliance aggressively called

⁶⁷ Mohammed Junayd, "Maldives oppositions candidate Muizzu wins presidential vote", *Reuters*, October 1 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/maldives-opposition-candidate-muizzu-wins-presidential-vote-2023-10-01/>

⁶⁸ Krishan Francis, "Maldives Presidential Election Heads to a Run-off", *The Diplomat*, September 11 2023, Accessed On: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/maldives-presidential-election-heads-to-a-run-off/>

⁶⁹ Albina Muratbekova, "Geostrategic Games in the Indian Ocean: The Case of the Maldives", *Eurasian Research Institute*, October 2018, Accessed On: <https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/geostrategic-games-in-the-indian-ocean-the-case-of-the-maldives/>

⁷⁰ "New Maldives President Elect Meets Indian Envoy, Handed Over Letter from Indian PM", *The Wire*, October 4 2023, Accessed On: <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/mohamed-muizzu-maldives-india-high-commissioner-meeting>

⁷¹ Mohamed Rehan, "India ready for loan leniency talks: Ambassador", *The Edition*, October 5 2023, Accessed On: <https://edition.mv/world/29484>

for the return of Indian soldiers from the Maldives.⁷² According to PPM, the presence of these troops is a graving threat to the island's national security and sovereignty.

However, both the nations share a long history of defence cooperation as India provided the Maldivian National Defence Forces (MNDF) with a fast patrol vessel and a landing craft assault ship, as well as other defence equipment such as two helicopters in 2010 and 2013, and a small aircraft in 2020, as part of its efforts to improve the Maldives' maritime capabilities. ⁷³Apart from these resources, 75 Indian military personnel were stationed in the Maldives to operate and repair the Indian aircraft.



According to Delhi, these assets were used for search and rescue operations as well as medical evacuations.⁷⁴ 'Operation Castor' was carried out during the COVID-19 epidemic to provide help to the Maldives, and the IAF transported 170 tonnes of relief items and rescued 885 individuals⁷⁵. During his February visit to the Maldives, India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, signed an agreement to fund the establishment of a vessel repair and maintenance facility.⁷⁶ He also stated that the deal will strengthen Maldivian Coast Guard capability and facilitate regional humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts (HADR), highlighting the collaborative nature of the partnership.⁷⁷ Recently in May 2023, Maldives and India jointly launched the Uthuru Thila Falhu project, led by India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Maldives' Defence Minister Mariya Didi that marked a significant step in their defence relationship. This project comprises the construction of the Coast Guard's 'Ekatha Harbour' at Siffavaru, a critical Indian assistance project in the archipelago. It aims to improve the capacity of the Maldivian Coast Guard while also helping regional HADR efforts.⁷⁸

With increasing India's strategic importance in the Indian Ocean, as well as the Maldives' crucial position in the region, Maldivian president should take a balanced approach and prioritise Maldivian interests. Muizzu believes that maintaining Indian troops in Maldives might expose the country to potential risks if tensions between India and China intensify close to their Himalayan border. According to Muizzu, Maldives is too small to be drawn into this global power struggle.⁷⁹

⁷² C. Krishnasai, "Told India to remove troops from Maldives: President-elect Mohammed Muizzu", *Wion*, October 24 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/told-india-to-remove-military-troops-from-maldives-president-elect-mohamed-muizzu-650390>

⁷³ Anbarasan Ethirajan, "Maldives: The presidential poll with India and China on the Ballot", *BBC News*, September 26 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66909240>

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Vikas Kalyani, "The Indian Air Force and an increasing HADR mandate", *Observer Research Foundation*, May 12 2020, Accessed On: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indian-air-force-increasing-hadr-mandate-65992/>

⁷⁶ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "New Maldives President: India's Friend or Foe", *Observer Research Foundation*, October 17 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/new-maldives-president-indias-friend-or-foe/>

⁷⁷ Dr. S Jaishankar on X, February 21 2021, Accessed On: <https://twitter.com/DrSJaishankar/status/1363383540151242752>

⁷⁸ Tanya Jain, "India and Maldives Defence Cooperation", *USI of India, CS3, South Asia Monitor*, June 2023, Accessed On <https://www.usiofindia.org/pdf/20230713151613.pdf>

⁷⁹ C. Krishnasai, "Told India to remove troops from Maldives: President-elect Mohammed Muizzu", *Wion*, October 24 2023, Accessed On: <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/told-india-to-remove-military-troops-from-maldives-president-elect-mohamed-muizzu-650390>

While the presence of Indian forces in the Maldives has caused concerns, it is critical to recognise that the Maldives is vital to India. India has contributed significantly through critical humanitarian aid, grants, and defence deals, including critical Humanitarian aid and Disaster Relief initiatives. It is in both nations' best interests to respect their long-shared history and preserve and improve bilateral relations for mutual benefit and regional security.



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