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Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



Myanmar in better times
Photo Courtesy- Uday Bhanu Singh

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Southeast Asia

ASEAN

India and ASEAN to advance their partnership

The 21st ASEAN- India Joint Cooperation Committee Meeting was held virtually on 31st March 2021. During the meeting, both sides noted the developments of ASEAN-India Plan of Action (2016-2020)¹ and assured their interest in implementing the new Plan of Action for 2021-2025. Rules and progress of joint projects like ASEAN-India Fund, ASEAN-India Green Fund and ASEAN-India Project Management Unit were also updated and reviewed for better functioning. ASEAN acknowledged India's contribution of USD 1 million to ASEAN to help fight COVID-19.

28th ASEAN-EU joint cooperation Committee.

On 26th March 2021, ASEAN-EU JCC was held via video conferencing. Ambassador Kok Li Peng, Permanent Representative of the republic of Singapore to ASEAN and by Mr David Daly, Head of the South-East Asia Division of the European External Action Service², co-chaired the meeting re-establishing their commitment to further deepen their cooperation for better implementation of the projects undertaken by them. Both sides expressed their views about

the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, defence and security related issues, counterterrorism and transnational crime, and reaffirmed their responsibility towards regionalism, rule-based multilateralism, transparent and open trading system with the WTO³.

18th March ASEAN chiefs of Defence forces meeting.

The 18th ASEAN chiefs of defence forces meeting (ACDFM) was held virtually, where the ASEAN chief of Defence Forces adopted two-year Activity Work-Plan. The ASEAN military exercises support the military engagements to reinforce regional security, interoperability, and abilities through integrated cooperation⁴.

UN on Myanmar military coup.

The United Nations has been observing the situation in Myanmar and is calling out the member nations of the ASEAN to exert pressure on Military Junta to respect and protect the human rights and freedom of the citizens of Myanmar⁵. Regional Speaker in Thailand David Swanson commented about the informal meeting held virtually by the ASEAN nations urging both sides in Myanmar to restore peace by peaceful negotiations and protecting the citizens. At the UNSC, UN Special Envoy for Myanmar, Burgener pointed out the need of international intervention to reverse the coup and restore democracy.

11th AMOM

The 11th ASEAN Military Operations Meeting (AMOM-11), convened by Brigadier General Haji

¹ <https://asean.org/asean-india-advance-partnership/>

² <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Overseas-Mission/ASEAN/Recent-Highlights/2021/03/15th-ASEAN-Japan-Joint-Cooperation-Committee-Meeting>

³ https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/guyana/95745/asean-eu-28th-joint-cooperation-committee-joint-press-release_en

⁴ <http://www.asean2021.bn/Theme/news/news-18.03.2021-acdfm.aspx>

⁵ <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/us/un-calls-on-asean-states-to-leverage-myanmar-military-junta-to-protect-peoples-freedoms20210306151508/>

Abdul Razak bin Haji Abd, was held via videoconference on March 10 and exchanged views on the regional and global security situation, particularly traditional and non-traditional security challenges that directly affect the ASEAN region. The officers also reviewed revising the work plan for the ASEAN armies for 2021-2022, which was adopted in 2020 when Vietnam took the role as ASEAN Chair. In the course of the COVID-19 pandemic's dynamic developments, non-traditional security threats remain a constant source of uncertainty, requiring countries to strengthen their ties in exchanging intelligence, border control, and other areas. ASEAN forces' operations departments should prioritise preserving their prominent place in building confidence among ASEAN armies while also increasing practical and effective collaboration through cooperative initiatives. Vietnam supports the proposed update to the 2021-2022 work plan, which will be presented at the 18th ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Forces Meeting (ACDFM-18)⁶

BRUNEI

Singapore and Brunei reaffirm their relations.

On 22nd March, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for foreign Affairs of Singapore, visited Brunei to re-establish their close and historical relationship. Dr Balakrishnan extended an invitation to Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah to visit Singapore⁷. During the meeting they continued to discuss about mutual

cooperation especially healthcare, strong defence ties, and Currency Interchangeability Agreement established in 1967. In addition, as both the nations are part of the ASEAN, they discussed the progress on regional cooperation and expressed their concerns about the military coup in Myanmar, urged all parties to peacefully resolve the dialogue to retain peace and stability.

CAMBODIA

Cambodia bars travellers from India to check COVID-19 spread

Cambodia has banned travellers from India, with effect from April 29 to check the more infectious strain of Covid-19.

The Ministry of Health decided to ban all Indians and foreign travelers who have been in India or have travelled through India from entering Cambodia.⁸

INDONESIA

Addition Hui 16 and Hui 17 patrol vessels in Natuna Sea.

On 12th March 2021, Indonesia's Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Ministry have added two more patrol vessels in the Natuna Sea in their fight against illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. The two vessels, Hui 16 and Hui 17, deployed on the Malacca strait and Northern part of Natuna sea to help in the collection of data and fight against the illegal fishing taking place in the exclusive economic zones. The new vessels are advanced and well equipped with interception and drones that help in security checks and detentions.⁹

⁶ <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/11th-asean-military-operations-meeting-held-online/197360.vnp>

⁷ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/vivian-balakrishnan-visits-brunei-to-reaffirm-close-ties>

⁸ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/27/c_139910466.htm

⁹ <https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/environment-sustainability/indonesia-adds-two-more-patrol-vessels-to-combat-illegal-fishing>

South Korea and Indonesia defence ties.

Indonesian Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto's high-level visit to South Korea last week emphasized the two countries' growing security interests. Although the two countries have increasingly had security links, and a Defence agreement inked in 2013, there has recently been a push to improve relations and expand cooperation to include cybersecurity. Indonesia will also get military equipment like KT-1B wong bee turboprop basic training aircraft, supersonic jet fighters, T-50 Golden Eagle light combat aircraft and Changbo-Go class submarine.

LAOS

Laos-China high speed railway.

As a part of China's BRI, China undertook a massive project worth \$5.9 billion to construct a railway route and track through Laos. The length of this project is 400 km and after 5 years of laying the railway tracks and building bridges, the project will be completed by the end of 2021. With the completion of this project, Laos will have multiple benefits as it will boost the economy with more trade, tourist and industries¹⁰. Laos being a landlocked country, it restricts its economy to grow by exporting hydropower and minerals and the government of Laos hopes more countries will be wanting to trade because of the connectivity.

Three Thailand-Laos border checkpoints reopen.

Amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic, most of the trade check points were shut to contain the spread of the virus. On March 3rd the Thai cabinet approved of reopening three trading checkpoints on the Park Saeng, Chiang Khan and Hai Soke¹¹. The reopening will be restricted to only commercial goods, products and regulations will be put to avoid the spread of the virus.

MALAYSIA

Malaysia on vaccine passport for economic recovery.

On March 10th Datuk Seri Mohamed Azim Ali appealed to the ASEAN member states to consider the practice of vaccine passport¹². Vaccine passport will only allow those people to travel who are fully vaccinated against the coronavirus. idea behind the passport was to limit travel restriction and give people the opportunity travel, which will help to boost the economy. Azim suggested the same during the ASEAN Economic Ministers Retreat and the ASEAN members are working towards the functions of the vaccine passport.

Anti-fake news law

The Malaysian government passed an anti-fake-news bill on Thursday, 12th March 2021, in order to combat Covid-19 misinformation. The country has been proclaimed in a state of emergency by King Yang di-Pertuan Agong, which will endure until August. Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin used his

¹⁰ <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/laos/hsr.htm>

¹¹ <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/three-thailandlaos-border-checkpoints-reopen-for-trade-exchange/197020.vnp>

¹² <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/03/10/azmin-implores-asean-to-look-into-vaccine-passport-to-fast-track-economic-r/1956494>

executive authority to enact the law, which bypassed Parliamentary procedures.

MYANMAR

IMF concerned about Myanmar.

The International Monetary Fund said on Thursday, 6th March 2021, that it is “extremely concerned” about rising tensions in Myanmar, but that it will hold off on most involvement with the country’s military rulers until its members’ perspectives on the country’s political situation are clarified¹³. IMF discussed its apprehensions about the impact on people with the rise in tensions and with the ongoing pandemic, the military must ensure that protocols to combat COVID-19 are being followed.

PHILIPPINES

EU- Philippines to improve relations.

The EU-Philippines Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) was signed in 2018 and has been suspended due to disagreements between Brussels and Manila, as well as the COVID-19 crisis. The PCA’s inaugural trade and economic cooperation subcommittee was conducted digitally at the end of January. As Brussels strives to improve ties with the regional Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a significant relation with the Philippines is now a must. Philippines will overtake the as the ASEAN coordinator

for Dialogue relations with the EU until 2024¹⁴ therefore they will have to find an approach to cooperate better. EU’s relationship with the Philippines is focused on the implementation of many international conventions under the General Scheme of Preferences (GSP+), which the Philippines now enjoys.

SINGAPORE

Singapore’s troubled leadership succession

Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong chose not to appoint then PM-designate Heng Swee Keat in his place, when he went on Christmas leave last year. This indicated clearly he was unwilling to hand over the reins. This came despite the People’s Action Party (PAP) performing poorly in the July 2020 election.

Lee has been in power since 2004, and while he has appointed new 4G (fourth generation) leaders in his cabinet, real power still rests with Lee and his own 3G (third generation) cohort. Recognising the writing on the wall, last week a gracious Heng stepped aside as leader-in-waiting, couching his decision with platitudes on health and his age.

Heng’s departure exposes serious internal challenges for the PAP.¹⁵

THAILAND

Thailand battles third wave of COVID-19

Bangkok and 17 other provinces in Thailand were declared maximum control areas or “red zones” on

¹³ <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/imf-concerned-about-rising-myanmar-tensions-most-fund-engagement-halted-11615479156969.html>

¹⁴ <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/philippines-and-eu-repair-relations-despite-human-rights-concerns-7222676/>

¹⁵ <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/04/12/no-plan-b-for-singapores-leadership-succession/>

Apr 16 as the country battles the third wave of COVID-19 infections.

Besides Bangkok, the red zones include Chiang Mai, Phuket and Chonburi.

According to Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha, the Thai government has been in touch with different COVID-19 vaccine providers as it tries to secure more doses for the population.¹⁶

VIETNAM

Pham Minh Chinh sworn in as Vietnam's prime minister

Vietnam's parliament elected Pham Minh Chinh, head of the Communist Party's Central Organization Committee, as prime minister on April 5. He replaces Nguyen Xuan Phuc who will take on the largely ceremonial post of president.

The new leadership will seek to keep the economy of the communist nation growing

solidly and keep the security and integrity of the country intact (in the midst of Chinese aggressive action in South China Sea).

Vietnam's political leadership has four pillars: Communist Party chief, president, prime minister and chair of the National Assembly, the country's parliament.¹⁷

PM Phuc is Vietnam's new President

Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc has been appointed as Vietnam's next president after the National Assembly passed a resolution to this effect.

Phuc, 67 becomes the 11th president since 1945. The state president is the country's top representative in both internal and external affairs; and commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

He became prime minister in 2016.

He is a member of the Party Central Committee and Politburo.¹⁸

¹⁶ <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/thailand-bangkok-red-zone-maximum-control-covid-19-third-wave-14635018>

¹⁷ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Vietnam-picks-new-PM-and-president-for-next-5-years>

¹⁸ <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/pm-phuc-is-vietnam-s-new-president-4258039.html>

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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