

INSIGHT SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



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Geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific have visibly increased as the US and China jostle for influence in the region. While the Pacific islands have felt the heat of this rivalry, the South China Sea has become increasingly vulnerable to breakout of a conflict. Senior US officials identify China as to be a major threat to stability in the Pacific, with its [attempts to change](#) the status quo on its maritime borders in the South China Sea as well as on its land borders with India. President Biden and President Xi [spoke virtually](#) on 28 July, 2022, and discussed regional issues including stability of the Taiwan Strait. "Those who [play with fire](#) will eventually get burned," China's foreign ministry quoted Xi as telling Biden in their fifth call as leaders. "It is hoped that the U.S. will be clear-eyed about this." is the sentiment that seems to have been conveyed. India and ASEAN nations may closely observe developments in the region.

Indonesia holds G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting

Indonesia, the leader for G20 countries in 2022, held the Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Bali on 7-8 July, 2022. Jakarta shaped the main agenda for the conversation around [global energy and food crisis](#) even as the Ukraine issue dominated the discussions. The successfully concluded meeting could be seen as Indonesia's bid to play mediator among large powers and elevate its position in the regional security calculus. External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar attended the meeting, and also discussed bilateral

relationship with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the [sidelines of the summit](#). Both countries see significance of engaging with Moscow for their own strategic considerations, including to balance each other in the region.

China and US Officials Visit Southeast Asia

The Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi paid an official visit to [Southeast Asian countries](#) of Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia from 3-14 July, 2022. Yi participated in Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Foreign Ministers' meeting during his visit to Myanmar, marking it as the first high-level meeting between China and Myanmar after the coup last year. He also participated in the G20 Foreign Ministers' meeting in Indonesia, and co-hosted the second meeting of the China-Indonesia High-level Dialogue Cooperation Mechanism alongside Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Cooperation with China, Luhut Pandjaitan. These visits came after the G7 countries introduced the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative. "The future of our region should be in our own hands", Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi said. He warned on 11 July that countries in Southeast Asia must [avoid being used as "chess pieces"](#) by major powers during a policy speech in the Indonesian capital. Speaking at the ASEAN secretariat in Jakarta, Mr. Wang said that many countries in the region were under pressure to take sides in a region at risk of being "reshaped by political factors."

Around the same time, US secretary of State [Antony Blinken visited](#) Bali in Indonesia, Thailand and Tokyo from 6-11 July, 2022. In Bangkok, he signed an agreement with his counterpart to expand US-Thailand Strategic Alliance and Partnership. He also met pro-democracy activists from neighbouring Myanmar which is governed by a military junta regime. The US has made explicit declarations of an increased focus towards Southeast Asia which is a critical region for rivalry with China.

Myanmar Executes Pro-democracy Activists

Myanmar's [Junta regime executed](#) four democracy activists on 25 July, 2022, in what is believed to be the first judicial execution in nearly three decades. Activist Ko Jimmy and former National League for Democracy lawmaker Phyto Zeya Thaw were among the four people sentenced to death under the "terror acts" accusations in Myanmar. The four were executed "in conformity with judicial procedures" for directing and coordinating "violent and cruel accomplice acts of terrorist killings." Despite worldwide calls for leniency for the political prisoners, also from United Nations officials and current ASEAN chair Cambodia, the executions went through. A joint statement was issued by G7 countries condemning these executions while many ASEAN nations also issued similar statements.

Singaporean Foreign Minister called the development a grave setback in ASEAN's efforts to resolve the crisis in Myanmar.

ASEAN nations have pressed upon the junta regime to implement the five-point resolution for peace and immediate cessation of violence without any success. India has [expressed deep concern](#) over the developments. Foreign ministry spokesperson said that India will continue to support Myanmar's return to democracy and stability. As a neighbour, India wishes for a peaceful resolution for the issue.

The Philippines May Procure India's Advanced Light Helicopters

The Philippines is considering [purchasing a batch](#) of Advanced Light Helicopters (ALHs) from India to boost its combat capacity, only months after signing a US\$ 375 million contract to purchase three BrahMos cruise missile batteries. The ALH helicopter, which was developed in India, is a twin-engine, multi-role, multi-mission new generation helicopter in the 5.5-tonne weight class that is regarded as an excellent platform for diverse military exercises. Amid several security threats and decades-long territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea, the Southeast Asian nation has prioritised military modernization. The new government in Manila has maintained the rigour of relations between the two countries of the past few years. The Philippines will remain an important partner for India as tensions may escalate in the South China Sea or the larger Indo-Pacific. A defence industry relationship between the two reflects growing trust and alignment of strategic interests.

Indo-Pacific Defence Chiefs Conference Concluded in Australia

The 24th annual Indo-Pacific [Chiefs of Defence Conference](#) was held in Sydney from 25-27 July, 2022. Representatives from 26 countries attended the conference as the rise of China featured strongly on the agenda. Beijing was invited but could not attend. The interoperability of militaries, use of advanced and emerging technologies, and potential for joint exercises was discussed.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the US, Mark Milley, [warned that China](#) has increasingly indulged in “unsafe” and “unprofessional” conduct of intercepting foreign aircraft in the South China Sea region, which can potentially lead to loss of lives. In June, 2022, a US C-130 transport plane operated by US forces reportedly encountered Chinese aircraft. There have been such incidents with Australian and Canadian planes as well. On the other hand, china has continued its incursionary tactics as PLA forces reportedly conducted a military exercise above the Pangong Lake.

ASEAN Nations Begin the Foreign Ministers’ Meeting

ASEAN nations begin week-long [deliberations in Phnom Penh](#) from 30 July-6 August, 2022, including the 55th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, 23rd ASEAN Plus three Foreign Minister’s Meeting, 12th East Asia Summit foreign Ministers’ Meeting, and 29th ASEAN Regional Forum. Some issues that may be discussed in these meetings are the crisis in Myanmar, the developments on agreement for Code of Conduct (CoC) on South China Sea

conflict, and inclusion of Timor Leste into ASEAN. India has been part of ASEAN-led forums and maintained ASEAN centrality in regional issues of the Indo-Pacific.

Cambodia in its previous chairmanship of ASEAN in 2012 had objected to mentioning China’s assertive posture in the South China Sea in the joint communique. Beijing may want to push the CoC deliberations as long as Cambodia remains the chair this year. The meetings may be important to gauge how ASEAN nations and countries involved in ASEAN-led forums tackle the contentious issues like Myanmar and Ukraine crisis, and the developments on CoC for South China Sea.