

INSIGHT SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
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Against the backdrop of a precarious political and humanitarian situation in Myanmar, junta chief Min Aung Hlaing addressed thousands of troops on the annual Armed Forces Day celebrations. He blamed a nexus of powerful foreign elements and armed rebels for the current reality of a highly destabilised Myanmar. In election news from the region, front runner Prabowo Subianto was declared the winner of Indonesia's 2024 general elections though his victory was challenged by his rivals in the Constitutional Court. Vietnam, on the other hand, is faced with political instability with the resignation of its youngest ever President, Vo Van Thuong. The region also witnessed a flurry of high-level visits as Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited New Zealand and Australia, where his meeting with the former Prime Minister Paul Keating raised eyebrows. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Philippines President Marcos Jr. also met to reaffirm their commitment to preserving law and order in the South China Sea. ASEAN leaders flew down to Melbourne for a three-day ASEAN-Australia Special Summit, commemorating 50 years of relations and announced a slew of initiatives. Meanwhile the geopolitics in the PICs continued to simmer with Canberra managing to keep the new Tuvalu administration from scrapping the bilateral climate and security pact.

Junta celebrates Armed Forces Day, Russian military personnel felicitated

Myanmar Army chief Min Aung Hlaing addressed troops gathered at Naypyidaw for the Armed Forces Day. In his address,

he called for unity in the wake of the massive crisis caused by armed rebels that are "destroying the path towards forming a union based on democratic values and federalism". The military, he said was holding power just temporarily and "working to restore peace and stability". The armed rebels, Min Aung Hlaing argued, were thwarting the junta's attempts at restoring democratic rule by derailing plans to hold general elections. The army chief expressed dismay at the Burmese youth for having become "scapegoats of insurgents, misled by false narrative propaganda through media sabotage". He blamed interference from "some powerful nations" and foreign journalists, working to support the anti-junta factions by spreading false narratives.

Demonstrative of the uptick in bilateral relations, Russia's deputy minister of defence, Alexander Fomin, was re-invited as the guest of honour at the parade. Additionally, almost two dozen Russian military commanders and defence officials received honorary titles in recognition of the "excellent performances in international military cooperation measures in order to build a modern Tatmadaw,". Russia and Myanmar have grown close since the coup. In a report by Russian state news agency RIA Novosti, Russian Defence Ministry confirmed the proposal to carry out 50 joint military activities with the Myanmar army.

Indonesia elects a new President, Vietnamese President resigns

Official results released by Indonesia's General Election Commission show a clear

victory for Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto in the February general elections. The Prabowo-Gibran pair managed to secure the support of 59 percent of the 96 million voters that set out to vote on February 14. Rivals Anies Baswedan and Ganjar Purnowo received 41 million (25 percent) and 27 million (16 percent) votes respectively. Accusing Prabowo of having benefited from Jokowi administration's tacit support and the distribution of social aid leading up to the general elections, Anies Baswedan and Ganjar Pranowo have taken to the Constitutional Court, seeking a re-run of the election and the debarment of Prabowo. The Constitutional Court is expected to render its verdict on 22 April.

Meanwhile, Vo Van Thuong tendered his resignation after completing one year in office, making him Vietnam's shortest-serving President. His resignation, announced by the National Assembly, has been officially attributed to the violation of party rules and shortcomings that "negatively impacted public opinion, affecting the reputation of the Party, State and him personally".

Australia set to ratify the Falepili Union

The Falepili Union is set to be tabled in the Australian parliament for ratification after long-drawn speculation over the fate of the bilateral agreement. Pat Conroy, Australia's minister for the Pacific, told parliament that Tuvalu's new administration had decided not to alter the security and climate migration agreement. Earlier in March, Feleti Teo, the new Prime Minister, had

called for an arrangement that would guarantee Tuvalu's sovereignty. Conroy assured the Tuvalu leader that Australia would cooperate closely with Tuvalu to uphold and guarantee its sovereignty. He added that "Australia commits to assist Tuvalu in responding to a major natural disaster, a health pandemic, or military aggression. This is predicated on Tuvalu requesting such assistance."

Blinken lands in Manila, as China Philippines spat escalates

The United States Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with Philippine President Marcos Jr. in Manila on 19th March. Secretary Blinken and President Marcos Jr. reaffirmed their shared commitment to preserving international law in the South China Sea and stressed the significance of the U.S.-Philippine Alliance to security in the Indo-Pacific region. Recent bilateral events such as the Presidential Trade and Investment Mission to Manila and the signing of a pact on civil nuclear cooperation were hailed as successes in the longstanding bilateral relationship. Marcos Jr. and Blinken also expressed enthusiasm for the first-ever trilateral leaders' meeting between the US, the Philippines, and Japan, slated for April 2024 in Washington.

Increasing Chinese aggression in the South China Sea has been a cause of concern for countries in the region. Recent flashpoints between China and the Philippines include attempts of the Chinese coastguard (CCG) to obstruct Philippine navy's supply mission to the BRP Sierra Madre on March

23, just a day after the CCG harassed a Philippine Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources boat carrying Filipino scientists to Sandy Cay reef. In response, President Marcos Jr. has promised countermeasures against "illegal, coercive, aggressive, and dangerous attacks" by the Chinese coastguard.

Wang Yi visits New Zealand and Australia

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was in Canberra for the seventh Australia-China Foreign and Strategic Dialogue, where he was welcomed by his counterpart Penny Wong. This is the first visit of a Chinese foreign minister since 2017. Wang also briefly met Prime Minister Anthony Albanese before travelling to Sydney for further meetings including with Australia's business community. While Beijing as Wang Yi highlighted expected, "no hesitation, no yawing and no backward steps" in the relationship, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong's statement was more cautious in its reading of the visit. Wong after the meeting told the press that "A stable relationship between Australia and China doesn't just happen, it needs ongoing work (...) and this was the latest meeting in that process." Wong added that dialogue enabled both sides "to manage our differences" and both sides understood that "it does not eliminate them". Meanwhile the domestic press saw heated coverage over the Wang Yi - Paul Keating meeting at China's consulate in Sydney. The veteran centre-left leader and former Prime Minister has been very critical of his own party in government for stirring trouble

with Beijing. The two are reported to have held "a big picture discussion about the geo-strategic balances and influences in the world".

Wang Yi's Australia visit was preceded by a visit to Wellington, where he met his New Zealand counterpart, Winston Peters. The Chinese foreign minister expressed China's desire to increase economic engagement with New Zealand, and also suggested collaboration on the issue of climate change. Wang Yi's visit to New Zealand comes a month after the latter expressed interest in joining AUKUS Pillar II at the inaugural Australia – New Zealand Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations (ANZMIN 2+2).

The United Kingdom and Australia strike a US\$3 billion deal to jointly develop nuclear-powered submarines

In keeping with news on the AUKUS, Australia has announced its plan to inject 4.6 billion Australian dollars (US\$3bn) into the British industry as a part of the AUKUS security pact, to fund the construction of nuclear-powered submarines and guarantee the timely delivery of its new ships. The British defence company BAE Systems and Adelaide-based submarine manufacturer ASC are set to form a new joint venture to develop the future nuclear-powered and conventionally armed SSN-AUKUS submarine fleet. BAE systems would be responsible for the production of nuclear reactors at the Rolls-Royce factory, while the submarines themselves would be constructed by ASC at the Osborne naval shipyard, Adelaide. ASC will also take care

of logistics and maintenance of the submarines. The ten-year project will also entail the establishment of a joint skills centre by BAE and ASC to create a specialised workforce. Additionally, Australia plans to invest A\$1.5 billion (\$993 million) to prepare a naval facility in Western Australia for nuclear submarines. The naval facility will host U.S. and British forces for a portion of the year beginning in 2027. It is anticipated that the project will cost roughly A\$8 billion in total. The announcement was made a day after the signing of a new bilateral defence and security cooperation agreement between the United Kingdom and Australia, including a “status of forces” agreement.

ASEAN leaders gather for the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit

ASEAN heads of government met in Melbourne for the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit, which celebrated 50 years of the ASEAN-Australia Dialogue. The summit saw the adoption of the “ASEAN-Australia Leaders’ Vision Statement – Partners for Peace and Prosperity and the Melbourne Declaration – A Partnership for the Future.” Key themes throughout the three-day summit included- Business, Emerging Leaders, Climate and Clean Energy, and Maritime Cooperation. Events organised within the scope of these focus areas included- CEO Business Forum, SME Conference Emerging Leaders’ Dialogue, Climate and Clean Energy Forum, and the Maritime Cooperation Conference. PM Albanese took the opportunity to hold the Australia-Singapore

Annual Leaders Meeting with the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong on the sidelines of this summit. PM Albanese also hosted programs with the heads of states of Philippines, Malaysia, Lao PDR, and Vietnam. Additionally, bilateral meetings with the leaders of Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, Timor-Leste and with the ASEAN Secretary-General were also held.