

# *INSIGHT* SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR  
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Significant diplomatic and defence engagement took place in the region and beyond with summit meetings making headlines globally. The Biden-Xi meeting at the APEC was tracked closely by the region and the attempted thaw was welcomed by all. Australia's attempts to stabilise relations with China with a leaders meeting, even as India held its 2+2 dialogues with US and Australia, spoke to the management of the China Challenge in the Indo Pacific. The Pacific Forum Islands meeting saw the management of geopolitical tensions and issues like climate change at the forefront. Japan's extended its Overseas Security Assistance to Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam even as the ADMM plus meetings discussed ways to address regional tensions. While elections have given NZ a new government, the precarious security situation in Myanmar complicating borders tensions with China as it battles sanctions and refugee crises is worrying the region.

### **XI-Biden meet at APEC, region watches attempted US-China reset closely**

The US hosted the 2023 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in San Francisco after a gap of 12 years. The key takeaway from the summit was the restoration of communication between Beijing and Washington DC after nearly a year. Both sides had kept expectations low indicating that the main goal was to prevent the relationship from deteriorating further. In their first face-to-face talks for a year, President Biden and President Xi agreed to establish a working group on fentanyl, resume military-to-military communications and cooperate on addressing the risks of artificial intelligence. While the meeting demonstrated the culmination of months of efforts from both sides to normalize

dialogue it was clear that neither side made statements or commitments that diverged far from the status quo. However US experts have argued that forging of an affirmative bilateral agenda for more durable stability into the relationship is a goal both sides haven't achieved given the many areas of disagreement between the two sides- especially Taiwan's status, which will remain a dangerous potential flashpoint. There is a clear interest among APEC members, including U.S. allies and partners in the Indo Pacific, to see the United States and China stabilize ties, but its clear neither side could appear to be conciliatory.

### **Albanese-Xi meeting attempts to stabilise Australia-China ties**

Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese met Chinese Premier Li Qiang in Beijing restarting an annual leaders' dialogue that Albanese said would continue as relations between the trading partners stabilised. This meeting was the first by an Australian Premier in seven years, after a diplomatic dispute had stalled the once-annual meetings of leaders. In a clear signal that China was ready to move on came from President Xi when he observed that stable ties between China and Australia served each other's interests and both should expand cooperation. China has lifted trade blocks on most Australian exports imposed in 2020 in the wake of Australia's call for an international investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic. Albanese said he had used the four-day visit to advocate for Australia's interests in trade, human rights, regional and global issues. Notably ahead of the meeting Xi had warned against "bloc politics", emphasising China was "ready to carry out more trilateral and multilateral cooperation with Australia to support South Pacific countries in enhancing development

resilience, addressing climate change and other challenges”. The statement came ahead of Albanese’s visit from China to the Cooks Islands for the the Pacific Islands Forum, where the United States and its allies have stepped up competition with China for influence.

### **India holds 2+2 Dialogue with US and Australia**

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar met with with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin during the 5th India-US 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in the backdrop of the Israel-Hamas crises. In a noteworthy statement, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said that India and the US are increasingly in agreement on key issues, such as countering China’s aggression. Even the US defence secretary, told the press that both sides talked about the rising security challenges that are posed by China and shared assessments. The India-US Defence Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X), launched in June 2023, had its first Investors Strategy Session before the 2+2 Dialogue. This initiative is aimed at mobilising capital for funding innovation in cutting-edge technology. Within the ambit of defence cooperation, working together on initiatives for the Indo Pacific, especially in south east asia and the Pacific were also discussed.

New Delhi also hosted the second India-Australia 2+2 Defence and Foreign Ministerial Dialogue, featuring Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh, External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar, Australia's Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Mr. Richard Marles, and Foreign Minister Ms. Penny Wong. Discussions spanned strategic, defence, and security issues, emphasizing bilateral, regional, and

global cooperation under the India-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Indian participation in the ongoing AUSTRALIND-23 exercise in Perth was also in focus. The joint exercise focused on enhancing collaboration, sharing best practices, and improving interoperability for multi-domain operations in urban settings. The 14th Foreign Ministerial Framework Dialogue (FMFD) on November 21 further reviewed cooperation under the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, addressing regional and global issues of mutual interest.

### **ADMM and ADMM Plus Meeting: Key Developments**

The 17th ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM) took place in Jakarta, Indonesia, on November 15, 2023, under the theme “Peace, Prosperity, and Security.” The Joint Declaration of The ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting for Peace, Prosperity, and Security was issued, acknowledging diverse security threats, including the impact of COVID-19, climate change, and geopolitical shifts. The ministers reiterated the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) as a guiding framework. The declaration endorsed Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership, supported the Five-Point Consensus in Myanmar, and addressed concerns in the South China Sea. Commending the ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise, approving strategic papers, and adopting the ADMM Work Programme 2023-2026, the ministers aimed to enhance defence cooperation, foster resilience post-COVID-19, and promote regional peace, stability, and maritime security. The declaration also welcomed the Lao PDR as the upcoming ASEAN Chair in 2024. Subsequently, on November 16, the 10th ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) convened in Jakarta, Indonesia. During the

meeting, the ministers adopted the Joint Statement on Women, Peace, and Security, affirming their commitment to advancing women's meaningful participation and leadership in peace processes. Recognizing the ongoing initiatives, the ministers underscored the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace, and Security (RPA on WPS) (2022), emphasizing women's full engagement in peacekeeping, equal opportunities in the defence sector, and utilization of UN training modules. The commitment also focused on strengthening regional frameworks for WPS implementation and advancing the WPS Agenda in future work plans of ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Groups.

### **Philippines' exercises with US, Australia in SCS, pushes for regional Code of Conduct**

ANNUALEX, a 10-day exercise led by Japan designed to improve interoperability between partner navies, began on 10 November. Australia, Canada, Japan and the US took part in the exercise. For the first time the Philippines, also participated as an observer. Other than that, the Philippines and United States also conducted joint sea and air patrols off the Island of Batanes, the country's northernmost province close to Taiwan that China claims as its own. The patrols entailed the deployment of three navy ships and three fighter jets from the Philippine military, complemented by one littoral combat ship and one aircraft from the American side. On November 25, Manila started joint patrols with Australia involving two navy vessels and five surveillance aircraft from the Philippines and Australia's HMAS Toowoomba warship and a P-8A maritime surveillance aircraft. The activity in the contested waters continued until November 27. Along with this, the Philippines also approached neighbours such as Malaysia and Vietnam

to discuss a separate code of conduct for the South China Sea, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. had stated while citing limited progress toward striking a broader regional pact with China.

### **Japan's Implements Official Security Assistance program (OSA) in Southeast Asia**

During his three-day trip to Southeast Asia, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida aimed to enhance security ties with Malaysia and the Philippines, signalling Japan's efforts to expand its network of security partners amid concerns over China's military power. The visits focused on implementing Tokyo's new Official Security Assistance program (OSA) through grants for equipment, supplies, and infrastructure development in the Asia-Pacific region. Kishida, in Kuala Lumpur, discussed accelerating coordination with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and emphasized maritime cooperation. In the Philippines, talks with President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. included a reciprocal access agreement (RAA) for bilateral security cooperation, marking Japan's first RAA with an ASEAN member. The agreements strengthen Japan's regional security role amid rising tensions and concerns over China's assertiveness. Other than that, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong have agreed to enhance maritime security cooperation in response to China's increasing military assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region. Both leaders also expressed commitment to expanding collaboration on economic and cultural fronts. Kishida and Thuong discussed Japan's official security assistance program (OSA), allocating ¥2 billion (\$13 million) to offer defence equipment, with discussions about its application to Vietnam.

## **Pacific Island Forum Leaders Meeting 2023**

From November 6 to 10, 2023, the 52nd Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting (PIFLM) convened in the Cook Islands, featuring leaders and representatives from 18 Pacific countries and territories. With the theme “Our Voices, Our Choices, Our Pacific Way: Promote, Partner, Prosper,” the meeting emphasised regional decision-making and Pacific-led strategies. A highlight was the adoption of the implementation plan for the PIF 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific, showcasing a consensus among PIF leaders on prioritizing regional initiatives. Climate change took centre stage, leading to the approval of the Pacific Resilience Facility for financing resilience projects. Addressing security, the PIFLM acknowledged the AUKUS trilateral security pact and commended Australia’s transparency. Discussions also focused on safeguarding Pacific interests amid rising sea levels, resulting in endorsements of declarations emphasizing the continuity of statehood, cultural heritage preservation, and protection of maritime rights in the face of climate change-related challenges.

## **New Government Formed in New Zealand**

New Zealand's National Party, led by Christopher Luxon, has successfully negotiated a coalition deal with the conservative ACT and populist New Zealand First parties to form a government. Luxon, set to be the new prime minister, secured 48 seats in the 123-seat parliament in the recent general election. The coalition promises tax cuts, increased police presence, reduced government

bureaucracy, and a focus on rebuilding the economy. The deal includes policy compromises, with Luxon expressing gratitude for the public's patience during the six-week negotiation period. Winston Peters of New Zealand First will serve as deputy prime minister for the first 18 months, succeeded by David Seymour of ACT for the remaining term.

## **Security Situation in Myanmar Worsens: tensions with China and refugee crises**

Intense conflict in Myanmar between the Armed Forces and armed groups has resulted in widespread casualties and displacement including 2 million people. Myanmar has become a concern for China due to recent conflicts along the border. An attack on a China-Myanmar goods convoy and live-fire drills by the Chinese PLA along the border signal rising tensions. The Brotherhood Alliance's Operation 1027 and capture of key outposts increase the risk of civil war in Myanmar, complicating relations with China. As Chinese naval ships visit Myanmar, PLA drills emphasize border stability. China's stance may shift, with potential crackdown on refugees, as it faces internal disturbances. Nationalist protests in Myanmar, rocket attacks, and arson along the border contribute to the volatile situation, heightening China's concerns. US has also sanctioned key state-owned oil companies of Myanmar in an effort to cut their financial resources. India too witnessed the infiltration of Myanmar soldiers, looking to escape their country to Mizoram – who were eventually deported. Indonesia which saw the arrival of Rohingya refugees via sea, also sent back the refugees to Myanmar.