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**America-South Asia Program**  
**South Asian Progress Report**  
**Sapna Suresh April 2023**

## About The America-Eurasia Center

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In partnership with The South Asian Program, The America-Eurasia Center is proud to present the *South Asian Progress Report*. This report will cover crucial political, social, economic, cultural, and environmental developments in South Asia from 2022 to early 2023.

## Inside This Report

[India's G20 Presidency](#)

[Nepal's Electoral Politics](#)

[Pakistan Post Imran Khan](#)

[Cultural Spotlight: The Oscar Wins](#)

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Nations of the G20 Flags in India Photo Credit: [Daily Sabah](#)

### India's G20 Presidency

From February 22-25, 2023 the G20 finance and central bank ministerial meeting occurred in Bengaluru, India.<sup>1</sup> Later, on March 2, 2023, the foreign ministers' meeting in New Delhi. As the current G20 president, the Modi government hoped to utilize its position as the voice for the "Global South."<sup>2</sup> In a televised address to the Bengaluru Summit, PM Modi stressed that Trust in international financial institutions has eroded. This is partly because they have been slow to reform themselves."<sup>3</sup>

US Trade Secretary Janet Yellen accused Russia of "weaponizing" food and its detrimental impact on the global economy.<sup>4</sup> No joint communique was issued since Moscow and Beijing strongly objected to calling the war in Ukraine a "war." Instead, India issued a chair summary, reflecting that "most members strongly condemned the war in Ukraine and stressed that it is causing immense human suffering and exacerbating existing fragilities in the global economy...the use of or threat of use of

nuclear weapons is inadmissible. The peaceful resolution of conflicts, efforts to address crises, as well as diplomacy and dialogue are vital. Today's era must not be of war."<sup>5</sup>

A similar replay of events occurred in the New Delhi foreign ministers meeting. The foreign minister's meeting was the first time Russian FM Lavrov and Secretary Blinken met face-to-face since the war, and according to reports, both met for about 10 minutes. There was no joint communique, and India issued a "chair statement." External Affairs minister Jaishankar admitted, "On the issue, which very frankly concerned the Ukraine conflict, there were divergences, there were differences, which we couldn't reconcile between various parties ... we tried, but the gap between the countries was too much."<sup>6</sup>

Notably, Jaishankar revealed that aside from Ukraine, there was consensus on other issues, such as climate change, food security, and counterterrorism.<sup>7</sup> During the

meeting, Moscow and Beijing pushed back against Western accusations of violating international law. China's foreign ministry spokesperson remarked, "while emphasizing the need to respect and maintain the international order, the US has vigorously pursued illegal unilateral sanctions, putting domestic law above international law." Similarly, FM Lavrov commented that the West is promoting an "anti-Russian agenda" and has insisted that it would use the G20 to prevent the "West to take revenge for the inevitable disappearance of the levers of dominance from its hands."<sup>8</sup>

Since its independence, India has had a non-aligned foreign policy to avoid being involved in conflicts. A key element of New Delhi's non-alignment foreign policy is its relationship with Moscow, regardless of the Congress Party or BJP in power. Russia continues to be India's largest source of arms, with France coming at second.<sup>9</sup> India continues to have good relations with the Russians to safeguard its regional security interests, namely preventing Moscow to be even more close to China.

However, Moscow's increasing ties with China and the reliability of Russian arms are growing worries to India. As per the latest reporting, the Indian Air Force released an official confirmation revealing that Russia could not meet its order commitments due to the war in Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, at the end of the day, "India is one of the only countries amid the war in Ukraine that is able to pick up the phone and talk to leadership in both the United States and Russia on the same day."<sup>11</sup>

"As the G20 proceedings have shown thus far, India is now the voice and conscience

of the entire developing world." Given its close relations with Moscow and tensions with the West, China would not be perceived as a fair mediator. Türkiye, which did help mediate talks earlier in the conflict and has close economic ties with Russia, is still a NATO member.<sup>12</sup>

While Russia will ignore criticism by Brussels or Warsaw, it takes the opinion of New Delhi seriously. President Putin's latest foreign policy document calls for strengthening relations with India to achieve a "multipolar world." Crucially, there is a high chance that Putin will attend the upcoming SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Council) and G20 summits.<sup>13</sup> Maintaining good relations with India is crucial for Moscow, as it seeks diverse foreign partners (such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Brazil) to help alleviate the sanctions and not rely only on Beijing.

The US should welcome any role by India or others, such as Brazil, to reduce tensions between Moscow and Kyiv. However, it may be perceived by some, that Washington's efforts to persuade other countries to stop purchasing Russian oil and framing the war as a fight between "democracy and autocracy," may further alienate the Global South from the West, as the Global South is dependent on Russian energy.

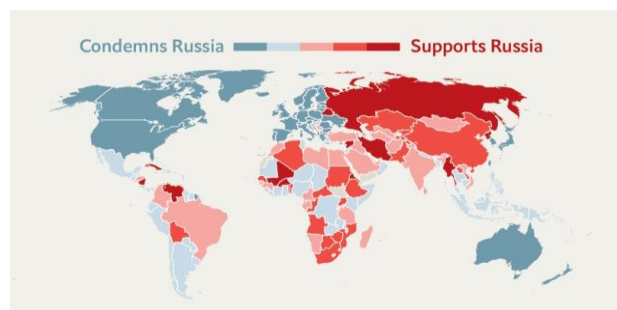


Photo Credit, [The Economist](#)



Newly elected President Ram Chandra Paudel Photo Credit, [Al Jazeera](#)

### **Nepal's Electoral Politics**

In November 2022, Nepalese participated in their parliamentary elections. In Nepal, the House of Representatives (lower house), 165 are elected with a first past the post method (plurality voting), while 110 are elected through a proportional representation system. The members of The National Assembly (upper house) are elected by the electoral college.<sup>14</sup> The Nepali Congress Party won most of the votes while the main opposition party, the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist-Leninist, came second. However, to form a government, both parties need to form coalitions. In this election, voter turnout was reported to be 60%, with many attributing it to a general dissatisfaction with the political establishment.<sup>15</sup>

On March 9, Ram Chandra Paudel was elected president, receiving 33,802 votes, while his opponent received 15,518 votes. Paudel was previously imprisoned due to his participation in opposing the monarchy.<sup>16</sup> Later, on March 13, 2023, Paudel was officially inaugurated to be Nepal's third president.<sup>17</sup> In Nepal's political system, the

President has a largely symbolic role; however, his election triggered a split between Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal (elected in December 2022), who backed Poudel.

This decision brought opposition from Dahal's main supporter, the Communist Party of Nepal, pulling out of Dahal's coalition government.<sup>18</sup> When an ally withdraws support, the prime minister must face a vote of confidence. On March 20, Dahal won the vote of confidence by parliament after securing an alliance with the Nepalese Congress Party.

An issue that arose was Dahal's role in the civil war.<sup>19</sup> Nepal's civil war started in 1995, after the government dismantled the Maoist Party. In July 2001, due to the rising violence, Prime Minister GP Koirala quit, and in November of that year, the Maoists ended the four-month truce with the government. Shortly after, King Gyanendra declared a state of emergency, creating a decades-long stalemate between the government and Maoists. In November 2006, the Maoists signed a peace deal with

the government, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, officially ending the conflict. In December 2007, the parliament officially abolished the monarchy as part of a peace deal with the Maoists. In September 2015, the parliament passed the current constitution, officially declaring Nepal a secular state.<sup>20</sup>

Since then, Nepal has struggled to create a functioning federal system. Governments rarely lasted their term, and many appointees undermined the electorate's wishes. In 2021, only 32% of Nepalese expressed satisfaction with provincial governments.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, there continues to be a lack of representation from women, considering that only 225 out of 4,661 candidates for the parliament were women.

As per the constitution, there needs to be 1/3 female representation which was intended to increase representation from women and indigenous communities. Many members of parliament nominate women merely to check the box instead of nominating experienced women. "While the parties are fulfilling the constitutional obligations by meeting the quota, there seems to be little long-term investment in developing women leaders."<sup>22</sup> Aside from electoral issues, Kathmandu's tourism industry has suffered an immense blow, due to the pandemic, which contributes to a huge portion of the economy.<sup>23</sup>

Nepal's relations with India and China have been a primary element of its foreign policy. Nepal has an open border relationship with India, allowing visa free exchanges from both sides. In addition, Nepal imports most of its food from India.<sup>24</sup> However, in recent years, relations with India have been problematic. India imposed an unofficial blockade after the 2015 earthquake, leading Nepal to seek Chinese assistance. Later,

nationalistic sentiments in Kathmandu and New Delhi resulted in both countries redrawing demarcations established in the 1816 Sugali Treaty.<sup>25</sup> The pandemic drastically increased Beijing's, especially how the CPN-MC (Communist Party, Maoist Centre) and CPN-UML (Communist Party of Nepal, United Marxist-Leninist) which formed a coalition, which China has been seeking for a while.<sup>26</sup>

In February, Victoria Nuland, the US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, visited Nepal. During her visit, Nuland praised Nepal's democratic transformation and said, "we see autocrats trying to change the global rules of the road by force ... that is not the Nepali way, and that is not the American way."

Kathmandu does not share the "liberal vs. illiberalism" view of the world. "Like other nonaligned states...Nepal seeks a strategic space to pursue relations with China, India, and the United States on its own terms."<sup>27</sup> The so-called vector diplomacy, allows smaller states a strategy to leverage relations with larger powers and get the maximum benefits for their country. The US should keep this in mind when seeking to improve relations with countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh.



Victoria Nuland in Nepal Photo Credit, [Foreign Policy](#)



Imran Khan at a rally in Pakistan Photo Credit, [TRT World](#).

### Pakistan Post Imran Khan

On April 10, 2022, Imran Khan was removed from office by a vote of no-confidence, with Shehbaz Sharif (the younger brother of Nawaz Sharif) succeeding him. Imran Khan is the first Pakistani prime minister to be removed by a no-confidence vote, with the opposition securing 174 votes in a 342 house. In 2018, Imran Khan was elected with much enthusiasm by the electorate, especially his campaign slogans of fighting corruption and creating a “new Pakistan.”<sup>28</sup> “Khan’s outsider status and populist appeal as a former cricket star put him in clear contrast to the dynastic political families that have rotated through government.” (Such as the Bhutto family).<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, as with past prime ministers, the military is the actor that has the real power in Pakistan. Many argue that Khan was removed due to growing divergence from the military, which ironically helped him get elected.<sup>30</sup> However, Khan’s tenure had many failures. Anwaar ul Haq Kakar, a member of the Balochistan Awami Party, withdrew support for Khan in March 2022, arguing that “as far as governance was

concerned, the government had totally failed.” Similarly, Nadeem Afzal Chan, an assistant to Imran Khan, resigned and rejoined the opposition party, PPP (Pakistan People’s Party). Chan admitted, “I was impressed by Khan’s anti-corruption platform and was tired of the status quo but then I saw that while Khan publicly talked about the poor, privately he surrounded himself with wealthy investors.”<sup>31</sup> Due to Khan’s poor economic policies and the pandemic, the Pakistani economy has worsened.<sup>32</sup>

Imran Khan blamed his removal on a “foreign conspiracy,” claiming - with no evidence - that he received a letter from a US interlocuter, which said that if he remained in power, Washington’s relations with Islamabad will face consequences.<sup>33</sup> The Russian foreign ministry claimed that Imran Khan’s removal was “his punishment,” since Khan visited Moscow on February 24<sup>th</sup>, immediately after Moscow invaded Ukraine.<sup>34</sup> After a failed assassination attempt in November 2022, Khan argued that PM Sharif, a senior military officer, and the interior minister planned this attack.<sup>35</sup> Khan was in his

seventh national tour, in which he called for elections to be held before August when this attack occurred.<sup>36</sup> Eventually, an unidentified man confessed to be the perpetrator.



Inflation in Pakistan Photo Credit, [Bloomberg](#)

Since becoming prime minister, Sharif has inherited domestic and foreign policy crises. The total public debt is reported to be \$270 USD, roughly equivalent to 78% of the GDP. The Pakistani newspaper, *Dawn*, reported that the average inflation rate for a basket of goods (eggs, rice, fuel, etc.) is about 40% and foreign reserves are estimated to be \$3 billion USD. Pakistan's policy of relying on the Saudis, Chinese, and Emiratis to help bailout its economy is unsustainable. "The biggest allies are all saying you have to help yourself. China, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, are enlisted to help. They get Saudi money to pay off China, then get UAE money to pay off the Saudis."<sup>37</sup>

The return of an establishment figure in Islamabad has made countries such as Saudi Arabia, China, and Türkiye more comfortable, viewing Imran Khan's style of diplomacy with unease.<sup>38</sup> A crucial challenge Pakistan will have to deal with is

in Afghanistan. Since the American withdrawal, the TTP (Pakistani Taliban) has gained influence since the Afghan Taliban took power in 2021. Despite requests to the Afghan Taliban, they have not reduced their relations with the TTP, illustrative of Pakistan's failed "strategic depth" policy in Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup> Despite problems between Washington and Islamabad, America will continue to ensure that Pakistan does not become more dependent on Beijing. Considering the volatile security situation in Afghanistan, Pakistan is the only country the US can use to access Afghanistan since Kabul's other neighbors – Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and China – are not possible.

Regardless of who is prime minister, the government has put little resources in economic development and cultivating human capital.<sup>40</sup> Part of this is the legacy of the 1947 partition, in which Pakistan started off with a weak institutional structure but inherited a strong military.<sup>41</sup> Since then, the military prioritized "rivalry with India and taking significant chunks of the country's narrow resource base."<sup>42</sup> The military has used the "security threat" from India to justify its monopoly of power within Pakistan at the expense of being capable of managing other pressing challenges, such as climate change, as demonstrated by the recent floods.

Given the current situation, the US should welcome progress in grassroots-led efforts to strengthen Pakistan's civilian government. The status quo policy of giving black cheques and seeing Islamabad as Kabul's interlocutor has only served to maintain the military's dominance and increase the popularity of individuals such as Imran Khan.





From left to right: Lyricist Chandrabose, music director M. M Keeravani of “Naatu Naatu.” Filmmaker Kartiki Gonsalves and producer Guneet Monga of *The Elephant Whisperers*. Photo Credit, [The Indian Express](#)

### Cultural Spotlight: The Oscar Wins

The 95<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards on March 12, 2023, at the Dolby Theatre produced much media frenzy for Indians and the Indian diaspora worldwide. The song “Naatu Naatu” won the Academy Award for the best original song, and *The Elephant Whisperers* was awarded for the best short documentary. Prior to “Naatu Naatu,” the song “Jai Ho” from the film *Slumdog Millionaire* was the first Indian song to receive the award for the best original song.<sup>43</sup>

“Naatu Naatu” is a song from the Telugu film, *RRR*, which is about real-life Indian freedom fighters, Komaram Bheem and Alluri Sitarama Raju fighting against British colonial rule. However, unlike the film’s portrayal, these two never met. The song was filmed in front of the Mariinsky Palace (before Russia’s invasion), which is the official residence of the Ukrainian president.<sup>44</sup>

When asked about the recent win, music composer M.M Keeravani, of the song “Naatu Naatu” said, “it’s just the beginning of everything. For the world, particularly the western world, folks are more on India and Asian music. It’s just long due. I feel very happy to open doors and the world to embrace my culture.”<sup>45</sup>

*The Elephant Whisperers* is a Tamil language documentary about Bomman and Bellie, members of Kattunayakan community, who bond with an orphaned elephant, named Raghu. In the award acceptance speech, director Kartiki Gonsalves said, “I stand here today to speak of the sacred bond between us and our natural world, for the respect of indigenous communities and empathy towards other living beings we share space with, and finally, coexistence.”<sup>46</sup>

Western cinema continues to portray India in an Orientalized manner. “Members of the Academy and the Hollywood community are not the most ‘cosmopolitan’ in their view of world cinema.”<sup>47</sup> There is an image that Indian movies are limited to song and dance sequences.<sup>48</sup> While that perception may have been true to describe the films during the 1990s and early 2000s, more and more films are deviating from the song and dance sequences.<sup>49</sup> In addition, there is a misinformed perception by international audiences that “Bollywood” represents all Indian cinema when it only represents the Hindi-language film industry. Many within the film industry view the term “Bollywood” to be derogatory.<sup>50</sup>

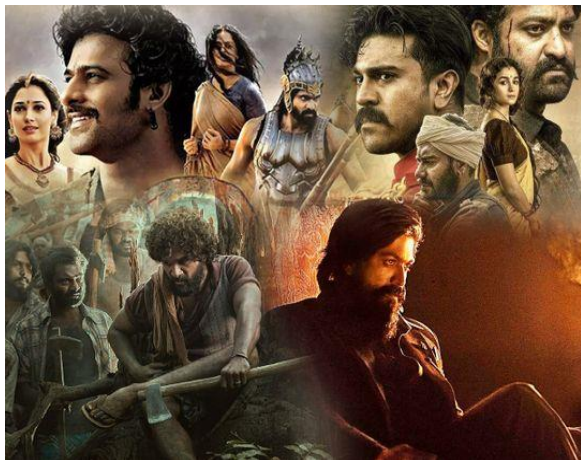


Photo Credit, [Gulf News](#)

What is remarkable about the recent wins is that neither were from the Hindi-film industry. The recent wins illustrate the growing trend of the rise in “pan-Indian” films in which many movies are dubbed stimulatingly in India’s languages (Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, etc.), such as the Telugu film *Baahubali* (parts 1 and 2), Kannada film *KGF* (parts 1 and 2), and Tamil film *Ponniyin Selvan: I*.<sup>51</sup> Many of these films portray eras in India’s history, such as the Chola era or freedom fighters opposing Western colonialism. “For a South

Indian audience who rarely sees itself represented in the films coming out of Mumbai, such movies can increase interest for more representation.”<sup>52</sup>

Additionally, many Western films about World War I and II ignore colonial atrocities. *The Darkest Hour*, whitewashes Winston Churchill and ignores his involvement in the 1943 Bengal Famine, which killed about a million people.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, *Dunkirk* ignored the many contributions by soldiers in the British Raj during World War II. Columnist Mihir Sharma views the film as adding “to the falsehood that plucky Britons stood alone against Nazi Germany once France fell, when, in fact, hundreds of millions of imperial subjects stood, perforce, with them.”<sup>54</sup>

The wins at the Oscars illustrate increasing opposition to Western colonial narratives. “The anti-colonialist tale of two freedom fighters railing against the British Raj perfectly lined up with conversations about racism, imperialism and the establishment that have burgeoned in the Western world over the last few years.”<sup>55</sup> When asked about the complicated relationship between New Delhi and London, during the Raisina Dialogue (an annual conference hosted by the Observer Research Foundation), India’s external affairs minister, Jaishankar, made a reference to *RRR* by saying “if I put it delicately, you weren’t the nice guys in the movie.”<sup>56</sup>

Sangita Gopal, a professor at the University of Oregon who studies South Asian cinema, acutely observed that “*RRR* brings together so many currents of global cinema. It represents a compilation of both national film history and global trends.”<sup>57</sup>

## Further Reading

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