

Vol 6 No 2 March-April 2017

INSIGHT **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



The Twin Towers, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Photo Courtesy- Divisha Srivastava

*Southeast Asia & Oceania
Centre
Bimonthly Newsletter*



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Editor's Note

2017 is celebration time in Southeast Asia: the year marks the 50th anniversary of the founding of ASEAN and many other anniversaries which include the 40th anniversary respectively of ASEAN-US and ASEAN-EU relations. Whereas ASEAN and EU are looking to revive their plans for a Free Trade Area Agreement between the two organisations, ASEAN-India relations are already well established. ASEAN is one of India's leading trade partners (accounting for over 10 per cent of its trade). The burgeoning relationship has brought the Indian industrial sector to the enviable situation where the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) is able to sign MoU with three Singapore universities.

The rise of China has posed a challenge to countries of Asia Pacific in one way or another. The ASEAN Member States facing aggressive Chinese action in the South China Sea, on their part, are mounting pressure on China to agree to host a meeting to agree on a preliminary framework for the Code of Conduct. For India, the strategically situated Arunachal Pradesh (one of the four states of North East India bordering Myanmar and Southeast Asia) occupies a place of importance. But, the visit of the Dalai Lama to this state somehow annoyed China.

The success of the Act East Policy and the planned India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway depends on the availability of a dependable infrastructure (especially good road network) in North East India. The Centre has allocated funds for this purpose and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has signed an agreement to fund these road projects. India-Myanmar military cooperation continued apace with the visit of a Myanmar Navy delegation in February-March. Some naval understanding with Malaysia also seemed to emerge with Indian Chief of Naval Staff's visit to Malaysia in early April. Indonesia, on its part hosted the first ever Indian Ocean Rim Association Leaders' Summit at Jakarta.

In an ironical twist, the US which bombed Cambodia flat during the 1970s has demanded Cambodia repay its debts- at a time when Cambodia is falling straight into China's lap. In contrast, China has been very forthcoming with aid. Another contrast that has been observed is the tension on the Laos-Cambodia border on the one hand, and the Laos-Vietnam cooperation on the other. There have been some positive signs too. Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines have agreed for instance, to joint patrolling of the Sulu Sea (between the Philippines and Malaysia) by Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines from April 2017. This would also include air patrol like that in the Straits of Malacca. On the negative side, Australia has opted out of patrolling South China Sea with Indonesia.

This issue includes a Book Review on the critically important India-Singapore relationship. The book is by Amit Mukherjee and has been reviewed by Divisha Srivastava.

Udai Bhanu Singh

Mukherjee, Anit (ed.), *The Merlion and the Ashoka: Singapore-India Strategic Ties*, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd, Singapore, 2015, Pp 106, ISBN 978-9814704663

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To commemorate the 50th anniversary of Singapore-India relations, the South Asia programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, organised a workshop to examine the security and strategic relations between the two nations. *The Merlion and the Ashoka: Singapore-India Strategic Ties* edited by Anit Mukherjee is a compilation of the papers presented there. The workshop consisted of separate papers examining the strategic and defence cooperation between Singapore and India, two from each country. Peter Ho's keynote address outlining the relations constitutes the first chapter in this volume. The Singaporean view point on strategic and defence cooperation is provided by See Chak Mun and Bilveer Singh, the Indian perspective is covered by C. Raja Mohan and Vijay Sakhuja and Gurpreet Khurana.

In the introduction, the editor outlines how Singapore has been a pivot of India's engagement in the region and has played a decisive role in catalysing India's entry into multilateral forums in the region. He further highlights the motivations behind organising the workshop on Singapore-India strategic and defence ties and

encapsulates the core arguments of the papers submitted. The workshop led to an emerging consensus that the intellectual discussions and deliberations between experts on strategic and defence matters from the two nations needed to be regularized. Further it was also noted that there was a need to build upon the goodwill generated from the regular military engagements between the two nations.

Peter Ho, in his key note address grounds the relationship between Singapore and India in an understanding of history and relays its evolution since. 'An Ancient Civilisation and a Small City-State: Can Their Strategic Interests Be Aligned' outlines the stark contrasts between India, an ancient civilisation with the world's second largest population and Singapore a city state with a shorter history. From the comparison he draws upon the relationship that they have had over the years, the lessons learnt and the apprehensions or missteps which prevented them from forging stronger ties before. Singapore being a city-state is limited by size and thus needs to find ways to manage a strategic relationship with both big and small players to facilitate regional stability without undermining the national interests of individual states. Similarly he believes that India by virtue of its size and influence shall always remain a

key player in the region and thus needs to engage with its neighbours more effectively. Not only are the two nations working in tandem but ASEAN's approach towards regional architecture also fits perfectly with the Look East Policy as both aim to engage with all players, big and small without favouring any one. Ho concludes that the relationship between the two nations has matured because of their shared values and common heritage. The challenge for them now is to find ways to make this relationship sustainable in the long run by adopting a non-transactional based approach and institutionalising the relationship by creating more forums for enhancing their defence cooperation and engagement.

C. Raja Mohan's chapter 'Restoring the Eastern Anchor: India's Strategic Partnership with Singapore' envisions the evolution of the strategic relationship between Singapore and India from an Indian perspective in three phases: the years of colonial construction, post-colonial neglect and the Look East Policy. Throughout the three phases it is seen that India was a hesitant partner while Singapore and ASEAN were eager to engage deeply.

The previous administrations were often caged in the shadows of Non alignment, making them apprehensive of projecting India as a key security partner and provider in the region. The Modi government however has a different outlook towards foreign policy. India's 'Look East Policy' has now been recalibrated as the 'Act East Policy' which will help India restore her Eastern Anchor. Rajamohan further believes that Singapore's geopolitical importance will continue to grow and thus there is a need to forge a comprehensive strategic

partnership in order to elevate the relationship from where it stands today.

In chapter three: 'Singapore-India Strategic Relations- Singapore's Perspective', See Chak Mun establishes that the basic core of Singapore's foreign policy is to facilitate the creation of a multi-faceted regional balance, which would give them enough space to manoeuvre according to their strategic needs. Since India is a major power in the region, Singapore has consistently tried to engage with them. This engagement and Singapore's perspectives on India can be understood in four different phases. The first phase was right after independence when Singapore approached India for help and military assistance. India was amiable in helping but a little apprehensive about becoming a net provider of security in the region. The second phase which began in the 1970s saw India's impartiality as the leader of the non-aligned movement being questioned leading to tensions. By the late 1980s attitudes saw a shift when India began sending special envoys to ASEAN to find some mediatory role for India. The third phase saw extensive intensification of bi-lateral relations because of the dynamics shared by the then Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Tong and the Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, who understood the need to step away from the Cold war paradigm and envision a greater role for India in the development of the strategically crucial Asia Pacific region. The same momentum was continued further by the Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh governments. The fourth phase saw the rise of India and China and led to speculations about the ramifications of this rise on the security and stability of Asia. For Singapore cooperation between the two powers would contribute to regional prosperity while conflict would negatively impact the region's stability and security. As a nation working to ensure stability and security in the region, Singapore is suited to initiate a process of coordination between the two powers.

Vijay Sakhuja and Gurpreet Khurana look at the defence cooperation between Singapore and India from an Indian perspective in 'India-Singapore Defence Cooperation: Exploring Strategic and Functional Compatibilities'. Their paper lays down the nature of defence cooperation and its operational dividends, and the prospects which can be explored to enhance this cooperative relationship. They argue that both Singapore and India's security objectives are similar and that they share a commonality of core values which makes defence cooperation between them a natural outcome. They further provide a historical view of the evolution of the defence ties and where they stand today. Singapore and India have an impressive, strong and comprehensive defence relationship which can be enhanced by exploring newer avenues, especially with the changing nature of threats and evolution of technology. These include maritime security, deterrence and diplomacy, combined operations, tactical compatibility, and defence industry cooperation. The scope of Singapore-India defence engagements has been multifaceted and has led to an increasing convergence of political goals and tactical capabilities. They suggest the creation of an agenda to develop the military industrial complex between the two nations with joint scientific and technological research, and combined production of weapon systems leading to business with international buyers. In their view a stronger defence relationship between Singapore and India would be mutually beneficial.

Bilveer Singh highlights the Singaporean perspective in the last chapter: 'Singapore-India Defence Relations amidst Changing Security Architecture in the Asia Pacific

Region'. Singapore and India share an asymmetric relationship which needs to be acknowledged in order to understand how the defence dynamics between them functions. Singapore's relationship with India emerged in the changing geo-political context of a declining US-USSR led regional security order. He divides the defence ties into three phases which show how the relationship has evolved from low level defence ties marked with minimal exchanges to contemporary times with unprecedented levels of cooperation between the two militaries. He further argues that Singapore suffers from 'acute asymmetries' with regard to all great powers, including India. The challenge for them is therefore to remain relevant in the eyes of the bigger powers and maintain fluid relations. The engagement between Singapore and India also fits into Singapore's strategic worldview. It is well aware of its vulnerabilities and thus aims to have overwhelming power on its side by engaging with the great powers so that they don't harm her and instead help her in achieving her goals. Singapore's pragmatic and realistic defence doctrine acknowledges that power asymmetries shall remain but aims to make them work for its advantage, turning its core weakness as a small city-state into its strength. Singapore believes that India's defence engagement with South East Asia can lead to an equitable division of power where no great power is tempted to destabilise the region, ultimately enhancing peace and stability.

The papers that were brought together in this book succinctly highlight the contours of the multifaceted strategic relationship that the two countries have. This monograph thus fulfills its aim of creating awareness about the strength of strategic ties between Singapore and India by examining and contextualising the relationship that they share, where the security and defence cooperation between them stands today and recommendations for enhancing this relationship further.

Southeast Asia

ASEAN

South China Sea Code of Conduct:

In May 2017, China is said to host a meeting with the ASEAN nations to reach a preliminary agreement on the framework for the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea. President Duterte of Philippines and the ASEAN Chair, who has been moving the issue forward as part of his ASEAN agenda, said in a statement that this time they might be successful in achieving progress¹.

The aim of this Code of Conduct is to ease tensions which occur due to the overlapping claims made by China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, Brunei and Taiwan. The Code of Conduct was envisaged to lay down specific rules and regulations which would be legally binding and would thus help hold the aggressors accountable and facilitate conflict resolution in the region. It aims at preventing territorial conflicts from escalating into armed confrontations by codifying a set of norms and rules aimed at discouraging aggression.

Foreign Secretary of Philippines Enrique Manalo stated in a news briefing that a draft of the framework is already in circulation for the 10 ASEAN members to sign. The framework is expected to

incorporate elements which were agreed upon in the Declaration of Parties in South China Sea in 2002. These include exercising self restraint and preventing militarisation within the contested waters.

The Code of Conduct has been on the table since 2002 and solid agreement had not been reached so far due to the lack of consensus between the ASEAN countries and conditions laid down by China which make it difficult for the others to compromise. Reaching a consensus is not easy with different members wanting different things from the agreement. Philippine's former Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario has also urged for the inclusion of the international arbitration ruling as part of the Code of Conduct². He stated that they couldn't promote the rule of law while ignoring the existing laws as they stood.

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop also agreed, that since the arbitration set out clear recommendations and findings it should be used be used as a framework³. The ruling nullified China's claims in the South China Sea, and has thus become a trigger point for China. Compared to his colleagues, President Duterte however has claimed that he wishes to avoid a confrontation with China and thus sees no point in pressing it to abide by the rulings.

Strategic partnership with US:

On April 4, 2017, the ASEAN-US Joint Co-operation Committee met for the 8th time in Jakarta. The meeting was held to review their co-operative efforts in the past and discuss potential for a deeper bilateral partnership in

¹ China to host Asean in meeting on South China Sea, March 24, 2017, The Straits Times, at <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/china-to-host-asean-in-meeting-on-south-china-sea>

² Arbitration ruling should be part of ASEAN-China code of Conduct-Del Rosario, March 1, 2017, GMA News, at <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/601524/arbitration-ruling-should-be-part-of-asean-china-code-of-conduct-del-rosario/story/>

³ Australia urges South China Sea ruling as basis for 'code of conduct', March 16, 2017, Reuters, at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-philippines-australia-southchinasea-idUKKBN16N13B>

the future. They both showed their support for the ASEAN-US Action Plan for 2016-2020 and prioritizing collaboration on 5 key areas including marine co-operation, economic connectivity, responding to trans-national challenges etc.

The US delegation acknowledged the central role ASEAN plays in the region and committed itself to continue its projects in the future- which include bridging the connectivity and development gap and implementing the third phase of the ASEAN Connectivity Initiative and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025.⁴

ASEAN member states appreciated the US's efforts in aiding various ASEAN initiatives and actively joining regional forums and mechanisms like the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting Plus.

The two sides agreed to collaborate to enhance co-operation in response to the new emerging challenges. The year 2017 also marks the 40th anniversary of ASEAN-US ties and the 50th anniversary of the founding of ASEAN, the two sides considered the possibility of holding celebrations for the same.

Strong relations with the European Union:

On March 10, 2017, delegates from the European Union and ASEAN agreed to

revive their plans for a Free Trade Agreement between the two organizations. The agreement was reached at the 15th ASEAN Economic Ministers-European Union Trade consultations which were held in Manila. The EU Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmström stated that having a regional trade agreement between the two organizations is a long term goal which has been at the discussions stage for a while⁵. While they have agreed to establish a framework to initiate talks, no time frame has been established.

In 2010, the ASEAN countries and the EU had launched talks towards a trade pact, but it never materialized. The EU chose to have individual bilateral agreements with the ASEAN countries instead. The negotiations between the two regional organisations had halted because of the problem of standardizing and setting common goals between the ASEAN nations which comprise of varied political systems, economies and populations.

The EU ambassador Franz Jessen stated that the visit was a milestone in establishing growing trade and investment relations between the two. The EU is the largest external source of Foreign Direct Investment for the ASEAN. While the EU has standing bilateral agreements with Vietnam and Singapore they have also started negotiations with the Philippines and Indonesia. As a long term goal they wish to engage with all ASEAN members.

Later in the month, on March 28, 2017 the French President François Hollande spoke at the 40th Singapore Lecture on France and Singapore, Strategic partners in a Fast-

⁴ ASEAN, US pledge to enhance strategic partnership, April 6, 2017, Vietnam net, at <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/government/176035/asean-us-pledge-to-enhance-strategic-partnership.html>

⁵ EU and ASEAN agree to put free trade pact back on agenda, March 10, 2017, The Times of India, at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/international-business/eu-and-asean-agree-to-put-free-trade-pact-back-on-agenda/articleshow/57572557.cms>

Changing world, and stated that the EU and ASEAN should look beyond their cultural and economic co-operation and work towards engaging with each other politically⁶. He reiterated that both ASEAN and the EU need to sign a partnership agreement setting out their political principles which all parties can abide by. He also suggested that the EU should consider signing a strategic partnership with ASEAN. 2017 also marks the 40th anniversary of ASEAN-EU dialogue relations. All these efforts are seen as a part of the two sides' efforts to accelerate the establishment of a strategic partnership between them.

Concerns over North Korean Missile Tests:

The foreign ministers of the ASEAN members issued a joint statement on April 28, 2017 expressing grave concern over North Korea's nuclear tests in 2016 and the recent ballistic missile tests. The statement was made during the annual leaders' summit being held in Manila, Philippines. The ASEAN leaders also urged all parties concerned including North Korea to exercise self-restraint to facilitate de-escalation of the tensions and to refrain from undertaking actions which could aggravate the situation⁷.

Earlier in the week, Ri Young Ho, North Korea's Foreign Minister had appealed to ASEAN's Secretary General via a letter to

back North Korea in their conflict with the United States in order to prevent a nuclear holocaust. He warned that the Korean Peninsula had reached the brink of war because of US's actions. However, the ASEAN countries criticised North Korea's aggression acknowledging that any instability in the Korean Peninsula would have serious impact on the region and beyond.

ASEAN-India

ASEAN-India look to boosting trade between them through ASEAN-India Biztech Expo and Conference:

The ASEAN-India Biztech Expo and Conference is the first of its kind to discuss trade relations between the ASEAN countries and India, and is being hailed as a beacon of hope in ensuring better trade between the region and India. With Digital India programme being called the Government of India's flagship development programme, India now offers a large market in the digital sphere which can be exploited. The Malaysian Ministry of International Trade and Industry's (MITI) secretary-general Datuk Jayasiri Jayasena said that both ASEAN and India have large markets to offer that can be beneficial for companies on both sides.⁸ He also said that given the sheer size of the Indian market even small Malaysian companies, which struggle to find a foothold, will be able to find buyers. The expo and conference will feature market players from the information and communications technology,

⁶ France calls for ASEAN-EU political engagement, March 28, 2017, Today, at <http://www.todayonline.com/world/asia/france-calls-asean-eu-political-engagement>

⁷ ASEAN to express alarm over N Korea nuclear tests, missiles, April 28, 2017, The Hindu, at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/asean-expresses-alarm-over-nkorea-nuclear-tests-missiles/article18265912.ece>

⁸ Asean, India looking to bolster trade relations, March 8, 2017, The Sun Daily, at <http://www.thesundaily.my/news/2186239>

automotive and aeronautical, electrical and electronics, financial services, healthcare, pharmaceuticals and biotechnology as well as the professional and business services sectors from ASEAN and India.

The event was organised by the ASEAN-India Business Council and endorsed by MITI, Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation, Malaysian Digital Economy Corporation, the Indian High Commission and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry. It was held in Kuala Lumpur from 24th and 25th May.

CII signs MoUs with 3 Singapore Universities:

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) signed a memorandum of understanding with three Singapore Universities namely Nanyang Technological University, National University of Singapore, and Singapore Management University. The memorandum was signed through International Enterprise (IE) Singapore – a statutory board under the Ministry of Trade and Industry – under its Young Talent Programme. The MoU will allow IE Singapore to tap into CII’s network of over 8000 members to create overseas attachment opportunities and internship opportunities for enrolled students.⁹ This

could also be seen as an attempt by Singapore to break into India’s vast market.

ASEAN-India to hold anti-terrorism conference:

India is set to host a counter-radicalisation conference with the participation of all ASEAN member countries. ASEAN has become an important partner to India over the years with FDI inflows totalling \$28 billion during the three year period from April 2014 to December 2016.¹⁰ This also comes in the wake of an increasing threat of terrorism to Southeast Asian countries – specifically to Thailand, Philippines and Myanmar.

Northeast India-Act

The Dalai Lama visits Arunachal Pradesh:

The Dalai Lama announced that he would be visiting Arunachal Pradesh, including Tawang, despite China’s repeated objections to the visit. The controversy arose from the fact that the Dalai Lama would visit strategically sensitive areas of India that China has laid claims on under the invitation of the Indian government to a Buddhist seminar. China issued warnings that India’s relations with China will suffer “severe damages” and the peace and stability of the border areas will be affected¹¹ if India didn’t stop its provocative actions. India, however, quelled the threats by saying that it doesn’t recognise the Dalai Lama as a political

⁹ CII signs MoUs with 3 Singapore Universities at ASEAN-India Business Forum, April 21, 2017, News Nation at <http://www.newsnation.in/business-news/companies-and-commodities/cii-signs-mous-with-3-singapore-universities-at-asean-india-business-forum-article-168991.html>

¹⁰ India to host anti-terror conference with Asean, April 8, 2017, Economic Times, at <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-to-host-anti-terror-conference-with-asean/articleshow/58033631.cms>

¹¹ Dalai Lama to visit Arunachal Pradesh from April 4 overriding China’s objection, April 4, 2017, Hindustan Times, at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/dalai-lama-to-visit-arunachal-pradesh-from-april-4-overriding-china-s-objection/story-dRkK2kxMdViyazsH7tK1I.html>

leader but as a spiritual one. At a public function in New Delhi, Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar said India-China relationship had a negative public persona in India. The response of Mr. Jaishankar underlines the continued differences between India and China over a number of issues including territorial claims, counter-terror measures and Tibet.¹² The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said “China’s position on eastern section of China-India border dispute is consistent and clear. The Dalai clique has long been engaging in anti-China separatist activities and its record on the border question is not that good.”¹³ Meanwhile, Minister of State for Home Affairs Kiren Rijiju commented, “There is no political angle behind His Holiness’s visit to Arunachal Pradesh. It is completely religious. Arunachal Pradesh is an inseparable part of India and China should not object to his visit and interfere in India’s internal affairs,” he added “There may be some differences of opinion between India and China over the boundary. But China has no locus standi over Arunachal Pradesh.”¹⁴ The controversy comes in the aftermath of China’s clear opposition to India’s membership to the Nuclear Suppliers

Group despite India’s attempts to engage in dialogue with China and China’s unchanged position against designating Pakistan-based Maulana Masood Azhar a terrorist by the UN.

Centre planning 7,500 Crores worth of infrastructure projects:

Four national highway projects in Mizoram, Meghalaya and Manipur will be taken up by the cabinet for approval to improve connectivity between the Northeast and Myanmar. The aim of the project is to improve the road network system in the Northeast for better connectivity with the rest of India, Bangladesh, and the planned India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway. The Indian Ministry of Road Transport and Highway would spend an estimated ¹ 7,500 crore to upgrade and develop the current road and highway system in the northeast – specifically the Tura-Dalu and Dalu-Dudani in Meghalaya, Aizawl-Tuipang in Mizoram and Imphal-Moreh in Manipur.¹⁵ The Union Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari commented that the Indian government is planning to spend Rs. 1 lakh crore in total on infrastructural development in the area. He said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had instructed him to put special emphasis on infrastructural development in the northeast as the region has remained deprived of progress for years.¹⁶

¹² Dalai Lama sets the tone for his Northeast trip, March 22, 2017, The Hindu, at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/dalai-lama-sets-the-tone-for-his-northeast-trip/article17567135.ece>

¹³ China Slams India for Inviting Dalai Lama to Buddhist Seminar, March 20, 2017, Northeast Today, at <http://www.northeasttoday.in/china-slams-india-for-inviting-dalai-lama-to-buddhist-seminar/>

¹⁴ India stands firm on Dalai Lama’s Arunachal visit in face of China opposition, April 5, 2017, Live Mint, at <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/85Qbx4D3xrjZ5oM3fPAwCN/India-stresses-Dalai-Lamas-Arunachal-Pradesh-visit-religio.html>

¹⁵ ¹ 7,500-crore road network to boost North-East economy, February 24, 2017, The Hindu Business Line, at <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/7500crore-road-network-to-boost-northeast-economy/article9559199.ece>

¹⁶ Rs.1 lakh crore for road infrastructure in Northeast: Gadkari, June 29, 2017, The Statesman, at <http://www.thestatesman.com/northeast/rs-1-lakh-crore-for-road-infrastructure-in-northeast-gadkari-145183.html>

Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to fund Phase I of Northeast road network:

The Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Government of India signed an agreement whereby the former will fund Phase I of the Northeast road network improvement project. The Agency will provide approximately Rs. 4000 crore to improve NH-54 and NH-51 in Mizoram and Meghalaya. The NH-54 connects Aizawl to Tuipang. Improving this enhances the connectivity of the region to the rest of India as well as to Myanmar through the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Corridor. The NH-51 will connect Tura to Dalu in Meghalaya, which connects to the Bangladesh border. Both these highways will serve to improve the infrastructure and connectivity in the region as well as provide land connectivity to India's neighbours as part of the India-Myanmar-Thailand friendship highway.

The funds come in the form of an Official Development Assistance Loan (ODA) which is provided at a concessional 1.4% interest rate for project activities and 0.01% interest rate for consulting services and offers a 30-year period of repayment (including 10 years of grace period).¹⁷ JICA India Office chief representative Takema Sakamoto believes that the project will contribute towards socio-

economic development and regional connectivity. Under the project, he said modern slope protection technologies will be used to address the problem of landslides in the northeast.

“The region needs high quality road infrastructure as the region is envisaged as the gateway to South East Asia,” Sakamoto said.¹⁸

Talks of pipelines between India, Bangladesh and Myanmar:

Talks about a tri-nation oil pipeline have resumed once more between India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. According to plans the pipeline will link Sittwe in Myanmar to Mizoram and Tripura in India and Chittagong in Bangladesh. The pipeline will be approximately 7000 kms long and will be shared equally between the two countries. The idea had been pitched earlier to exploit Myanmar's offshore fields which had been awarded to India. However the then Prime Minister of Bangladesh Khaleda Zia did not agree with the proposal. When brought up again in 2010, Myanmar showed disinterest since a rival facility was already carrying gas from Myanmar through the Shan and Chin states into China.¹⁹ However since then Bangladesh has become an energy-starved economy with a growth rate of 6 per cent. With Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India and Myanmar's growing desire to find alternative markets to China, talks have resumed once more regarding the oil pipeline.

¹⁷ Japanese agency signs agreement for fund on Phase I of the North East Road Network, April 8, 2017, India Live Today, at <http://www.indialivetoday.com/japan-agency-signs-agreement-fund-phase-north-east-road-network/151865.html>

¹⁸ Rs 4000 crore aid from Japan for better road connectivity in North East, April 7, 2017, The Times of India, at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/4000-crore-aid-from-japan-for-better-road-connectivity-in-ne/articleshow/58060303.cms>

¹⁹ BD, Myanmar, India considering pipeline connecting the three nations, March 06, 2017, The Financial Express, at <http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/2017/03/06/63560/BD,-Myanmar,-India-considering-pipeline-connecting-the-three-nations>

India plans to link the pipeline with its mainstream gas grid and is already building a multi-modal transportation system connecting Aizawl to Sittwe.

Brunei

Saudi King Visits Brunei:

The King of Saudi Arabia, Salman bin Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud visited Brunei as part of his month long tour of Asia. He was conferred with Brunei's highest honour – the Royal Family Order for Brunei's throne, by Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah. This was after the two leaders had met and discussed their bilateral ties on a range of issues.

In a joint statement the two leaders reiterated the importance they gave to reaching a lasting and comprehensive solution for the problems being faced in Palestine, Syria and Yemen within the purview of existing international laws and treaties. They also emphasised the need to strengthen their bilateral co-operation in the fields of political, military, security and Islamic affairs. They also agreed to co-ordinate their perspectives within the framework of the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation to better serve the interests of their countries, their people and the Islamic world. They also underlined the

need to reject extremism and combat terrorism from any source.²⁰

Both sides expressed appreciation for each other and highlighted that the visit was symbolic of the continuous historical, cultural, bilateral, and binding relations that Brunei and Saudi Arabia shared as two brotherly countries. A few weeks later in a press reception to celebrate Brunei's national day in Riyadh the ambassador Dato Yusoff Ismail highlighted the historical and cultural trajectory of the longstanding relations that Brunei has had with Saudi Arabia and stated that the visit has catalyzed a new era in Brunei-Saudi relations²¹.

Ties with Russia:

During the 6th Moscow Conference on International Security the Russian Defence Minister Alexander Fomin stated that the Russian government was going to sign a document on military co-operation with Brunei²². The document would be a memorandum of understanding for military co-operation between the two countries. In an interview with news agencies commemorating his reign of fifty years, the Sultan of Brunei, Darussalam Hassanal Bolkiah stated that Brunei values the ties it has with Russia in spheres of defence, energy and trade. He stated that he was glad Russia and Brunei have worked together and that there is a lot of potential for their bilateral relationship to be further enhanced²³.

²⁰ King Salman conferred Brunei's highest honor, March 5, 2017, Arab news, at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1063436/saudi-arabia>

²¹ New era in Saudi-Brunei relations, says ambassador, April 25, 2017, Arab news, at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1089916/saudi-arabia>

²² Russia to sign military co-operation agreements with Paraguay, Brunei, April 5, 2017, Telegrafnoe Agentstvo Sovetskovo Soyuzu at <http://tass.com/defense/939492>

²³ Sultan of Brunei praises ties with Russia, April 2, 2017, Telegrafnoe Agentstvo Sovetskovo Soyuzu at <http://tass.com/world/938821>

Cambodia

US asks Cambodia to pay back war debts:

Nearly half a century after the United States carpet bombed parts of Cambodia, it is now demanding a \$662 million war debt (after interest).²⁴ The demand has incited indignation and outrage from Cambodia considering that it was the US bombings that paved the way for the Khmer Rouge, spiralled the country into years of oppression and poverty, and not to mention killed hundreds of people in the bombings. US Ambassador William Heidt said that Cambodia should stop looking at the past and pay the debt to ensure its future. He emphasised that for a country like Cambodia it shouldn't have arrears as bad as Sudan, Somalia and Zimbabwe.²⁵ Prime Minister Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge commander hit back, saying "The US created problems in my country and is demanding money from me."

"They dropped bombs on our heads and then ask us to repay. When we do not repay, they tell the IMF (International Monetary Fund) not to lend us money," he told an international conference in early March.²⁶

The bombings by the US in the 1970s were done to disrupt the "Vietnam Trails" in the east of Cambodia that supplied provisions to the Viet Cong and to flush out Viet Cong members from the area. The bombings caused massive migrations from the countryside to Phnom Penh, and caused many civilian survivors to join the Khmer Rouge. The capital was burdened to provide for the refugees – the capital for which was provided by the US in the form of a \$274 million loan.²⁷ The loan ostensibly was used to buy food supplies however the Lon Nol government used them to allegedly buy weapons to use against its own people. The US did send shipments of maize. However since maize isn't used in Cambodian cuisine, it was used mostly to feed animals.

The Cambodian government has tried to appeal to the US in the past to turn the loan into humanitarian aid but to no avail.

Cambodia asks US Navy Aid Unit Seabees to leave:

Relations between Cambodia and the US have been strained since US' renewed demands for Cambodia to pay its \$500 million debt and its criticism of legal changes in Cambodia which makes it easier for the government to ban political parties. The dissatisfaction with US' behaviour culminated in the Cambodian government asking the US Navy Aid Unit named the Seabees to leave Cambodia before

²⁴ Fury in Cambodia as US asks to be paid back hundreds of millions in war debts, March 11, 2017, Brisbane Times, at <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/world/fury-in-cambodia-as-us-asks-to-be-paid-back-hundreds-of-millions-in-war-debts-20170311-guvxyp.html>

²⁵ With War-Era Debt Demands, US on Shaky Moral Ground, February 10, 2017, The Cambodia Daily, at <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/featured/with-war-era-debt-demands-us-on-shaky-moral-ground-124912/>

²⁶ Fury in Cambodia as US asks to be paid back hundreds of millions in war debts, March 11, 2017, Brisbane Times, at <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/world/fury-in-cambodia-as-us-asks-to-be-paid-back-hundreds-of-millions-in-war-debts-20170311-guvxyp.html>

²⁷ US demand that Cambodia repay war-time debt is immoral, April 7, 2017, The Phnom Penh Post, at <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/analysis-and-op-ed/us-demand-cambodia-repay-war-time-debt-immoral>

schedule. The Seabees was supposed to help monitor many projects such as building of schools and hospitals.²⁸ The request for an early departure has prompted diplomatic alarm since this is not the first time Cambodia is suspending diplomatic activities with the US. In January Cambodia suspended the military exercises with the US citing that it would be busy with the elections. However just last year, Cambodia held a naval drill with China and benefited by receiving Chinese training and equipment, including jeeps, rocket launchers and helicopters.²⁹ Although Cambodia says otherwise, its actions indicate a strong pivot towards China. China, too, has been generous in its aid by providing for funds for a new sports stadium in Phnom Penh and \$27 million in aid when President Xi visited in October 2016.³⁰ However, Cambodia's shift of allegiance shouldn't come as much of a surprise since it has been echoed by many other South East countries such as Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand.³¹

Cambodia and Vietnam resume talks on border dispute:

Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc made his first trip to Cambodia in late April at the invitation of the Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen as part of the Vietnam-Cambodia Friendship Year 2017.³² While the meeting was to boost ties between the two countries, one thorn that especially stuck out was the border disputes between them. Vietnam has been accused several times for infringing Cambodian territory by building border posts, farms and digging ponds. Cambodia has been able to do little to stop its bigger and more powerful neighbour. In the last meeting regarding border disputes, the two countries were unable to release a joint statement due to disagreements.

However this year as Vietnamese foreign minister Pham Binh Minh met his Cambodian counterpart Prak Sokhon, both parties will cooperate in ensuring that citizens don't buy land across the border. The Cambodian government issued an order in 2015 that banned leasing farmland along the border to Vietnamese citizens. The Vietnamese government has promised to implement the same order in Vietnam.³³

²⁸ Seabees Leaving Cambodia Ahead of Schedule, April 4, 2017, U.S News, at <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-04-04/us-navy-aid-unit-told-to-leave-cambodia>

²⁹ ibid

³⁰ Cambodia Scraps US Aid Program, Accepts \$150M From China, April 7, 2017, Voice of America, at <https://www.voanews.com/a/cambodia-scraps-us-aid-program-accepts-150-million-dollars-from-china/3800792.html>

³¹ Cambodia scraps US military aid deal in latest snub to Washington, April 5, 2017, Financial Times, at <https://www.ft.com/content/b367boba-19c2-11e7-a53d-dfo9f373be87?mhq5j=e1>

³² PM to visit Cambodia in effort to boost ties, April 24, 2017, ViCt Nam News, at <http://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/375200/pm-to-visit-cambodia-in-effort-to-boost-ties.html#4ElXuszAwXOMwozS.97>

³³ Vietnam Promises to Back Off Border Areas, March 16, 2017, The Cambodia Daily, at <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/morenews/vietnam-promises-to-back-off-border-areas-126620/>

The current joint committee will work on border demarcation and planting land border markers to step up talks and seek solutions on sections not yet demarcated, and work closely on border management.³⁴ The countries said they were also moving ahead on a special economic zone along the border in Tbong Khmum province and cooperating to prevent the illegal trafficking of wood and wildlife across the border.³⁵

East Timor

East Timor to get membership of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank:

On March 23, 2017 the Asian Infrastructure Investment bank announced that it would accept East Timor as a prospective member³⁶. The AIIB approved 13 new members for membership. This was the first time the bank has introduced new members since it began its operations, bringing the total tally to 70 member states. The prospective members would officially get to become a part of the bank once they complete the requisite domestic processes and make their first financial contribution.

The Council of Ministers of East Timor met on March 28, 2017 and sat with the Ministry of Finance to initiate the process of the formalizing their application and admission process to the AIIB. The Ministry of Finance would then send a proposal to the National Parliament for consideration and voting after gathering the necessary information and completing the required procedures.

Presidential Elections:

On March 20, 2017, citizens of East Timor elected their new president- former Parliament Chief Francisco Guterres. This election was a milestone as this was the first time that East Timor could hold elections without any direct support from the international community. This is the first election they have held since the United Nations peacekeepers left in 2012³⁷.

Guterres comes from the Fretilin party which led the East Timorese independence struggle. Their cause was strengthened when they garnered support from the resistance hero Xanana Gusmao and his CNRT party. Guterres election is said to bring stability as he is the first presidential candidate to have received a majority in the first round since 2002. The biggest challenge for the new government is now going to be able to diversify their sources of income as their oil reserves are almost depleted. As of now, the energy sector accounts

³⁴ ViCt Nam, Cambodia agree on measures to boost ties, April 26, 2017, ViCt Nam News, at <http://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/375350/viet-nam-cambodia-agree-on-measures-to-boost-ties.html#aAsWI1rOrGpBOWMu.97>

³⁵ Vietnam Promises to Back Off Border Areas, March 16, 2017, The Cambodia Daily, at <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/morenews/vietnam-promises-to-back-off-border-areas-126620/>

³⁶ Sixth Constitutional Government, Dili, March 28, 2017, Press Release, Council of Ministers meeting of March 28, 2017, at <http://www.easttimorlawandjusticebulletin.com/2017/04/east-timor-council-of-ministers-meeting.html>

³⁷ East timor to elect new president as oil revenues rapidly run dry, March 20, 2017, at <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2017/03/20/east-timor-elect-new-president-oil-revenues-rapidly-run-dry?cid=inbody:guterres-wins-timor-leste-election-bringing-hope-for-greater-stability-in-the-region>

for 90 percent of the government's revenue. East Timor is also embroiled in a conflict with Australia over running the lucrative Greater Sunrise gas fields. According to an Australian parliamentary committee without the revenue from these fields, East Timor would likely become an aid dependent, failed state. Guterres election has led to better prospects for an agreement on sea borders with Australia which could therefore help East Timor develop the Greater Sunrise fields.

Laos

Ties with Vietnam:

The Deputy Defence Minister and Chief of the General Staff of the Vietnamese People's Army Phan Van Giang came to Laos for an official visit. He stated that Vietnam gives top priority to their solidarity, co-operation and friendship with Laos. He was received by the Lao Defence Minister Chansamone Chanyalath who highlighted the co-operative relationship between the two armies and the need for them to collaborate in other spheres including in their advisory roles to the Party and State leaders to intensify defence security and improve their combat readiness capacity. They discussed a range of issues including mutual visits, personnel training and cultural exchanges³⁸.

The Lao government has agreed to create the best conditions for the two armies to

foster deeper ties and would also support Vietnamese businesses and military run firms to invest in their country. After a successful round of talks the two sides also signed a Memorandum of Understanding on co-operation between the Vietnamese Defence Ministry's Institute for Military Strategy and the Lao Defence Ministry's Military Science and History Department.

Lieutenant General Giang also stated that such stronger connections between the two armies would facilitate the consolidation of the traditional amity, solidarity and all round co-operations between Laos and Vietnam.

On April 6, 2017, the Vietnamese Prime Minister came to Laos for an official visit³⁹. His visit was as a symbolic culmination of the efforts the two sides have been putting to bolster their bilateral relations. Earlier in the month the Vietnamese government agreed to grant a 50 year concession to Laos to develop the Vung Ang Seaport project in its central Ha Tinh province, the Laos cabinet has approved the direction of the project and discussed a work plan to ensure efficiency. The states and the people of both Laos and Vietnam have been working to co-ordinate activities to mark the 55th anniversary of the bilateral diplomatic relations between the two countries. The year 2017 also marks the 40th anniversary of the signing of the Vietnamese- Laos Treaty on Amity and Co-operation.

Border dispute with Cambodia:

Laos and Cambodia have had a tumultuous relationship recently due to construction activities near the border. Almost 80 percent of

³⁸ Vietnamese army enhances cooperation with Lao counterpart, March, 15, 2017, Vietnam net, at <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/government/174565/vietnamese-army-enhances-cooperation-with-lao-counterpart.html>

³⁹ Lao media: PM Phuc's visit to elevate Vietnam-Laos ties, April 26, 2017, Vietnamnet, at <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/government/177346/laos-media-pm-phuc-s-visit-to-elevate-vietnam-laos-ties.html>

the 533 kilometer border between the two countries has been demarcated but there are a few areas which still remain under contestation, where border posts have not been established. These “white zones” are the reason for the recent border tensions.

Lao workers were found working on a well near the Trapeang Kriel-Nong Nok Khian International border checkpoint. Similarly in the Stung Treng province, Cambodian authorities were found trying to upgrade a colonial-era border outpost located in an un-demarcated zone. After sending in armed troops to halt the construction, Lao authorities shut down the Voen Kham border crossing on April 2nd and 3rd temporarily. According to the Cambodian border police force the colonial out post was being renovated in response to Laos’ attempts to build a military check point⁴⁰.

On April 5, 2017 following a meeting between Cambodian and Lao provincial military and border officials decided to draw back their forces from the two white zones where construction activities had led to a military standoff. The joint delegation from both the countries inspected the concerned sites in the Thala Barivat and Stung Treng districts and decided to withdraw troops to avoid escalation.

Malaysia

Closer ties with Saudi Arabia:

King Salman Bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud visited Malaysia from the end of the February to the first week of March 2017, as part of his official Asian tour⁴¹. On occasion of this visit the Malaysian defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein stated via an official social media channel that Malaysia had offered its training facilities to the Royal Saudi Navy. This is seen to support Saudi Arabia’s efforts to reach a underwater fighting capability. The Malaysians have agreed to share their expertise in submarine operations and ensure that the training is conducted continuously. This training would be simultaneous to the first RSN submarine being constructed.

End of February, the Saudi oil company Aramco successfully signed a \$7billion deal to gain a 50 percent stake in a mega Malaysian oil refinery project along with Malaysia’s national oil company the Petronas.⁴²The plan is being developed in the southern Johor state and is expected to produce 300.000 barrels of oil a day. It is being touted as a historical event for two national oil companies to be engaged in such a gigantic project. The deal took three years to negotiate, and finally has made Aramco the single larger investor in Malaysia. Aramco’s CEO Amin H Nasser believes that Malaysia offers great opportunities for growth and that this deal would serve to enhance the energy security in South East Asia.

⁴⁰ Cambodia, Laos draw back troops in bid to avoid escalation at border, April 6, 2017, The Phnom Penh Post, at <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/cambodia-laos-draw-back-troops-bid-avoid-escalation-border>

⁴¹ Malaysia offers submarine training facilities to Saudi Arabia, Ridzwan Rahmat, March 3, 2017, Janes, at <http://www.janes.com/article/68441/malaysia-offers-submarine-training-facilities-to-saudi-arabia>

⁴² Saudi Aramco inks \$7billion deal for Malaysia oil venture, February 28, 2017, USA Today, at <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2017/02/28/saudi-malaysia-oil-deal/98514948/>

Joint patrolling of the Sulu Sea:

The Sulu Sea is a body of water, situated between Malaysia and the Philippines. More than 100,000 ships transit the area annually carrying around 55m metric tons of cargo. According to the International Maritime Bureau the Sulu Sea has become a dangerous site due to a rising threat of kidnappings. The IMB advises charterers and owners to avoid the region and to follow alternate routes.

These acts of piracy, hijacking and kidnapping are attributed to Abu Sayyaf, which is an al-Qaeda linked terror group, and according to sources operating from the Philippines. In 2016 alone they received over \$7 million in ransom payments. In November 2016, the Philippines government had allowed the Malaysian and Indonesian forces to carry out “hot pursuits” to tackle the issue. For the past one year the three nations have been discussing ways to manage the problem⁴³.

During a news interview on March 14, 2017, the Malaysian Navy Chief, Admiral Ahmad Kamarulzaman stated that Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines were going to conduct joint patrolling of the Sulu Sea from April this year. The patrolling initiative would be modeled after the multilateral patrols in the Strait of Malacca which have been successful in lowering the number of piracy cases. Maritime patrolling in the Sulu Sea would also be accompanied with air patrols of the waters and coastline.

The chief stated that this was a historic achievement as reaching such a level of consensus is rare. It would require a high level of trust and constant communication. He stated that there was not only an understanding about what was to be done but also an acceptance of what each country can and cannot do. Joint patrolling shows that the three countries are ready to co-operate in order to mitigate the challenges which they are facing today like cross border crimes and kidnapping for ransoms.

Malaysia keen to upgrade to Rafale fighter jets:

According to sources in the Malaysian defence ministry, they are planning on replacing the Royal Malaysian Air Force’s squadron of the MiG-29 combat planes⁴⁴ from Russia. The current fleet is ageing with about half of the fleet being grounded.

According to the Malaysian Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein the top two choices for upgrading the RMAF are between the French Dassault Rafale and the Eurofighter Typhoon. Malaysia is keen on buying around 18 fighter jets. This deal would potentially cost them more than \$2 billion, despite the fact that they have narrowed their defence spending this year. The defence spending for countries in the region is expected to rise as a reaction to China’s aggressiveness in the South China Sea and militarisation of reefs and islands like the Subi, Mischief and Fiery Cross reefs to bolster its claims⁴⁵.

⁴³ Joint patrols in Sulu Sea to start in April: Malaysia Navy chief, March 14, 2017, News Asia, at <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/joint-patrols-in-sulu-sea-to-start-in-april-malaysia-navy-chief-8756452>

⁴⁴ Rafale appears in the lead as Malaysia seeks new fighter jets: defense source, March 22, 2017, Reuters, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-defence-idUSKBN16ToXQ>

⁴⁵ Warning that Beijing’s military bases in South China Sea are ready for use, March 28, 2017, The Guardian, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/28/beijing-military-bases-south-china-sea-ready>

Collaborating with ASEAN in the Defence Industry:

Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi stated on March 21, 2017 that Malaysia was keen on collaborating with ASEAN members to tap into the growing defence industry of the region. He was at the Official opening of the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition 2017⁴⁶.

South East Asia has a growing defence industry which is being projected to generate about US \$ 100 billion by 2030. Hamidi believes that ASEAN member nations shouldn't be merely seen as consumers of the end product from the defence industry. Rather they should upgrade themselves as friendly collaborators of other industry system integrators. The LIMA exhibition had attracted exhibitors from around the world and could become a stage for ASEAN members to further explore the possibilities of defence collaboration.

He also said that Malaysia had been a key producer of a number of good components and would be willing to share its knowledge and technology with other ASEAN nations. He states that Malaysia doesn't want to be left behind as the defence industry is developing and wants to go along in order to participate and collaborate in the industry with its neighbours.

Malaysia- India ties strengthen:

The Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak paid an official visit to India which catalyzed many developments in the bilateral relations between Malaysia and India. The meeting between Najib and Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India on April 1, 2017 led to the successful signing of seven agreements⁴⁷ and a joint statement which emphasised the need to follow self restraint in conducting activities, not escalating tensions through unilateral actions and using the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) rules in resolving maritime conflicts. It also highlighted their joint commitment to respect the freedom of navigation and the conduct of lawful commerce in line with international rules and norms. The statement was seen as a joint response against China's activities in the South China Sea.

Prime Minister Najib also stated that India was keen to buy the MiG-29 aircrafts from Malaysia and upgrade them for use. In exchange the Malaysians were keen on purchasing spare parts for the Sukhoi SU-30 in order to strengthen their air power.

The Malaysian Prime Minister also encouraged Indian investors to invest in Malaysia while addressing a joint interaction in Chennai, organized by the Malaysian Associated Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MAICCI)⁴⁸. He believes that India could make Malaysia its gateway to enter the ASEAN markets. This would be an effective strategy given the fact that ASEAN is the seventh largest

⁴⁶ Zahid moots ASEAN cooperation in defence industry, March 21, 2017, Bernama, at <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2017/03/21/zahid-moots-asean-cooperation-in-defence-industry/>

⁴⁷ In message to China, India-malaysia call for respect of navigation laws, April 2, 2017, The Times of India, at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/in-message-to-china-india-malaysia-call-for-respect-of-navigation-laws/articleshow/57968353.cms>

⁴⁸ Najib urges Indian investors to use Malaysia as gateway to ASEAN, March 31, 2017, Business News, at <http://www.thestar.com.my/business/business-news/2017/03/31/najib-urges-indian-investors-to-use-malaysia-as-gateway-to-asean/>

economy in the world and that the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership would be underway soon. Najib also said that the Malaysia had taken several steps to facilitate trade and investment in the region which would make it lucrative for foreign investors. With joint efforts by the two countries he stated, Malaysia-India economic trade and co-operation would reach newer heights.

In the first week of April, the Indian Chief of Naval staff, Admiral Sunil Lamba embarked on a five day goodwill visit to Malaysia to consolidate and enhance bilateral maritime relations between the two countries and provide a boost to their defence relations. A field training exercise is also being organized between the two navies for the first time in June this year. That would also be the time when Indian naval ships visit Malaysia.

Myanmar

Defence co-operation with India:

A three-member Myanmar Navy delegation visited Kochi for a four day visit from February 26 to March 2. The visit was aimed at exploring avenues for defence co-operation between the two navies especially in the field of Meteorology. The delegation called on to the Chief of staff, Southern Naval Command Rear Admiral R. J. Nadkarni who assured them that the Indian Navy would be willing to provide them all the

assistance required in setting up meteorological facilities in Myanmar and for training personnel to operate said facilities.⁴⁹ He further requested the delegation to send a proposal to the Southern Naval Command to facilitate reaching an agreement with higher authorities. In February, India and Myanmar also successfully signed an agreement to facilitate coordinated maritime patrolling between them.

News sources also suggest that India plans on exporting light weight torpedoes to Myanmar. The deal cost Myanmar around \$37.9 million. The export documents for which were presented to Defence Minister Arun Jaitley during a DRDO function on March 24, 2017⁵⁰. According to the DRDO Chief S Christopher, the torpedoes would follow defence equipment exported earlier to Myanmar which includes naval sonars, acoustic domes and directing gear.

There have also been efforts to enhance the coordinate patrolling along the Indo-Myanmar border by the Indian Army. India has been encouraging the Myanmar forces to undertaking sustained operations against militant groups like the United National Liberation Front (ULFA), the People's Liberation Army (PLA) etc. who have bases in the thick jungles near the international border between the two nations.

Ethnic conflict in the North, China a key player:

The Kokang region in the Shan state, north of Myanmar has been embroiled in chaos as ethnic rebels are clashing with the military forces. The military has been targeting groups

⁴⁹ India to train Myanmar Navy, March 3, 2017, the Hindu, at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-to-train-myanmar-navy/article17403541.ece>

⁵⁰ India steps up supply of military equipment to counter China, March 24, 2017, The Times of India, at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-steps-up-supply-of-military-equipment-to-myanmar-to-counter-china/articleshow/57815200.cms>

like the Kachin independence Army (KIA) and ethnic Ta'ang, Kokang and Rakhine rebel groups. The continuous violence, has led to more than 200 deaths and thousands have been displaced. The worsening of the conflict is raising alarms in the relationship between Myanmar and China.

Military retaliation intensified in November last year when ethnic rebels launched a major offensive at the border in November last year. The military resorted to heavy artillery and air strikes. In 2015 eight of the 21 rebel groups had signed the National Ceasefire Agreement.

On March 1, 2017 the Aung San Sun Kyi government held the first high-level meeting with the United Nationalities Federal Council. They discussed the potential for the rebels to take part in a peace conference, signing the NCA and participating in dialogue to create a federal and democratic union. The violence is being seen as the Sun Kyi governments' incompetence to ensure peace and stability, while the government is desperate to end the violence to prevent a major refugee exodus. Rebel groups on the other hand feel angry and alienated because of the silence of the government over military excesses.

China has been providing aid to the region and has managed to settle more than 20,000 people who fled the border area seeking refuge from violence. Chinese spokesman Gen Shuang stated that the aid was being given to avoid further escalation and war, albeit temporarily. He also called for an immediate ceasefire

between the conflicting forces and reiterated that China supports Myanmar's peace process. China has offered help in the form of \$3 million for peace talks and is urging the rebels to sign the ceasefire.

The Myanmar military however is distrustful of the Chinese, they believe the rebels may be receiving aid and weaponry from the Chinese, others believe that the Chinese may be trying to influence the process through their linkages with the powerful rebel groups. The Wa rebels hosted six rebel groups and rejected the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and have called for a new peace process to be mediated and arbitrated by China.

Indonesia

IORA Summit to forge stronger ties:

From March 5-7 Indonesia hosted the first ever Indian Ocean Rim Association Leader's Summit at Jakarta⁵¹. The Summit was themed 'Strengthening Maritime Cooperation for a Peaceful, Stable and Prosperous Indian Ocean'. Indonesia the current chair of the organisation, has been trying to steer it towards strengthening maritime cooperation between the 21 nations and bringing them together to combat piracy, and extremism in the region. The Indonesian foreign ministry's Director General for Asia-Pacific Desra Percaya said that Indonesia had been working to expand the IORA's focus to include a framework which would govern the behavior of all the countries involved. It is in common interest for all to not let the Indian Ocean become a theatre for great power competition as is seen with the South China Sea, which happened because of the absence of a framework to govern state behavior.

⁵¹ Vice President to attend IORA Summit in Jakarta, March 3, 2017, The Hindu, at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/vice-president-to-attend-iora-summit-in-jakarta/article17400372.ece>

President Joko Widodo further announced at the IORA Business Summit that Indonesia wants to link its 'maritime axis program' with the IORA member countries⁵². In November 2014, Widodo had announced his "Poros Maritime Dunia" or the global maritime axis doctrine. The doctrine comes in light of Indonesia realisation regarding the shifts in power centres from the west to the east, giving it an advantage due to its strategic location at the crossroads of the Indian and Pacific oceans. The doctrine extends Indonesia's sphere from ASEAN to the larger Indo-Pacific region and focuses on trade, infrastructure, security and an advanced role for Indonesia in regional and global diplomacy.

Better Defence ties:

US

The head of public information at the Iswahjudi Air Force Base Mayor Tamsir announced that five F-16C/D jet fighters arrived at the base in Magetan, on March 20, 2017⁵³. These five aircrafts are a part of the twenty four aircrafts that the US government has granted Indonesia, which has received 19 so far. These fighter aircrafts are aimed at strengthening Indonesia's main weaponry and air defence capabilities.

France

The president's office announced on March 29, 2017 that French and Indonesian naval defence ties were being strengthened with a new Memorandum of Understanding⁵⁴. This MoU extends an existing agreement to advance joint studies and industrial cooperation between the French naval defense specialist DCNS and the Indonesian shipyard PT PAL in view of Indonesia's plans to acquire submarines. The DCNS also announced that under the Indonesian-French defense dialogue the memorandum for naval studies also took into account Indonesia's interest in acquiring warships. They further announced that since Indonesia is looking at reinforcing its naval capacities, it is in discussions with France to discover projects for building submarines and surface ships in Indonesia with a high level of local industrial involvement. Other agreements being discussed include a letter of intention on defence cooperation which was signed by the respective defence ministers. A letter of intent was also signed by Airbus Defence and Space and the local partner PT Pelia to explore an order for the A400m airlifter.

Russia

On March 31, 2017 a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by Alexey Aleshin, chairman of Russia's Rostekhnadzor - the Federal Environmental, Industrial and Nuclear Supervision Service and Jazi Eko, chairman of

⁵² IORA Summit 2017 Jakarta: Jokowi's global Maritime Axis doctrine key to Indonesia's future, March 6, 2017, The Jakarta Post at <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/03/06/jokowi-s-global-maritime-axis-doctrine-key-indonesia-s-future.html>

⁵³ More F-16 aircraft from US arrive in Indonesia, March 20, 2017, The Jakarta Post, at <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/03/20/more-f-16-aircraft-from-us-arrive-in-indonesia.html>

⁵⁴ French, Indonesia naval firms extend submarine study, March 31, 2017, Defense News, at <http://www.defensenews.com/articles/french-indonesian-naval-firms-extend-submarine-study>

Indonesia's BAPTEN - the Nuclear Energy Regulatory agency⁵⁵. The memorandum aims to explore cooperation in a range of areas related to nuclear radiation safety, security of nuclear technology and mining of radioactive materials, including emergency preparedness and response.

Saudi Arabia and Indonesia cooperate to combat the Islamic State

Saudi Arabia's King Salan bin Abdulaziz Al Saud visited Indonesia as part of his larger Asian tour in March 2017. This was the first time in five decades that the King had visited Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim majority country⁵⁶. Ambassador Osama Mohammad Abdullah Alshuaibi said that they understand how Indonesia has suffered because of bombings and terrorism and Saudi Arabia was willing to cooperate with Indonesia in combating the Islamic state by exchanging data, and experience. He stated that soldiers from both nations were training in each other's countries to combat the Islamic state.

Philippines

China claims Benham Rise as its own:

The Philippines and China are once more at loggerheads over Benham Rise as

Chinese survey ships were spotted earlier this year in the region. Despite the Philippines filing a claim in 2008 and getting it approved in the UN 2011, China claims that Philippines has no territorial claim over the region. The Benham Rise is 250 km east of the Philippines and is part of its continental shelf according to the UN Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS). However the Chinese Foreign Ministry said that the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) states that "a coastal state's rights over the continental shelf do not affect the legal status of the superjacent waters or of the air space above those waters, nor do they affect foreign ships' navigation freedom in the coastal state's EEZ and on the high seas, or their innocent passage through the coastal state's territorial sea as supported by international law."⁵⁷ While the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson admits that the Rise is on Philippines' extended continental shelf, the UN approval doesn't make the Rise a part of its territory. The Chinese survey ships were merely exercising their rights of free navigation and innocent passage. However according to the UNCLOS the right to navigate can be given expressly by the country to which the continental shelf belongs to.

The Philippines, on the other hand, is of the belief that the intent behind the navigation of the ships was less than innocent. Defence secretary Delfin Lorenzana said that while it was not clear what the survey ships were doing there but according to the information he had received the Chinese were "looking for a place

⁵⁵ Russia, Indonesia to cooperate on nuclear regulation, April 5, 2017, World Nuclear News, at <http://world-nuclear-news.org/RS-Russia-Indonesia-to-cooperate-on-nuclear-regulation-0504175.html>

⁵⁶ Saudi King to work with Indonesia to combat Islamic state: Ambassador, February 28, 2017, Reuters, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-asia-indonesia-idUSKBN1670GJ>

⁵⁷ China: Philippines can't claim Benham Rise, March 13, 2017, The Philippine Star at <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/03/13/1680673/china-philippines-cant-claim-benham-rise>

to put submarines”.⁵⁸ The Philippines will send military patrols and survey vessels to a large underwater land mass in the Pacific Ocean to assert its rights over the area. The Armed Forces of the Philippines will also send its newly acquired TC-90 aircrafts from Japan to patrol the West Philippine Sea and the Benham Rise.⁵⁹

Meanwhile China dismissed the concerns raised by Philippines by saying that the ships were just passing through. The Chinese Foreign Ministry said, “China fully respects the Philippines’ maritime area rights over the Benham Rise. On this point, there has not been, is not at the moment and will not be a dispute between China and the Philippines,” China and the Philippines had worked very hard over the past year to improve relations, and China set great store on this, it added.⁶⁰

Philippines has remained suspicious of China and has proposed a point of action to rename the Benham Rise to the Philippine Rise to assert its sovereignty and ownership of the area.⁶¹ President

Rodrigo Duterte ordered the navy to put up structures along Rise and asked to assert itself by saying that the area is theirs, but in a friendly tone.⁶² What’s not lost on the Philippines is that it has been trying to normalise relations with China over the past few years and all progress made would be in vain if it escalates the situation too aggressively. Nevertheless it was expected to heighten military presence in the area with Defence Secretary Lorenzana saying that Philippines will build a runway, a port and a pier for its ships on Thitu – another island with disputed ownership claims.⁶³ However the long-term strategic implications of angering China seemed to be realised when Philippines officials later commented that the plans are to upgrade existing Philippine facilities on the islands and not to engage in a military build-up.⁶⁴

China and Philippines bicker over Scarborough Shoal:

Weeks after the Benham Rise dispute had calmed down; China announced that it plans on building an environmental monitoring station on the Scarborough Shoal on the South China Sea. Philippine Justice Minister Vitaliano Aguirre told reporters in Manila the

⁵⁸ Philippines to patrol Benham Rise to assert rights, March 14, 2017, Al Jazeera at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/philippines-patrol-benham-rise-assert-rights-170314140519782.html>

⁵⁹ Philippines to conduct air patrols in Benham, March 28, 2017, The Philippine Star at <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/03/28/1685184/philippines-conduct-air-patrols-benham>

⁶⁰ China says has no dispute with Philippines over Benham Rise, March 23, 2017, ABS-CBN News at <http://news.abs-cbn.com/news/03/23/17/china-says-has-no-dispute-with-philippines-over-benham-rise>

⁶¹ Renaming ‘Benham Rise’ to ‘Philippine Rise’ sought to assert sovereignty, April 1, 2017, The Philippine Star, at <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/04/01/1686679/renaming-benham-rise-philippine-rise-sought-assert-sovereignty>

⁶² Wary of China, Duterte tells navy to build ‘structures’ east of Philippines, March 12, 2017, Reuters, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-china-idUSKBN16KoUF>

⁶³ Philippines to strengthen military facilities in South China Sea, March 17, 2017, The Straits Times at <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/philippines-to-strengthen-military-facilities-in-south-china-sea>

⁶⁴ Duterte says will reinforce, not militarise, Philippines-controlled islets, April 10, 2017, Reuters, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-philippines-china-idUSKBN17CoL6>

government would file a “fairly strong” complaint against Beijing’s plan to construct a radar station on Scarborough Shoal. Aguirre said the Philippines would also renew its strong ties with the United States in the face of China’s aggressive action in the shoal, which is 229km from the Philippine island of Luzon.⁶⁵ Thailand and the Philippines have also agreed for closer economic and defence ties. “On the security matters, Thailand and the Philippines are willing to work together in tightening the military ties of both countries as we are concerned about the challenges in addressing terrorism and all forms of transnational crimes,” Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha pointedly said after their meeting.⁶⁶

The Philippines plans on resolving the dispute through international mediation. President Duterte quoted earlier that he recognises and admits that the Philippines cannot engage militarily with China. Therefore the only way towards resolution is to appeal to the international community.

However looking at China’s history with international tribunal and their rulings, the future seems bleak. China until late last year had two to three coastguard ships guarding the shoal and stopping

Filipinos from tapping its vast fish stocks. An international tribunal ruled last year that Beijing violated Manila’s entitlements and no country has sole rights to fish there.

However, just days after Duterte visited China and heralded a new era of ties, Filipinos returned to fish at the periphery of the shoal, unimpeded by Chinese vessels.⁶⁷ China has also put missiles and radar on some of its seven man-made islands in another part of the South China Sea, a strategic waterway claimed by Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam.⁶⁸

Australia and Philippines hold anti-terrorism talks:

With ISIS fighters being forced out of the middle-east there is a looming concern that around 600 members from south-east Asia are returning home. Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, after her return from the US, said, “There is concern that Isis may well seek to declare a caliphate, an Islamic caliphate, in the southern Philippines,” The leader of the Philippines-based terrorist group Abu Sayyaf had recently been declared an emir, or leader, by ISIS, Bishop said.⁶⁹

The Philippines is already wrecked with Islamic extremism in the Mindanao region. The government’s constant clashes with the Moro

⁶⁵ Philippines to China: Stop Scarborough Shoal plan, March 21, 2017, Al Jazeera, at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/philippines-china-stop-scarborough-shoal-plan-170321132520315.html>

⁶⁶ Thailand, Philippines Will ‘Tighten’ Military Ties, March 21, 2017, Voice of America, at <https://www.voanews.com/a/thailand-philippines-will-tighten-military-ties/3776613.html>

⁶⁷ Philippines to protest China’s planned construction on disputed shoal, March 21, 2017, Reuters, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinesea-philippines-china-idUSKBN16S1C3>

⁶⁸ Philippines to China: Stop Scarborough Shoal plan, March 21, 2017, Al Jazeera, at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/philippines-china-stop-scarborough-shoal-plan-170321132520315.html>

⁶⁹ Julie Bishop says Australia preparing for Isis to declare ‘caliphate’ in southern Philippines, March 25, 2017, The Guardian, at <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/mar/26/julie-bishop-says-australia-preparing-for-isis-to-declare-caliphate-in-southern-philippines>

Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the region's dissatisfaction make it a hotbed for further radicalisation. Currently, the Duterte government is pursuing talks with the MILF and has called for a ceasefire in Southern Philippines.⁷⁰ It promises reformation in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), while the MILF released hundreds of child soldiers it had captured over the years.⁷¹ Bishop said Australia would provide 90 million Australian dollars (\$68 million) over nine years to support conflict-sensitive quality basic education services in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao through a program called Education Pathways to Peace in Mindanao.⁷²

Singapore

Singapore plans to strengthen its cyber security:

In a rousing speech regarding the budget of the defence ministry, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen highlighted the need for more expenditure in cyber security. He quoted two examples to underline the

urgent need – one of Ukraine where cyber-attacks cut off electricity to an area 20 times the size of Singapore in the dead of winter and the other of Estonia which has been the target of orchestrated cyber-attacks since 2007. Dr Ng recommended measures such as setting up high-level cyber command to oversee policies and train cyber units to monitor its networks 24/7. This new Defence Cyber Organisation will have about 2,600 soldiers and be supported by defence scientists and engineers.⁷³ The total estimate of the defence budget was just over \$14 billion – the highest among all ministries – and was surprisingly met with consensus among all members. Dr Ng added that the government will also provide \$31.9 million annually to set up new defence laboratories that will undertake research and development (R&D) in areas including robotics and artificial intelligence.⁷⁴

The debate to beef up the defence budget came up especially after the breach of the Ministry of Defence's "I-net" system which resulted with personal information of about 850 people being stolen. The I-net system was, however, not connected to the main internal systems which prevented other, more sensitive information from being leaked. Cyber security experts have stated that there is a high probability that the

⁷⁰ Philippines, communists resume peace talks, March 12, 2017, The Daily Mail, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-4305482/Philippines-communists-resume-peace-talks.html>

⁷¹ Hundreds of MILF child soldiers released in Philippines, March 11, 2017, Al Jazeera, at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/hundreds-milf-child-soldiers-released-philippines-170311064133681.html>

⁷² Philippines, Australia to boost fight vs terrorism, March 18, 2017, The Philippine Star, at <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/03/18/1682266/philippines-australia-boost-fight-vs-terrorism>

⁷³ Beefing up defence a must, but make every dollar count, March 4, 2017, The Strait Times at <http://www.straittimes.com/singapore/beefing-up-defence-a-must-but-make-every-dollar-count>

⁷⁴ Singapore outlines plans to invest in cyber defence and new technologies, March 6, 2017, Jane's 360 at <http://www.janes.com/article/68470/singapore-outlines-plans-to-invest-in-cyber-defence-and-new-technologies>

attack was state sponsored given the current situation in the South China Sea. FireEye said in a 2015 report that claimant states in the South China Sea territorial dispute faced the risk of the disagreement spilling into “cyber operations”.⁷⁵

Singapore to buy precision mortar rounds from the US:

In the aftermath of discussing and agreeing on greater defence expenditure, Singapore’s Ministry of Defence confirmed that it is looking to procure 2000 XM395 Accelerated Precision Mortar Initiative (APMI) worth \$66 million. The Defence Security Cooperation Agency said that Singapore intends to use the rounds to modernise its armed forces to meet current and future threats, to strengthen its homeland defence, and to provide greater security for its economic infrastructure.⁷⁶

According to Orbital ATK – the manufacturer of the XM395 – the XM395 combines GPS guidance and computer-controlled directional control surfaces onto existing 120mm mortar rounds, replacing the standard fuzes and transforming them into precision-guided munitions that are compatible with all

120mm smoothbore mortar systems. The company adds that the round provides maneuver commanders with a precision indirect fire capability to neutralize fleeting targets on reverse slopes, in narrow gullies, in urban areas and in other complex terrain where they are difficult to engage with low-angle fire.⁷⁷

Singapore is a close regional security partner of the United States and has been a strong supporter of the U.S. security presence in Asia. In addition to various joint training exercises between both militaries, Singapore is also hosting rotational deployments of littoral combat ships and P-8 Poseidon multi-mission aircraft, as well as providing logistical support for American military ships and aircraft from its bases.⁷⁸

Singapore unveils fourth warship out of eight:

The Republic of Singapore Navy is going through a modernisation of its capabilities to help it better confront future challenges, particularly in the maritime domain. As part of this effort, the city-state’s 11 existing Fearless-class patrol vessels, which have been in service for 20 years, are being replaced by eight new, locally-built littoral mission vessels (LMVs).⁷⁹ Given the current geopolitical atmosphere in the South China Sea and China’s looming shadow over it, it doesn’t come as a

⁷⁵ Singapore Military Hack ‘Probably State Sponsored’, February 28, 2017, South China Morning Post at <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2074806/singapore-military-hack-probably-state-sponsored>

⁷⁶ US to supply Singapore with precision mortar rounds, March 15, 2017, Jane’s 360 at <http://www.janes.com/article/68733/us-to-supply-singapore-with-precision-mortar-rounds>

⁷⁷ US State Department OKs mortar rounds sale to Singapore, March 16, 2017, Defense News at <http://www.defensenews.com/articles/us-state-department-oks-mortar-rounds-sale-to-singapore>

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Singapore Reveals Fourth New Warship, March 21, 2017, The Diplomat, at <http://thediplomat.com/2017/03/singapore-reveals-fourth-new-warship/>

surprise that most countries that have a stake in the sea are beefing up their defences. The eight LMVs will also patrol the sea to battle threats such as piracy, terrorism, and trafficking.

The LMVs are considered “smarter, faster and sharper” from their predecessors. LMVs have various customizable mission modules that can be reconfigured to perform a range of roles ranging from counter-piracy to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. They are also equipped with an array of lethal and non-lethal options to deliver calibrated responses to a diverse set of threats. The new vessels boast greater endurance and speed. They are twice the size of their predecessor and can travel much further and faster.⁸⁰ All eight LMVs are expected to be fully operational by 2020.

Thailand

Purchase of Chinese Submarines confirmed:

According to the statement given by the spokesman Sansern Kaewkamnerd to Reuters, the Thailand cabinet approved the purchase of one Submarine from China on April 18, 2017. This decision comes in light of the Thai government’s larger project of purchasing three Chinese built submarines, which they confirmed in July 2016. A budget of 13.5 billion baht (\$393 million) has been earmarked for the

submarines over a six-year period⁸¹.

On March 23, 2017 the Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha revealed in a press briefing that the government would have to pay only for two submarines as the third was a gift. This move by China signals warmer ties between the two nations. In the past the Thai defence forces had tried procuring submarines from Germany and South Korea. The current military government has made it easier for them to realise their strategic goals. The three submarines being purchased are Yuan Class S26 T which the Chinese have developed exclusively for the Thai on the lines of the Chinese Yuan Class Type 039 A. The submarines would be equipped with the latest AIP- Air Independent Propulsion system which would enable them to dive consecutively up to 21 days without resurfacing.

The decision has received strong criticism by various factions who believe that the transaction was unnecessary and expensive since Thailand has severe economic problems to solve and it is not a party to the South China Sea conflict. The government thinks otherwise with the Navy spokesman Admiral Jumpol Looipikanon stating that Thailand needed new submarines to protect their maritime interests. He also reassured the people that the purchases would be worth it and beneficial to Thailand. The Prime Minister also reassured the people by trying to make them understand the needs of their defence forces. Since Thailand didn’t have the resources to manufacture them they need to buy the submarines from others. The submarines from China are the most affordable with an acceptable quality. Furthermore China

⁸⁰ What Do We Know about Singapore’s New Warship? July 07, 2015, The Diplomat, at <http://thediplomat.com/2015/07/what-do-we-know-about-singapores-new-warship/>

⁸¹ Thailand approves \$393-mln purchase of Chinese submarines, April 24, 2017, Daily Mail, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/reuters/article-4440010/Thailand-approves-393-mln-purchase-Chinese-submarines.html>

has offered them more than they had asked for making this a good deal.⁸² Admiral Na Arreenich, Chief of the Thai Navy is expected to visit China soon to finalise the government to government purchase.

Ties with Russia:

In order to strengthen the ties between Bangkok and Moscow the Russian Army Chief Colonel General Oleg Salyukov visited Thailand on March 15, 2017 for a three-day trip. His trip marks the first such trip by a high ranking military commander in a decade. During the visit, he met with high ranking Thai defence officials and also visited the Royal Thai Army facilities to familiarise himself with the daily life of Thai soldiers and addressing their army capabilities.⁸³ This meeting was seen as a practical manifestation of the intergovernmental agreement on military cooperation which was signed by the two nations in 2016.

The Russian ambassador to Thailand, Kirill Barsky stated that both Russia and Thailand were determined to take result oriented steps for strengthening their military interaction. For the first time the Thai military forces have been invited to take part in the International Army games in Russia. On the other hand, the

military parade dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the establishment of ASEAN has invited the Russian Naval command representatives to participate. According to the ambassador the two nations would also engage in confidence building measures which involve conducting joint military exercises and sending Thai officers to study at Russian military institutions. The ambassador also stated that the two nations have a long list of joint future projects. Thailand is planning on importing modern weapons and military equipment, and is also looking into assembling Russian military equipment and servicing military, civilian and dual use aircrafts⁸⁴. Military cooperation between Russia and Thailand is a key to boost bilateral relations the ambassador stated.

Strengthened Cooperation on Nuclear Safety and Security with the US

The Office of Atoms for Peace of Thailand (OAP) and the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) came together on March 15, 2017 to sign an 'Arrangement for the Exchange of Technical Information and Cooperation in Nuclear Safety Matters'. Thailand was represented by Dr. Atchara Wongsangchan Secretary General of the OAP and the US was represented by Kristine L. Sviniki, Chairman of the NRC⁸⁵. The arrangement follows on the earlier arrangement that Thailand and US signed in 2012. Thailand has actively participated

⁸² Thailand to get 3 Chinese submarines at the price for 2, March 24, 2017, Asia one, at <http://www.asiaone.com/asia/thailand-get-3-chinese-submarines-price-2>

⁸³ Russian Army Chief arrives in Thailand for 3-day visit, March 16, 2017, Russia Beyond the Headlines, at <https://www.rbth.com/asia/2017/03/16/russian-army-chief-thailand-visit-720596>

⁸⁴ Russia-Thailand military ties a factor if stability in Asia-ambassador, March 20, 2017, Russia Beyond the Headlines, at <https://www.rbth.com/international/2017/03/21/russia-thailand-military-ties-factor-stability-asia-ambassador-723876>

⁸⁵ Thailand, U.S. strengthen cooperation on nuclear safety and security, March 16, 2017, Royal Thai Embassy, Washington D.C. at <http://thaiembdc.org/2017/03/16/thailand-u-s-strengthen-cooperation-on-nuclear-safety-and-security/>

internationally in enhancing international cooperation on nuclear security, safety and safeguards.

Vietnam

Improved Defence Ties with Israel:

The Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang welcomed the Israeli President Reuven Rivlin on March 20, 2017 stating that the state visit to Vietnam reflected Israel's desire to deepen their friendship and cooperation⁸⁶. The two leaders discussed the need to improve bilateral trade and wished to accelerate the signing of a Free Trade agreement. They also discussed ideas to push forward their ties in various fields including national security and defence. During talks with the Vietnamese Defense Minister General Ngo Xuan Lich, the Israeli President Rivlin acknowledged the need to establish advance production lines with Israeli know how in Vietnam, in order to produce in Vietnam and with Vietnam.

Early in 2017, the Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Vietnamese People's Army Pham, Ngoc Minh hosted the Director of Israel Ministry of Defence, Mishel Ben Baruch. Their meeting led to joint resolution to improve bilateral defence cooperation. Yitzhak Aharonovitch chairman of the state

owned weapons developer IMM- Israel Military Industries Limited has also been in touch with Hanoi.

On March 21, 2017 the first Vietnam-Israel defense industry forum was held in Hanoi⁸⁷ which was attended by officials from both sides. Several Israeli companies also exhibited their defense equipment in Hanoi and presented their Vietnamese counterparts with advancements in unmanned aerial vehicles, drones, sophisticated tanks, rocket launchers, etc. Reports also suggest that Vietnam is keen on acquiring Israel's Delilah missile system, and has been a topic of discussion during Aharonovitch's visits. The IMM's Delilah air-launched cruise missile is a highly flexible and accurate standoff weapon which can carry different war heads and can fly to its target in subsonic speeds at various altitudes⁸⁸.

At the end of the meeting between the two presidents Rivlin requested Vietnam to reconsider its voting stance in international organisations. He made the analogy that not recognising Jerusalem as a part of Israel was akin to stating that Hanoi was not a part of Vietnam⁸⁹. Despite their economic and defence collaborating Vietnam has voted against Israel at the UN, supporting the Arab bloc positions and also recognises the Palestinian state. Furthermore Israel is also moving cautiously despite Vietnam's eagerness to acquire defence technology as they are wary of the Chinese and Iranians and wish to prevent sensitive technology from being leaked.

⁸⁶ Israel to deepen friendship, cooperation with Vietnam, March 2, 2017, Vietnam News, at <http://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/373177/israel-to-deepen-friendship-co-operation-with-vietnam.html#qGg8qRYJMEBU7HDo.97>

⁸⁷ Rivlin tour is proof of Israel, Vietnam are brothers in arms, March 25, 2017, at <http://www.atimes.com/hosting-israels-president-vietnam-seeks-closer-defense-ties/>

⁸⁸ Vietnam eyes Israeli weapons for air force use, March 2, 2017, Flight Global, at <https://www.flightglobal.com/news/articles/vietnam-eyes-israeli-weapons-for-air-force-use-434742/>

⁸⁹ Rivlin asks Vietnam to consider supporting Israel more, March 25, 17, at <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4940250,00.html>

Activities in the South China Sea:

In a recent attempt to bolster its claims on the strategic Paracel islands, China has launched a new cruise ship – the Changle Princess. The cruise can carry about five hundred tourists who get to visit three islands in the Crescent group of the Paracels⁹⁰. Reports suggest that China plans on developing the islands by developing hotels and resorts on the Crescent group. The first Chinese cruise to the Paracels was launched in 2013. Vietnam demanded that China stop sending cruises to the Paracels because they view such actions as a breach of their maritime sovereignty and a violation of international law⁹¹.

A statement released on the government's website on March 20, 2017, stated that the Vietnamese Prime Minister sought support from South Korea on the South China Sea issue during his meeting with the South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se⁹². Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc suggested that in order for Vietnam to improve its law enforcement at sea it needed South Korea to continue their support for Vietnamese and South East Asian claims on the South China Sea. Despite instability in South Korea after the ousting of the president, Yun reiterated South Korean willingness to promote ties between the two countries.

Vietnam has also been courting the US to balance against China's aggressiveness in the South China Sea. Vietnam would have become one of the top beneficiaries of the Trans Pacific Partnership but the Trump administration pulled out from the deal. However the Vietnamese are still eager to forge deeper ties with the US, this was further strengthened by US President Donald Trump's invitation to Vietnam's Prime Minister, announced by the Vietnamese government on April 21, 2017. President Trump would also be attending the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit to be held in Vietnam in November this year.

Strengthening Ties with India:

The 'Act East' dialogue was held in New Delhi on April 5, 2017 where attendees were a part of three sessions focusing on improving connectivity in India-ASEAN trade relations, Asia's multilateralism and new defence structure and Agenda 2025: Transforming ASEAN-India relations. In his speech delivered at the event, the Vietnamese Deputy Foreign minister Nguyen Quoc praised India's 'Act East' policy which is designed to strengthen India's ties with ASEAN member states.⁹³ He suggested that in order to strengthen the India-ASEAN strategic partnership as well as to accelerate the deployment of the Act East policy there was a need to enhance the physical, digital and cultural connectivity while facilitating people to people exchanges. As a coordinator of India-

⁹⁰ China launches new cruise ship tour to Vietnam's Paracel islands, March 3, 2017, Reuters, at <http://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/china-launches-new-cruise-ship-tour-to-vietnam-s-paracel-islands-3549694.html>

⁹¹ Vietnam demands China stop cruises in South China Sea, March 13, 2017, The Hindu, at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/vietnam-demands-china-stop-cruises-in-south-china-sea/article17455519.ece>

⁹² Vietnam seeks South Korean support in south China Sea, March 20, 2017, US News, at <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-03-20/vietnam-seeks-south-korean-support-in-south-china-sea>

⁹³ Vietnam applauds India's Act East Policy, April 6, 2017, Vietnam net, at <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/government/176039/vietnam-applauds-india-s-act-east-policy.html>

ASEAN relations, Vietnam further pledged to work with the two to commemorate the 25th anniversary founding anniversary of the bilateral strategic relationship and also help in enhancing the relationship to newer heights. This would in turn make important contributions to peace, stability and prosperity in the region.

Bilateral ties with China:

At the 10th meeting of the steering committee for Vietnam-China bilateral cooperation, held on April 18, 2017, in Beijing, the two sides reached an agreement to work together in order to strengthen the focal points of their strategic partnership.⁹⁴ The meeting was co-chaired by Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh and the Chinese State Councilor Yang Jeichi. They discussed difficulties and obstacles which occur in their bilateral ties and agreed to implement mechanisms for defence exchange and cooperation and to intensify connections in security and law enforcement. They also addressed the maritime issues straight forwardly and agreed to work on achieving substantial outcomes by carrying out the Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the East Sea. They also reiterated their commitment to finalise the Code of Conduct in the East Sea, controlling and de-escalating sea conflicts and refraining from actions which spark disputes in order to maintain stability in the South China Sea. Minh also stated that it was in the mutual interest of both Vietnam and China to control divergences and peacefully solve their

maritime disputes in accordance with international law and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Oceania

Australia

Australia opts out of patrolling South China Sea with Indonesia:

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced that his country aims to work alongside Indonesia on maritime cooperation, but would not hold joint patrols in the South China Sea with them. The area, according to Turnbull, is already rife with tension and does not need to become more inflamed. Indonesian President Joko Widodo had voiced his desire to see them hold joint patrols in February this year. However after meeting the Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs, LuhutPandjaitan said that he did not foresee any cooperation occurring between the countries on a joint patrol.

Indonesia has traditionally been a neutral country and has acted as the buffer between China and the rest of South East Asian countries – especially Philippines and Vietnam, who have most at stake in the South China Sea. But Jakarta was angered after China said the two countries had “overlapping claims” to waters close to Indonesia's Natuna Islands and staged large-scale exercise on the edge of South China Sea in October.

Australia - which says it takes no sides on South China Sea disputes but has supported US-led

⁹⁴ Vietnam and China pledge deeper ties, April 19, 2017, Vietnam News, at <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/news/business/aec/30312594>

freedom of navigation activities in the region - has been rebuilding ties with Indonesia after a recent spat over military.⁹⁵

North Korea threatens Australia with nuclear strike:

North Korea threatened Australia with nuclear retaliation after Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop announced that North Korea will be subjected to further economic sanctions. North Korea's state-run KCNA news agency quoted a foreign ministry spokesman saying, "If Australia persists in following the US moves to isolate and stifle the DPRK and remains a shock brigade of the US master, this will be a suicidal act of coming within the range of the nuclear strike of the strategic force of the DPRK."⁹⁶ However North Korea's promises have not been met with much alarm. Bishop responded to these threats by saying that it would be better if the DPRK would "invest in the welfare of its long-suffering citizens, rather than weapons of mass destruction".⁹⁷ Labor party defence spokesman Richard Marles noted that while the threats are a source of concern, similar threats have been made in the past to other countries with little consequence. There were even talks of deploying an

anti-missile system in the country, similar to South Korea's. However, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull dismissed such ideas – "We have extensive arrangements with our allies, in particular with the US, but we do not deploy in Australia a missile defence system like the Thaad system that Washington is deploying in South Korea at the moment," Turnbull said⁹⁸. The economic sanctions, according to Turnbull, are designed to put pressure on North Korea and attempt to bring it back to its senses.

Australia joins US on boycotting ban on nuclear weapons:

Over 120 nations are trying to introduce a treaty which bans nuclear weapons in the UN. The UN has come up with a draft, and anyone who signs it will have to stop developing and manufacturing nuclear weapons, and destroy any existing nuclear weapons they possess. The treaty has been received with fair enthusiasm with the exception of the nine nuclear powers, and Australia.

Australia argued that despite the utopian ideal behind the treaty, the geostrategic reality of the world remains unchanged. While it would be nice to see a world without nuclear weapons, the strategic environment is actually becoming more volatile and dangerous. The nuclear umbrella that the US provides is vital for deterrence, while additionally providing

⁹⁵ Australia says no plan for joint South China Sea patrols with Indonesia, March 07, 2017, Hindustan Times, at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/australia-says-no-plan-for-joint-south-china-sea-patrols-with-indonesia/story-VITSruij1jGaDcmrycGdfJ.html>

⁹⁶ North Korea threatens Australia with nuclear strike over US allegiance, April 24, 2017, news.com.au at <http://www.news.com.au/world/asia/north-korea-threatens-australia-with-nuclear-strike-over-us-allegiance/news-story/fa28ccb9eaaff6c02f5c12bdc19bc227>

⁹⁷ Australia, New Zealand hit back at North Korea threat, April 23, 2017, The Daily Mail, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-4436818/Australia-New-Zealand-hit-North-Korea-threat.html>

⁹⁸ Australia's no to deploying anti-missile system, April 28, 2017, Business Standard, at http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/australia-s-no-to-deploying-anti-missile-system-117042800470_1.html

protection to Australia. Australia's hard-line position comes after North Korea threatened Australia with a nuclear strike. Australia, however, is not in favour of a total boycott. It has been championing a "building blocks" approach which presses for nuclear states to be more transparent about their nuclear arsenals and dismantle facilities which are used to produce fissile material⁹⁹ instead of an outright ban.

Australia's approach has infuriated other countries. It has been accused of trying to deliberately undermine the treaty while at the same time trying to be part of the working group for the draft.

Australia selects Raytheon Co for ground based air defence system:

Australia is set to replace its thirty year old short range capability with a \$2 billion surface-to-air missile system provided by US based defence company Raytheon Co. At a time where China has been flexing its muscles militarily, Australia has been steadily increasing its defence budget by nearly \$23 billion.¹⁰⁰ Australia has also been trying to streamline its military tendering process to make it easier to obtain equipment. However several other defence companies felt spurned that the contract went to Raytheon and not one of them. One defence industry official said several companies had spent hundreds of

thousands of dollars responding to Government requests for information on their bids, but then discovered the final decision was made without a competitive evaluation.¹⁰¹ Raytheon Australia said its proposal was based on the Raytheon/Kongsberg Gruppen ASA National Advanced Surface to Air Missile System in use by seven countries, including the United States, Norway, Finland, Spain and the Netherlands.

"Our solution combines proven U.S. and Norwegian technology and Australian innovation backed by local integration and sustainment capability," said Raytheon Australia Managing Director Michael Ward.¹⁰²

Australia and India negotiate Uranium shipment and defence ties:

With Australia passing the Civil Nuclear Transfers to India Act last year, both sides are raring to go for a negotiation for uranium shipments from Australia to India. While most were expecting Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to sign the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) on his visit to India, the visit mostly focused on defence, strategy, security, energy, and education among other sectors.

"My first visit to India as Prime Minister is a chance to further cooperate across a wide range of sectors, including energy, education and trade. But there are many more opportunities. India wants to provide energy security through a range of technologies, including nuclear, clean coal, natural gas and renewable energy.

⁹⁹ Australia's stance on the nuclear weapons ban treaty - and why our diplomats were labelled 'weasels', June 3, 2017, ABC News, at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-06-03/australian-weasels-and-nuclear-disarmament/8585136>

¹⁰⁰ Christopher Pyne defends decision to award \$2b missile contract without competition, April 10, 2017, ABC News, at [http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-10/government-awards-\\$2b-missile-contract-without-competition/8430974](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-10/government-awards-$2b-missile-contract-without-competition/8430974)

¹⁰¹ Ibid

¹⁰² Australia selects Raytheon for \$1.5 billion ground-based air defense system, April 10, 2017, Reuters, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-raytheon-australia-idUSKBN17CoBH?il=0>

Australia is well placed to provide many of the raw materials, and some of the latest technology,” Turnbull said in a Sydney Institute speech on Thursday ahead of his trip to India.¹⁰³

Australia has always supported India for its membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and this agreement on uranium shipment will take the two countries’ relations to the next level. Other than uranium the pair discussed security in the Indian Ocean, the possibility of Australia joining the Indo-US-Japan trilateral Malabar naval exercise, trans-national crime, terrorism, more military-to-military exchanges and exercises such as the AUSINDEX naval war-game, the second edition of which is to be held late this year.¹⁰⁴

Fiji

Fiji part of the South Pacific Defence Meeting:

In 2006 due to a military coup Fiji lost its regional defence links. Since elections being held to elect the government in 2014 Fiji’s ties with regional powers have been restored. Fiji also initiated a Look North Policy to strengthen its ties with armed forces from several other Asian powers. Finally, this year Fiji will get to join the

South Pacific Defence Minister’s meeting which was held in Auckland on April 6, 2017¹⁰⁵. New Zealand’s Defence Minister Gerry Brownlee said in a statement that he was pleased to welcome Fiji. The South Pacific Defence Meeting was attended by ministers and senior officials from Australia, Chile, Fiji, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, France and Tonga.

Increased investments from the European Union:

The European Commission’s Director-General for International cooperation and Development, Stefano Manservigi visited the Pacific region from March 28 to April 3 to strengthen coordination and cooperation between the EU and the Pacific. He met with the Fiji President Major-General (Retd) Jioji Konusi Konrote. He signed the EU “Investment Facility for the Pacific” worth EUR 20million with the Pacific Island Forum (PIFS). The agreement aims to support and promote the sustainable development in the Pacific¹⁰⁶.

He also pledged EUR 3 million to Fiji for preparing for the Conference of the Parties (COP23) to the UN convention on Climate Change, which would be hosted in Bonn, Germany in November this year. Fiji would be presiding over the 23rd session of the COP. The EU has committed over \$90 million to Fiji from 2014 to 2020. In an address by Manservigi it was highlighted that the EU’s financial

¹⁰³ Australia likely to start supplying uranium to India from this year, April 07, 2017, ETEnergy world, at <http://energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/power/australia-likely-to-start-supplying-uranium-to-india-from-this-year/58058416>

¹⁰⁴ As Turnbull visits, India and Australia negotiate uranium shipment, April 06, 2017, Hindustan Times, at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/as-turnbull-visits-india-and-australia-negotiate-uranium-shipment/story-VlJUyRFcS1hv9lOurCAMDI.html>

¹⁰⁵ Fiji joins South Pacific Defence meeting in Auckland, April 5, 2017, Radio NZ, at <http://www.radionz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/328224/fiji-joins-south-pacific-defence-meeting-in-auckland>

¹⁰⁶ Eu strengthen ties with the Pacific: International cooperation and development policy, April 5, 2017, at http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/node/116440_es

assistance is to support good governance and projects on accessing justice. Many other projects on agriculture and rural empowerment are also being funded. Manservisi highlighted that the EU recognises that Fiji is an important trading partner in the region.

New Zealand

Purchasing Boeing Patrol Planes from the U.S.:

The American Defence Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) in April released the details of a potential sale with the New Zealand defence forces of Boeing P-8A Poseidon Maritime Patrol Planes¹⁰⁷. According to a defence forces spokesman, New Zealand is planning to buy four of these planes to replace an existing fleet of P-3K planes.

The DSCA stated that this potential sale would enhance the foreign policy of the U.S. by strengthening their defence cooperation and ties with New Zealand, which is a major non-NATO ally and has been an important force continually for political stability within the region.

Australia and New Zealand take a harder stand against North Korea:

After North Korea threatened them with a nuclear strike, New Zealand and

Australia decided to take a stricter stand against the former on April 23, 2017. This was in response to the statements by a spokesman from the foreign ministry of North Korea who threatened that it would be suicidal for the Australians to follow the Americans in stifling North Korea¹⁰⁸. He further threatened Australia to think of the consequences of their actions.

New Zealand and Australia being close allies took a stronger stand against these threats. The New Zealand Defence Minister Gerry Brownlee stated in an interview that people weren't aware of Kim Jong-un's regime but one can assume that he heads a large machinery of people who have evil intent. He further added that it is North Korea that is sending missiles to the Sea of Japan and making outrageous threats to Australia. Australia's Foreign Minister Julie Bishop called North Korea a serious threat and stated that the North Korean government should invest in the welfare of its citizens than into weapons of mass destruction.

New Zealand and ASEAN re-affirm partnership:

The 24th ASEAN-New Zealand dialogue was held on March 22, 2017¹⁰⁹. The dialogue was attended by senior representatives from New Zealand and from ASEAN member states and the ASEAN Secretariat. The two sides acknowledged the good economic ties that exist between them and agreed to go further. Many steps are being taken to strengthen these ties like the ASEAN-New Zealand-Australia Free

¹⁰⁷ New Zealand considers purchasing new Boeing military aircraft from US, April 29, 2017, at <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/92045512/new-zealand-considers-purchasing-new-boeing-military-aircraft-from-us>

¹⁰⁸ Australia, New Zealand hit back at North Korea's nuclear strike threat, April 23, 2017, Firstpost, at <http://www.firstpost.com/world/australia-new-zealand-hit-back-at-north-koreas-nuclear-strike-threat-3399394.html>

¹⁰⁹ ASEAN, New Zealand reaffirm commitment to closer partnership, March 23, 2017, ASEAN Secretariat news, at <http://asean.org/asean-new-zealand-reaffirm-commitment-to-closer-partnership/>

Trade Agreement which will be reviewed in June. They also reiterated their support for the effective implementation of the ASEAN-New Zealand Plan of Action (2016-2020) which provides a broad framework for organizing their cooperative relations for five years and supports community building and integration efforts by the ASEAN. Both sides encouraged and supported each other- New Zealand acknowledged ASEAN's role in the regional architecture while the ASEAN encouraged New Zealand to continue its participation in regional mechanisms like the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting plus.

Trade Relations with China:

The Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited New Zealand with a delegation of business and government representatives from March 26-29. The visit was instrumental in enhancing the ties between the two countries. New Zealand became the first western developed country to become a part of the China's One Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) after signing a Memorandum of Arrangement (MoA)¹¹⁰. New Zealand authorities see joining the BRI as a logical step in its engagement with China. The MoA is the beginning step; a detailed work plan for effective bilateral cooperation between the two will

be negotiated over the next 18 months. New Zealand being the first advanced country to join the BRI, can set precedents which would shape the final form of the overall project. Being a part of the project can help New Zealand shape it in accordance with its own interests. Australia on the other hand has shown caution and is willing to wait and watch the initiative as it develops in order to decide whether it is threatening to the global economic status quo or not.

An upgrade for a Free trade deal between China and New Zealand is also on the table, negotiations for which would begin in April. During a gala lunch on March 28, Premier Li stated that this deal would help China and New Zealand's relationship scale new heights¹¹¹. He also suggested that the China shared interests with the US and that this relationship could be conducive to lead to greater cooperation between China, US, and its allies New Zealand and Australia.

Papua New Guinea

PNG Defence Forces train with US marines:

The USS Comstock arrived in Moresby port on April 15, 2017 with about 100 US marines and sailors from the 11th Expeditionary Unit for bilateral training and theatre security cooperation engagement with the Papua New Guinea Defence Force¹¹². The training exercise is to help improve the PNGDF abilities to

¹¹⁰ New Zealand Sees Opportunity in China's "Belt and Road", March 24, 2017, The Maritime Executive, at <http://maritime-executive.com/editorials/new-zealand-sees-opportunity-in-chinas-belt-and-road> Zealand Sees

¹¹¹ NZ and China 'will be able to scale the highest peaks'. March 28, 2017, Radio NZ, at <http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/political/327681/nz-and-china-%27will-be-able-to-scale-the-highest-peaks%27>

¹¹² US Marines, Sailor train with Papua New Guinea Defence Force in preparation for APEC 2018, April 15, 2017, Marines , at <http://www.marines.mil/News/Press-Releases/Press-Release-Display/Article/1153238/us-marines-sailors-train-with-papua-new-guinea-defense-force-in-preparation-for/>

provide security for national level events like the upcoming national elections and the Asia- Pacific Economic Cooperation annual summit which is scheduled for 2018. It focused on various skill sets, tactics for the military to support the civilian authorities, personnel searches, urban patrolling, entry control, escalation of force tactics etc.

Centre Activities for March to April 2017

- A Two-member delegation from the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Indonesia visited IDSA on March 23, 2017.
- Dr Sampa Kundu “The 2017 By-elections in Myanmar: A Warning Signal for Suu Kyi?” April 05, 2017, IDSA Comment,
- Dr Sampa Kundu Quoted by Epoch Times on India-Vietnam Defense Ties April 07, 2017
- Sampa Kundu Delivered Talk on China-Myanmar Relations at Institute for Chinese Studies on April 19, 2017
- Dr Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, Visiting Fellow from Thailand in the Southeast Asia and Oceania Centre, IDSA spoke on “Thailand: Policing of anti-Government Protests” on April 20, 2017.
- Dr Udai Bhanu Singh delivered a talk on India-Myanmar Relations at the Naval Intelligence Course at IDSA on April 25, 2017
- Dr Udai Bhanu Singh spoke on ‘The Strategic Significance of Vietnam in India’s Act East Policy’ at National Seminar organised by VPMCIS, Mumbai on 27 April 2017
- Dr Sampa Kundu, “Regional Security in Southeast Asia: Prospects and Challenges for ASEAN”, (Commentary), April 26, 2017 for East Asia Research Programme, ICRIER, New Delhi

ABOUT US

The Southeast Asia and Oceania Centre focuses on policy-relevant research in respect of the ten ASEAN states, East Timor and Oceania, including Australia and New Zealand. The Centre studies India's bilateral and multilateral relations with states of the region with a view to providing contemporary relevance to India's Look East policy. It has a futuristic approach and examines the emerging trends in the regional security architecture. The Centre studies the potential for India's enhanced defence cooperation (including maritime issues) and cooperation in non-traditional security issues with the region. It examines internal developments of countries in this region, especially political transition and the role of the military, and their implications for India. The Centre seeks to promote Track-II institutional linkages with the region.

Contributions are invited for:

Book Review (800 words)

Commentary (900 - 1300 words)

Photo Essay (10-12 photographs, each with a caption,
accompanied by a 1000 words essay)

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