

# *INSIGHT* SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



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Three years into the Junta Regime, the crises in Myanmar worsens with a mounting humanitarian challenge despite a Chinese-brokered ceasefire in place. The Government of India has considered suspension of the Free Movement Regime and announced a decision to construct a fence along the 1,643-kilometre border with Myanmar. Meanwhile Myanmar has indicated willingness to engage with the ASEAN revisiting its boycott of the grouping. Indonesia entering a year of election frenzy has inched a step closer to realising its goals of essential deterrence by procuring 18 more Rafale fighter jets. The region saw an uptick in defence cooperation with Philippines and Vietnam sealing agreements on defence cooperation even as Manila and Washington conducted joint patrols in the South China Sea. The geopolitics over Pacific Islands saw new flashpoints with a reset in Nauru's ties with China exacerbating fears of more switches from Taiwan in Tuvalu and Papua New Guinea amidst electoral jostling.

### **Free Movement Regime to end as Myanmar crisis worsens**

As Min Aung Hlaing completes three years in power since the coup d'état of February 1 (2021), the Tatmadaw finds itself in a precarious situation. In spite of a Chinese negotiated ceasefire, details of which are not public, the region has seen a surge in violence. Myanmar Peace Monitor reports the junta's loss of at least 35 towns since the launch of Operation 1027. The Arakin Army has also taken control over areas adjoining the Indo-Myanmar border such as the strategic trade town of Paletwa in Chin state. The Government of India has indicated its desire to fence the porous Indo-Myanmar border. It has started the

tender process for an advanced fencing system. However, the decision to end the Free Movement Regime has been opposed by groups within Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma has also spoken up against the suspension of FMR. The conflict has led to a significant amount of influx of Burmese citizens and armed personnel. The Indian Army has reported 416 Myanmar soldiers having entered Indian territory since November. The Tatmadaw is also revisiting its boycott of ASEAN. The Junta-regime dispatched a senior diplomat to the ASEAN meeting in Laos, who reportedly engaged with ASEAN foreign ministers in Luang Prabang.

### **Nauru switches diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China**

The Republic of Nauru severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan just two days after the electoral victory of the Democratic Progressive Party's firebrand presidential candidate William Lai Ching-te and running mate Hsiao Bi-khim. Nauru Foreign Minister Lionel Aingimea met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January to sign a joint communique re-establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. Taiwan's incoming administration has reportedly blamed Beijing for "actively inducing a diplomatic shift" by approaching political figures and promising financial aid not just under the current President David Adeang but also under former President Russ Joseph Kun. It was indicated that Nauru reached out to Taiwan for a hefty financial assistance which surpassed the amount generally granted to allies. Some analysts have argued that the switch was influenced by Australia's

decision to scale back on the budget allocations to Nauru for the asylum seeker processing centre. Interestingly, this is the not the first time that Nauru has switched diplomatic recognition. Nauru first established relations with Taiwan in 1980, up until 2002 when it switched to recognition to the People's Republic of China. Nauru resumed bilateral relations with Taiwan just three years later, in 2005.

In what may add to tensions in the Pacific Islands, domestic turmoil within the PNG made Prime Minister James Marape reveal that he declined the need for foreign assistance in ensuring the return of peace in the capital/ Australia, having signed a bilateral security agreement with PNG in December 2023, offered to help restore law and order after deadly riots broke out on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January.

### **Philippines boost defence ties with the US, and Vietnam**

The United States and Philippines conducted a two-day joint patrol (Jan 3-4) in the South China Sea amidst rising maritime tensions between Manila and Beijing. The joint patrol saw the deployment of USS Carl Vinson and the US Indo-Pacific Command's strike group consisting of two destroyers and a cruiser. The Armed Forces of Philippines (AFP) deployed four ships, an anti-submarine warfare helicopter and a multi-role helicopter. The two nations had previously held joint patrols in November 2023. Such bilateral military exercises have been branded "irresponsible" and "detrimental to the management and control of the maritime situation and related disputes" by China. Meanwhile Vietnam and Philippines also signed two Memoranda of Understanding related to the SCS. These

are important as they cover Incident Prevention and Management in the South China Sea as well as maritime cooperation between the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and Vietnam Coast Guard (VCG). Notably, the latter will involve the establishment of a Joint Coast Guard Committee.

### **Electoral politics heats up in Indonesia and Thailand**

Indonesian President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo came under fire for declaring that it is well within his "democratic and political right" to campaign and take sides in the upcoming general election. Critics argued that despite the legal right to campaign for a particular side, the president should not undermine the democracy by choosing to discard neutrality. A local magazine had reported that Jokowi engaged with leaders of parties supporting the Prabowo-Gibran pair earlier this month.

Meanwhile, Pita Limjaroenrat is set to return to the Thai parliament and may be reinstated as the leader of the Move Forward Party following his acquittal in the election violation case. Pita, who led his reformist party to victory on wave of youth support, was blocked from becoming prime minister on charges of violating election law. Thailand's Constitutional Court, in the 8-1 ruling, decided that Pita had not broken rules banning members of parliament from owning shares in media companies. However, the Move Forward Party faced a legal setback on the royal insult law verdict. The Constitutional Court ruled that the party's campaign for the reform of the Lèse-majesté laws was in violation of the Thai Constitution. The Move Forward Party was ordered to abandon its campaign promise to amend the law.

### **Defence Trade and SCS dominate Jokowi's three nation tour**

Defence and Trade was also the focus of Indonesian president Jokowi's three-nation tour to the neighbouring South-east Asian states. In Philippines (from Jan 09-11), Jokowi focused was on continuing border cooperation, boosting bilateral trade, infrastructure development, pushing for the universality of UNCLOS, and defence ties-in particular the Indonesian defence exports to Philippines. The Vietnam visit (Jan 11-13) yielded an MOU on fishery cooperation, the contents of which are not made public yet. Cooperation on information, communications, and technology were discussed. The two nations affirmed support for Lao PDR's Chairmanship of the ASEAN and commitment to the implementation of ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Jokowi concluded his official tour with a visit to Brunei where he pitched for investment in Nusantara to investors. Indonesia's push for increased defence trade comes in the backdrop of the country having completed its acquisition of 42 Rafale fighter jets as a part of its US\$ 8.1 billion defence deal with French company Dassault Aviation. The first batch of Rafale jets are expected to be delivered in the beginning of 2026. The acquisition is a part of the government's larger goal of reaching Minimum Essential Force by 2024.

### **Thai Prime Minister hosts US NSA Jake Sullivan, Chinese FM Wang Yi**

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin and Foreign Minister Parnpree Nukara. A range of bilateral and regional issues were discussed. The United States and Thailand sought to strengthen their

cooperation in the security and green energy sectors. Affirming its commitment to ASEAN centrality, the United States expressed support for the implementation of the ASEAN Five Point Consensus on Myanmar. Provision of humanitarian assistance to the people of Myanmar was identified as crucial. Both sides expressed keenness to increase high-level engagement, usU.S.-Thailand Strategic and Defense Dialogue in Bangkok. Mr. Sullivan was also scheduled to meet the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Thailand as a follow up on the Biden-Xi Woodside Summit. The press note highlighted that worsening Myanmar crisis and South China Sea were substantively discussed along with the US emphasising the need for maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. The Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was also met Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin. The Chinese FM pushed for the speedy development of the China-Laos-Thailand connectivity project and the Trans-Asian Railway. The two sides also signed a reciprocal visa-waiver agreement.