

INSIGHT SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES

मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

- ⇒ PM Modi attends 20th ASEAN-INDIA summit announces more initiatives
- ⇒ ASEAN summit debates Myanmar, South China Sea issues, as Ukraine War and Sino-US tensions loom
- ⇒ US Pacific Island Leaders Summit Meeting held in Washington
- ⇒ New Vanuatu PM Likely to Revisit Security Pact with Australia
- ⇒ A Five Day ASEAN Solidarity Exercise Held at Indonesia
- ⇒ US and Vietnam ink historic partnership in Biden visit
- ⇒ Philippines Government Considering Filing Environmental Cases Against China
- ⇒ Myanmar sees 324% Increase in Air Strikes, reports allege Junta is Losing Control of South-Eastern Myanmar

PM Modi before hosting global leaders for the G20 summit in India, attended the 20th India-ASEAN Summit and East Asia Summit announcing a slew of new initiatives. Indonesia hosted the summit amidst the deadlock on the ongoing crisis in Myanmar and rising tensions in the South China Sea even as the shadow of US – China tensions and the Ukraine War dominated discussions. ASEAN also held a Solidarity Exercise, the first multinational defence drill amongst the ASEAN countries which included representatives from all the ten member states including Myanmar. Meanwhile regional tensions continued to see countries find ways to balance Chinese assertiveness - Manila called out Beijing on environmental damages while Vietnam inked a historic pact with United States to elevate bilateral military and economic ties. Geopolitics in the Pacific Islands also was in the spotlight with US hosting a leaders summit to double down on engagement while political turbulence in Vanuatu led to a set back for the US-Australia alliance.

PM Modi attends 20th ASEAN-INDIA summit announces more initiatives

Indonesia hosted the 43rd ASEAN Summit in Jakarta City, which included the 20th ASEAN-India Summit and the 18th East Asia Summit. The summit was co-chaired by Indonesian President Joko Widodo and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It centered on the theme “ASEAN Matters: Epicenter of Growth” and aimed to strengthen the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership while

charting its future course. The dialogue took stock of multiple areas of cooperation, including connectivity, digital transformation, trade, economic engagement, contemporary challenges, people-to-people contacts, and deepening strategic ties. The summit also resulted in the adoption of two joint statements, one on maritime cooperation and the other on food security between India and ASEAN. PM Modi unveiled a 12-point proposal to strengthen relations and discussed plans to establish a multi-modal connectivity and economic corridor bridging Southeast Asia, India, West Asia, and Europe. He also extended an offer to share India’s digital public infrastructure stack with ASEAN partners. Within the framework of this proposal, he called for a unified effort in combating terrorism, addressing the financing of terror activities, and countering cyber disinformation apart from cooperation on issues faced by the Global South and India’s advocacy of reformed multilateralism.

ASEAN summit debates Myanmar, South China Sea issues, as Ukraine War and Sino-US tensions loom

Indonesia hosted the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit and its related meetings with dialogue partners, including the East Asia Summit, in Jakarta. Media reported that the three-day affair was bogged down by the bloc’s continued inability to sort through internal divisions over member-state Myanmar’s 2021 military coup. China’s aggressive activities in the South China Sea were on the summit agenda with Beijing and

ASEAN pledging to reach an agreement on a long-stalled non-binding code of conduct. China also warned against a ‘New Cold War’ in the region and had asked the countries to refrain from taking sides. At the 18th EAS, the Leaders’ Declaration on ASEAN as an Epicentrum of Growth was adopted. Discussions were held on building resilience against emerging challenges and future shocks through cooperation on enhancing energy security and food security, maintaining financial stability, and strengthening regional health architecture. The meeting also reviewed the implementation of the EAS Plan of Action (POA) 2018–2022 and adopted the EAS POA (2024–2028). At the ASEAN Regional Forum that took place alongside the foreign minister’s meeting, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and China’s top diplomat, Wang Yi, continued discussions on thawing US-China ties. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also attended the regional forum. ASEAN countries have largely condemned the invasion of Ukraine but have focused on their own interests in engagement with Moscow.

A Five Day ASEAN Solidarity Exercise Held at Indonesia

A Five day ASEAN Solidarity Exercise was held from September 19, 2023, at Indonesia. This was the first multinational defence drill amongst the ASEAN countries which included representatives from all the ten member states including Myanmar. The five day defence drill was a non-combatant exercise, which covered areas such as HADR, rescue operations and

joint maritime patrols. Initially planned in the North Natuna Sea – wherein China often sends its patrols to assert its historic claims – the joint exercise was moved to the South Natuna Sea, avoiding the disputed waters. Notably the exercise was held at a time of increasing Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, from harassing several ASEAN members’ maritime activities within their exclusive economic zones (EEZ) to releasing a new map claiming nearly the entire South China Sea as its own.

US Pacific Island Leaders Summit Meeting held in Washington

At the US - Pacific Islands Forum Summit meeting at the White House on September 25, President Biden renewed the US’s commitment to enhancing partnership with the Pacific Islands. President Biden announced many new initiatives to strengthen engagement including recognising Cook Islands and Niue as independent, sovereign states where US will have diplomatic presence. Biden has also has pledged to work with Congress to provide US \$200 million more in funding for projects aimed at mitigating the effects of climate change, spurring economic growth, countering illegal fishing and improving public health- all of which have been highlighted by the region as existential crises. The White House in 2022 said the U.S. would invest more than \$810 million in expanded programs to aid the Pacific islands however media has reported that Congress had yet to approve most of the funding pledges made last year. While 18 representatives from the Pacific Island

Forum Members attended the summit, all were not at leader level proving China's shadow looms large in the region.

New Vanuatu PM Likely to Revisit Security Pact with Australia

The intense battle for geopolitics continues in the Pacific island countries with Vanuatu's new prime minister saying that the Pacific island nation would likely need to revisit a security agreement signed with Australia. Less than a day into his tenure, Sato Kilman said the parliament was unlikely to ratify the agreement, with questions raised about it being in Vanuatu's best interests. This agreement spans cooperation in areas including disaster relief, environmental and resource security, cybersecurity, aviation safety and law enforcement. The agreement has been signed but needs to be ratified by Vanuatu's parliament. The new PM, also hit back at reports about his party's political links with China saying "We are not pro-west, we are not pro-Chinese, we adopt a non-aligned policy". In response to this development, a spokesperson for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade said Australia will continue to work with Vanuatu to deliver "mutual benefits" and "ensure our shared security." The turbulent politics of this island nation has consequences for the the U.S.-Australia alliance trying to push back on Chinese inroads in the region.

US and Vietnam ink historic partnership in Biden visit

With a historic visit by President Biden's visit to Hanoi, the United States' elevated its relationship with Vietnam to a

comprehensive strategic partnership. Hanoi has comprehensive strategic partnerships with China and Russia, but had resisted hesitated in elevating relations with Washington up to this point. However tensions with China on assertiveness in the south china sea, has led to Hanoi look at a growing level of shared interests with the United States. This new, higher-level partnership will likely boost military-to-military ties between the two countries, as well as closer cooperation on issues such as climate change and technology innovation and collaboration. Hanoi which is dependent economically on China and has a close defence relationship with Russia, is hedging its bets just as the rest of Southeast Asia, and refuses to choose sides in the increasing U.S.-China competition. However Vietnamese PM Pham Minh Chinh during his visit to the US for the 78th UNGA debate met with US Department of Commerce, Gina Raimondo wherein a framework for long-term economic and trade cooperation between the two nations was agreed upon .Vietnam's Ministry of Information and Communication has also signed a MoU with US Chip manufacturing company Synopsys to support the development of semiconductor industry in Vietnam.

Philippines Government Considering Filing Environmental Cases Against China

The Philippines government has stated that it will file environmental cases against China for its destructive activities in the West Philippines Sea before the Permanent Court of Arbitration. These environmental

degradation activities undertaken by the Chinese are the alleged large-scale destruction of corals in Rozul Reef and Escoda Shoal; both part of the Philippines Exclusive Economic Zone, which are in disputed areas with China. The coastguard released a video following underwater inspections of Iroquois Reef and Sabina Shoal, which Manila claims as its territory, revealing “severe damage” to the marine ecosystem. The force also said that it also found dead corals that were cleaned and crushed before being dumped into the seabed in those areas where Chinese fishing boats had been spotted in recent months.

Myanmar sees 324% Increase in Air Strikes, Junta alleged to have lost of control of South eastern Myanmar

A report released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOCHR) said that the Junta has been increasingly unleashing air strikes against civilians, with the number more than doubling during the second year after the February 2021 coup. The air strikes, up by 324 percent, from 78 to 331—in its two reporting periods, have repeatedly been combined with “measures that systemically deny the ability of those injured to access medical care.”. Meanwhile Karen Peace Support Network (KSPN—an umbrella organization of 30 civil society groups) has brought out a report titled “A Shifting Power Balance: Junta Control Shrinks in Southeast Burma” stating that the junta lost 62 military camps in south-eastern Myanmar as a result of offensives by the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and its allies between February 2021 and

July 2023. The report also states that 24 military camps were captured and 38 were forcibly abandoned from February 2021 to July 2023 by the KNLA—the armed wing of the Karen National Union (KNU)—and its allies, the report said, adding that the expansion of territory under their control now directly threatens the regime’s central transport artery between Yangon and Naypyitaw. Escalating artillery and air attacks have failed to reverse the junta’s loss of territory, but they have increased the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Karen State to at least 637,414, an increase of 20% since February this year, the KPSN said.