

2025 Might be a Tumultuous Year for South Asia

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The future of Indo-US relations under Trump 2.0 will ultimately play the largest role in determining the degree of tumult that South Asia experiences next year.

South Asia is generally thought of as a comparatively stable region whose primary problems are socio-economic development, which shouldn't be underestimated but isn't the same as the geopolitical turbulence that West Asia and Europe have recently experienced. That might be about to change. From Afghanistan to Myanmar, the latter of which can be included in South Asia due to its former role in the British Raj, the entire region is bracing itself for a tumultuous 2025.

Beginning with Afghanistan, the latest [tit-for-tat attacks](#) between the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan across the Durand Line bode ill for the future of their bilateral relations. Kabul never recognized the British-imposed border between Afghanistan and what later became Pakistan. It's also accused by Islamabad of harboring the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, also known as the "Pakistani Taliban", which is a designated terrorist group. The Afghan Taliban, meanwhile, accused Pakistan of killing civilians in its latest strike.

At the same time, Pakistan's relations with the US are also deteriorating. The Biden Administration [imposed new sanctions](#) on its ballistic missile program, unprecedentedly targeting a state agency, while the State Department just [condemned](#) a military court's conviction of 25 civilians. Returning US President Donald Trump's envoy for special missions **Richard Grenell** is also [advocating](#) for the release of imprisoned former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan. Ties will likely become more complicated.

India's found itself in a similar situation. A former Indian official was [charged](#) in October with organizing the attempted assassination of a Delhi-designated terrorist with dual American citizenship on US soil in summer 2023. Earlier this year, Russia [gave voice](#) to Indian suspicions that the US meddled in its general election, while some Indians [believe](#) that the US' charges against billionaire business **Gautam Adani** are politically motivated. Others [accuse](#) the US of [overthrowing the friendly government in Bangladesh](#) too.

On that topic, ties between these neighbors took a huge hit after **former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina** fled her country during increasingly riotous protests over the summer. The new ruling arrangement in Bangladesh has adopted an ultra-nationalist position towards India, while India [accuses](#) it of turning a blind eye to retributive mob violence against the Hindu minority. Dhaka earlier accused Delhi of [playing a role](#) in August's floods. This rising mutual distrust might soon have regional security consequences.

And finally, Bangladesh would do well to a closer eye on Myanmar than on India, where the

Buddhist nationalist Arakan Army just [seized control](#) of their narrow border and [reportedly reaffirmed](#) its prior accusations that Dhaka backs jihadist Rohingya groups. The speed at which rebels swept across the country since the start of their 1023 offensive in October 2023, which has since led to them [reportedly capturing over half of the country](#), raises concerns that Myanmar might soon follow in Syria's footsteps.

As can be seen, socio-economic developmental problems are no longer South Asia's greatest challenge, with geopolitical issues now coming to the forefront of policymakers' attention instead. Three of them concern worsening inter-state relations between Afghanistan-Pakistan, India-Bangladesh, and Bangladesh-Myanmar, which add to existing tensions between India-Pakistan. If there's any geopolitical silver lining from the past year, it's that India and China are now trying to [patch up their problems](#).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping [met on the sidelines](#) of the latest BRICS Summit in Russia's Kazan in late October. This followed the announcement that their countries had reached a long-awaited deal to mutually de-escalate their border crisis that led to lethal clashes in summer 2020. Provided that their incipient rapprochement remains on track, then it could alleviate their security dilemma, which would reduce military pressure along India's northern border.

On the flip side, however, the returning Trump Administration might disapprove of any meaningful improvement in Sino-Indo relations due to expected prioritization of containing China. This might lead to the US trying to incentivize India into slowing the pace of its rapprochement with China in exchange for relief from some of the pressure that the Biden Administration previously placed upon it. The existing charges would have to run their course, but there might be an informal agreement to not hype them up.

India is the most important country in the region due to its demographic, economic, and military weight, which makes it a rising Great Power in what's been described as the emerging multipolar world order, so its balancing act (known in Indian parlance as "multi-alignment" between other major players can have an outsized role on the region. In particular, this concerns its relations with the US, China, and Russia. Ties with Russia are excellent, they're improving with China, while they remain complicated with the US.

Trump is expected to bargain hard for American trade and investment interests the world over, and he criticized India for its high tariffs [just several months ago](#), so he's unlikely to propose any related concessions for incentivizing India to decelerate its rapprochement with China. What he can do, however, is pressure Bangladesh's new ruling arrangement on the issue of minority Hindu rights and holding truly free and fair elections as soon as possible, which would be deeply appreciated by Delhi.

Worsening US-Pakistani ties over the issue of the latter's ballistic missile program, which **Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer** said could [one day reach American soil](#), and Khan's imprisonment would obviously be smiled upon by India but might not be enough to reach a deal on China. That's why the aforementioned Bangladesh proposal would be a more realistic means to that end, but even if something is agreed to, India is unlikely to turn against China and become a US proxy.

The most that it'll do is slow down the pace at which their ties are improving in the hopes that more American pressure on the People's Republic in the coming future, which would follow Trump's plans to broker a ceasefire, armistice, or peace deal between Russia and

Ukraine, could improve its hand. If India can once again position itself as the US' top regional partner, which it was during the Obama years and Trump's first term, then it'll be much better placed to manage any forthcoming regional turmoil.

Bangladesh and Pakistan don't have anywhere near the importance for the US' geostrategic interests as India does since they can't serve as a partial counterweight to China like it can. Trump, who's known to favor transactional deals, might thus privilege its regional interests so long as he can get something in return to justify this. Bangladesh might therefore be pressured to hold truly free and fair elections as soon as possible while Pakistan might be coerced into releasing Khan and then doing the same.

From India's perspective, it's imperative to ensure that relations with Bangladesh's new ruling arrangement don't worsen, which the US can help it with. India also wants to contain the consequences of any Syrian-like collapse in Myanmar instead of risk having them spill over into its historically unstable Northeast States. The US can't help as much in that regard, but some rebel groups are considered US-friendly and politically backed by the US, so it might be able to exert some positive influence on them.

Another thing that India wants is a relief in American political pressure, including acceptance of the role that India and Russia play in each other's complementary balancing acts vis-à-vis China, which meets US interests despite this not yet being widely acknowledged. The future of Indo-US relations under Trump 2.0 will ultimately play the largest role in determining the degree of tumult that South Asia experiences next year. A noticeable improvement would greatly reduce the scope of regional turmoil next year.

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