

INSIGHT SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
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Contents

- **Fresh instances of land buildup in the South China Sea**
- **Important negotiations on EEZ's (exclusive economic zones) boundaries concluded between Indonesia and Vietnam**
- **Australia unveils an underwater drone for surveillance in the Indo-Pacific**
- **The Indonesian Parliament ratifies a Defence Cooperation Agreement and Extradition Treaty with Singapore**
- **Vietnam holds its first international defence expo in attempts to lower its reliance on Russian arms**
- **Sitiveni Rabuka becomes 12th Prime Minister of Fiji**
- **First leaders' summit of ASEAN and European Union held at Brussels**

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Singaporean media recently reported that China has sought ASEAN's support for retaining its primacy in the SCS (South China Sea). As reported this is the first time that PRC has designed such a declaration to retain its hegemony in the SCS while obfuscating it as a commitment to uphold peace and stability in the region. It is noteworthy that these reports surface amidst increased activities of land claiming and infrastructure build-up in the SCS.

Fresh instances of land buildup in the South China Sea

Amidst reports of land reclamation activities by China in the South China Sea, the US think tank CSIS, through satellite images, has proclaimed that Vietnam has significantly expanded its landfilling activity at Namyit Island, Pearson Reef, and Sand Cay, all of which are home to its mid-sized outposts. Additionally, at Barque Canada Reef, Alison Reef, and Cornwallis South Reef, Vietnam is currently engaged in fresh dredging. These activities increased the newly created land under Vietnam by 420 acres in 2022. Meanwhile in response to "monitored Chinese operations near to Pagasa Island" in the SCS, the Philippines has mobilised its troops in the region.

Important negotiations on EEZ's (exclusive economic zones) boundaries concluded between Indonesia and Vietnam

Vietnam's President Nguyen Xuan Phuc while on his state visit to Indonesia finalized an agreement with Indonesian counterpart Joko Widodo on boundaries separating their exclusive economic zones (EEZs) based on terms of UNCLOS. After 12 years of talks that started in 2010, their maritime EEZs have now been officially delineated. The

Natuna Islands, which are in the South China Sea to the north of the disputed Indonesia-Vietnam border, have frequently been the scene of confrontations over the issue of unauthorized fishing. The conclusion of these talks is anticipated to "draw China's ire" because it will demonstrate "rejection of Beijing's expansive claim" over the South China Sea and could also result in the "establishment of a united front" of other claimants against the PRC, including the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei.

Australia unveils an underwater drone for surveillance in the Indo-Pacific

In the bid to strengthen its surveillance and mine warfare capabilities and to address the rising security concern due to the increased Chinese presence in the Indo Pacific a Dive-Large Displacement (Dive-LD) unmanned underwater vehicle (UUV) prototype was unveiled by Australia and a follow-through model called Ghost Shark with weapons is currently being built. The project is a component of Australia's "Extra Large Autonomous Undersea Vehicle" (XL-AUV) programme, which aims to develop an affordable, autonomous UUV that could be utilised for both combat and non-military missions. Australia's capacity to confront China in the Indo-Pacific is expected to grow owing to UUV. It is noteworthy that Australia is vying to undermine China's power in the Pacific by getting into security deals with Island countries. The latest in this series is Vanuatu with which Australia signed the "Australia-Vanuatu Bilateral Security Agreement" in December.

The Indonesian Parliament ratifies a Defence Cooperation Agreement and Extradition Treaty with Singapore.

The People's Representative Council (DPR-RI) of the Indonesian Parliament ratified a Defence Cooperation Agreement with Singapore which was pending since 2007

and was freshly signed again in January 2022. This defence pact is a component of a "package deal" between Indonesia and Singapore that also includes the extradition and realignment of the flight information region treaties. As per the accord, Singapore will require Indonesia's consent to perform army training on Indonesian territory requiring the latter's consent in case of third party presence. Additionally, the DPR-RI also ratified the long-held "Extradition Treaty" which will enable Indonesia's law enforcement officials to track down corruption suspects of the Asian Financial crisis in Singapore.

Vietnam holds its first international defence expo in attempts to lower its reliance on Russian arms

Vietnam's Ministry of National Defense hosted the defence expo "Vietnam International Defense Exhibition (VIDEX) 2022" for two days in Hanoi. This was attended by delegations of senior leaders of the Ministry of Defense, military officials of ASEAN countries and representatives of defence. Participants from other countries included Lockheed-Martin, Brahmos Aerospace, Japan's Acquisitions, Technology and Logistics Agency (ATLA), and other US and Russian defence companies. This defence trade fair aims to find sources to diversify the country's defence purchases, highlight the indigenous defence sector, and lessen its reliance on Russian weaponry so that it can become self-sufficient. The production of radars, armed drones, and anti-ship cruise missiles has already begun.

Sitiveni Rabuka becomes 12th Prime Minister of Fiji

Following a political impasse that had stuck in Fiji for about a week Sitiveni Rabuka was

sworn in as the 12th PM of Fiji. Rabuka, who has also been a former prime minister and two times coup, leader narrowly defeated the outgoing PM Frank Bainimarama after his People's Alliance Party and its affiliate National Federation Party got into a coalition with the Social Democrat Liberal Party. Earlier, the political stalemate occurred due to disputed election results and the refusal of Bainimarama to concede. The situation in Fiji seemed grim owing to which the military was deployed to ensure peace and stability in the country over fears of ethnic clashes. Notably, the Fijians of Indian origin who are in minority often face racial discrimination in the country

First leaders' summit of ASEAN and European Union held at Brussels

The European Union and the ASEAN (except Myanmar) held their first commemorative summit on December 14 in Brussels to acknowledge 45 years of diplomatic relations between the two parties. Both blocs stressed the significance of preserving and advancing security and stability in the South China Sea while also reaffirming their commitment to the "rules-based international order" against the backdrop of the protracted war in Ukraine. A new EU-ASEAN Plan of Action was also put forward and developed outlining a wide range of areas that will see enhanced cooperation in the area of climate change, security, pandemic recovery, sustainable and rule-based connectivity during the coming five years (2023–2027). The leaders also expressed concern over the ongoing situation in Myanmar, the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, and North Korea's ICBM tests.