

# International Relations This Week: Episode 97

International relations is a very important segment of the [UPSC syllabus](#). In this series, we present an analysis of the most important international issues and developments that occurred over the past week relevant for the IAS exam. In this article, you can learn more about China's Indian Ocean Region Forum, Sri Lanka's IMF Loan, India – Taliban Relations, Elections in Nepal and Iran Disbanding Morality Police.

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## 1. China's Indian Ocean Region Forum

**Context:** First China-Indian Ocean Region Forum was convened in Kunming, China recently.

### Introduction:

- The China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) hosted “the first high-level official development cooperation forum.”
  - The forum focuses on China's increased diplomacy in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).
- According to China, the forum was attended by “high-level representatives” and “senior officials” from 19 countries: Indonesia, Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, Afghanistan, Iran, Oman, South Africa, Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania, Seychelles, Madagascar, Mauritius, Djibouti, and Australia.
- Both the Maldives and Australia have denied their official presence in the forum contrary to claims by China.

- India was not invited to the forum and was the lone absentee in the new strategic initiative of China.

### **Joint Statement:**

- The forum issued a “Joint Press Statement” that noted China “proposed to establish a marine disaster prevention and mitigation cooperation mechanism between China and countries in the Indian Ocean region” and “all parties agreed” to “strengthen policy coordination, deepen development cooperation, increase resilience to shocks and disasters, and enhance relevant countries’ capacity to obtain economic benefits through the use of marine resources such as fisheries, renewable energy, tourism, and shipping in a sustainable way.”

### **India's Presence in Indian Ocean Region:**

- The Indian Ocean Region broadly represents areas consisting of littoral states of the Indian Ocean which comprises a number of sub-regions, such as Australia, South East Asia, South Asia, Horn of Africa and Southern and Eastern Africa.
- It is marked by a vast cultural, social, political and economic diversity.
- India acts as a first responder during major crises in the littoral countries and regularly engages with the Indian Ocean littoral countries through various forums and mechanisms such as the [Indian Ocean Rim Association \(IORA\)](#) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) under the vision of [Security and Growth for All in the Region \(SAGAR\)](#).
- India has a strong influence in the Indian Ocean region where India-backed organisations like the IORA have taken strong roots.
- India occupies a central and strategic location in the Indian Ocean area. Its national and economic interests are inseparably linked with the Indian Ocean.
  - Hence, keeping the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace free from superpower rivalry and increasing cooperation among littoral countries in the region has always been India’s foreign policy goal, for example, [Look East policy](#), Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation, BIMSTEC and Ganga-Mekong Cooperation, etc.

### **China’s plan for Indian Ocean Region:**

- The forum has highlighted Beijing’s growing interest in IOR which is crucial for sea routes, trade, and China’s economic interest.
- The stepped-up regional diplomacy comes at a time when China is enhancing its military presence in the waters of the IOR.
  - China’s first overseas military facility was established in Djibouti (near the Horn of Africa).

- China's tracking vessels, military ships, and submarines are visiting ports in the IOR with much greater frequency.
- It was also reported in the past that the PLA Navy would deploy six aircraft carriers to secure China's maritime interests and that two of them will be based in the IOR.

## 2. Sri Lanka's IMF Loan

**Context:** The Sri Lankan economy has been facing a grave crisis owing to a serious Balance of Payments (BoP) problem.

### Introduction:

- Sri Lanka was hoping to get IMF Board approval for a \$2.9 billion package by December 2022 to overcome its debt crisis.
- Sri Lanka has been working hard to obtain financing assurances from its diverse creditors.
  - It is a pre-requisite for the provisional \$2.9 billion-IMF package.
- Sri Lanka's [forex reserves](#) have reached bottom-low and it is facing mounting challenges in the form of unsustainable public debts, and low international reserves and is in need of large financing.
- The economy is expected to contract by 8.7 percent in 2022 and inflation recently exceeded 60 percent. The impact has been disproportionately borne by the poor and vulnerable.
- Sri Lanka reached a [staff-level agreement](#) with the International Monetary Fund in September 2022.

### China's role in Sri Lanka's debt restructuring:

- The loans obtained from China, Sri Lanka's largest bilateral lender, have come under sharp focus.
- While private lenders, mainly holders of International Sovereign Bonds, account for the largest chunk of Sri Lanka's external debt, China, India, and Japan are the top three bilateral creditors, and play a crucial part in the ongoing negotiations.
- China will have to play "a major role" in Sri Lanka's debt restructuring process, with US\$ 7.4 billion or 19.6 % of Sri Lanka's outstanding public debt owed to China at the end of 2021.
- It will be the first time a major Asian Belt and Road Initiative borrower is going through the process.
- China's approach to Sri Lanka's debt restructuring and the extent of debt relief offered will set a precedent for China's role and behaviour in other countries as well.

### 3. India – Taliban Relations

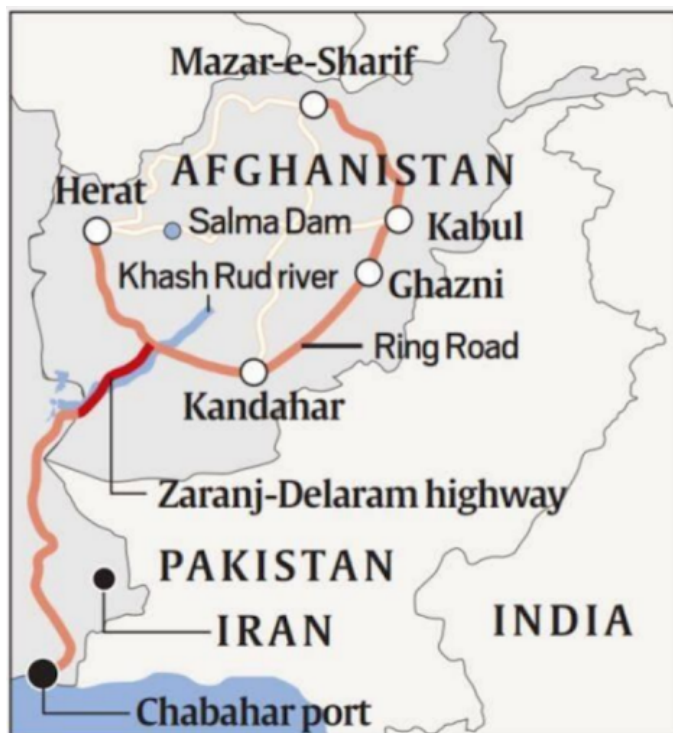
**Context:** The Taliban seek Indian investment and resumption of projects.

#### **India's Relations with the Taliban:**

- India has never recognised the [Taliban](#) while they were in power.
- In 1999, when an Indian Airlines flight was hijacked and landed in Kandahar, it was suspected that the Taliban supported the hijackers. India also supported a key anti-Taliban group, the Northern Alliance.
- Following the backdrop of the peace talks between the United States and the Taliban in 2019, the Taliban has sought positive relations with India.
- To this effect, the Taliban have reiterated that Kashmir is an internal matter for India and will not seek to interfere in the matters of other nations.
- Recently, the Taliban sought Indian investment and revival of India-supported infrastructure projects in the country during a meeting.
- The relationship between the Taliban administration and India has remained undefined as India has not recognised the current administration in Kabul, though an Indian Technical Team was sent back to reopen the Embassy of India.
- The latest development came against the backdrop of regional consultations and has rekindled hope of a greater Indian presence in Afghanistan.

#### **India's Investments in Afghanistan:**

- Since 2001, India's development partnership with Afghanistan has gained importance because India is today the fifth-largest provider of development assistance to Afghanistan with its total commitment.
- Around 433 High Impact Community Development Projects have been completed with Indian financial support in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan.
- During FY 2019-20, 37 projects were completed in various provinces of Afghanistan under the High Impact Community Development Project (HICDP) scheme of the Indian government.
- After the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the implementation of the projects was impacted. Several Indian companies were involved in building and maintaining health and electricity infrastructure projects in Afghanistan and these teams were evacuated in August 2021.
- In June 2022, India announced that it will deploy its technical team with a focus on the delivery of humanitarian assistance.



#### 4. Elections in Nepal

**Context:** Nepal parliamentary elections were held recently.

##### Introduction:

- Nepal parliamentary elections were held on November 20th.
- This was only the second since the country adopted its republican constitution in 2015.
- The Nepali Congress-led ruling alliance is poised to retain office in Kathmandu – led by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) of Pushpa Kamal Dahal ‘Prachanda’ is in the lead.

##### Significance to India:

- From India’s perspective, the continuance of a Deuba-led government is the best scenario.
- The Nepali Congress has old ties to India, and under his prime ministership, India-Nepal ties recovered to a great extent from the low to which they had sunk under Prime Minister K P Oli’s watch.
- Deuba made his first visit to India in April 2022 which helped to kick start a relationship that had been in the doldrums since the map [controversy over Lipulekh](#) in 2020.
  - The Indian establishment views the former prime minister as “pro-China”.

- Internal security is also a significant issue for India. The border between India and Nepal is almost open and only lightly policed, which terrorist and insurgent groups from the North Eastern part of India use to their advantage by, for example, sending trained cadres and fake Indian currency.
- India needs a stable and secure Nepal, given its immense strategic significance. Misuse of an open border by internal and external forces affects both countries, and both are responsible for border management and regulation.
- The electoral outcome also becomes increasingly important as Nepal, which is strategically located between India and China, is becoming a region for increasing Great Powers contestation.
- The United States, too, is seeking to have greater influence in Nepal to counter its bitter rival China's growing footprints in the region.

## 5. Iran Disbands Morality Police

**Context:** Iran withdrew the morality police recently.

### **Introduction:**

- Iran had erupted into protests in October 2022 against the brutality of the regime in enforcing the hijab law via what is known as the "morality police," or the Gasht-e Ershad (Guidance Patrol).
- The uprising had been ignited by the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in the custody of the morality police.
- Mahsa Amini was allegedly beaten by the morality police who had detained her for "incorrectly" wearing the mandatory hijab.

### **Morality Police:**

- Iran's morality police were established under hardliner President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and they began patrols in 2006.
- The Gasht-e Ershad are part of the police force and supervised by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, but the elected government has a say in their activities through the Interior Ministry.
- Both men and women officials are part of the morality police.
- Enforcement of hijab along with the implementation of other rules on public appearance and conduct, according to the Iranian authorities' interpretation of the Sharia, is the responsibility of the police.
  - For instance, in 2010, the Iran government issued a template for suitable haircuts for men in order to halt Western influence on culture, and the morality police were tasked with enforcement at salons.

### **History of Hijab in Iran:**

- Iran has a long history of policing the hijab. During the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1936, the hijab was actually banned in an effort to “modernise” the country.
- When conservative forces aligned with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini deposed Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, son of Reza Shah, the ban on the hijab was reversed.
- Wearing the hijab was made mandatory and a force was constituted to enforce the rules on morality and the public appearance of women in the 1990s to centralise its power and underline an Iranian national identity.
- Iran’s authorities have refused to concede any of the demands in the ongoing protests over hijab and have instead cracked down heavily on the protester.