

INSIGHT SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



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With China's rising interest in the Pacific Island countries, the Pacific region remains a hotbed for geopolitical contests. In the spree of wooing Island nations and to counter Chinese presence in the region, Australia announced signing a new security deal with Papua New Guinea by mid-2023. The Australia-France Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations held in Paris saw assertion by both Australia and France to continue cooperation with Pacific Island countries through various channels and mechanisms. Political instability continues to haunt Vietnam and Myanmar, while Philippines continues its balancing act of outreach to fighting superpowers US & now China.

Australia to sign security deal with Papua New Guinea by mid-2023

By the end of June, Australia and Papua New Guinea will have a new security agreement. In a joint statement, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and his PNG counterpart James Marape pledged that talks on the new bilateral security agreement would be completed by April 30 and that it would go into effect by the middle of 2023. The new pact, according to a joint statement, will allow both nations to safeguard their independence, sovereignty, and adaptability while simultaneously addressing "non-traditional security issues" like cyber security threats, climate change and economic concerns. The planned agreement is timed to correspond with China's ongoing efforts to increase its dominance in the region, especially in law enforcement and security, a development that has alarmed the Australian government.

Australian and French Defense and Foreign Ministers meeting held in Paris

Paris hosted the second Australia-France Foreign and Defense Ministerial

Consultation. This event served as a reflection of the shared resolve to rebuild a dynamic bilateral partnership built on mutual respect and mutual values. To further the objectives of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, the Ministers emphasised the significance of sustaining cooperation with Pacific Island nations, through various mechanisms and institutions such as the Pacific Community, the "Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)" and "Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme". France and Australia decided to keep collaborating through the current regional structures to address shared security problems, delivering Pacific-led responses to security priorities, and monitoring developments through the Pacific Policy Dialogue. Notably, the joint statement also made a point to mention Taiwan and the situation in the Taiwan Strait. Both countries advocated for the peaceful settlement of cross-Strait problems and emphasised the importance of stability and security through the Taiwan Strait via dialogue without the use of coercion, threats, or force. Additionally, they "reaffirmed their common opposition to sweeping modifications to the Strait's current status quo. This year's statement added the opposition to using coercive tactics and "unilaterally upsetting" the "status quo."

Vietnam's President resigns on major corruption charges

Nguyen Xuan Phuc, the President of Vietnam, submitted his resignation after the Communist Party in power accused him of being complicit in the crimes of multiple officials who reported to him during his tenure as Prime Minister from 2016 to 21 before he became President. According to state media, the Communist party ruled that he was accountable for several transgressions committed by top officials who worked for him. Pham Binh Minh and Vu Duc Dam were also expelled by Vietnam's National Assembly from their roles as deputy prime ministers as part of an

anti-corruption drive that resulted in the arrest of dozens of officials, many of whom were accused of engaging in transactions related to Vietnam's Covid response. The Communist party controls authoritarian Vietnam, which is formally ruled by the general secretary, president, and prime minister of the party. The Politburo, which presently has 16 members, makes all the major decisions.

Myanmar's Junta government announces election plans

Myanmar's Junta chief Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, outlined preparations for elections later in 2023 on the occasion of the country's 75th anniversary of independence from British rule. When the most recent six-month extension of a state of emergency expires, there may be a serious first step toward conducting elections. Additionally, 7,012 detainees will be released as part of an amnesty, according to the military government. In an unexpected turn of events, the Myanmar Junta, which overthrew the government two years ago, has been invited to attend the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus. The ADMM's Plus specialists group on maritime security and related operations is being jointly led by the United States and Thailand.

Ferdinand Marcos Jr. visits China amidst growing tensions in the South China Sea (SCS)

During a three-day state visit to Beijing, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. called on Chinese President Xi Jinping to strengthen bilateral relations. According to a joint statement by the two nations, the Philippines and China have agreed to establish a direct communication channel on the SCS issue and to settle disagreements over the disputed waters "by peaceful methods". During the official visit, Chinese investors pledged about \$22.8 billion in investments. 14 bilateral agreements were inked; among them, according to the Philippine presidential

office, were "deals on agricultural, infrastructure, development cooperation, maritime security, and tourism." The agreement between Xi Jinping and Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to resume cooperative oil and gas development and establish a direct line of contact for concerns relating to the SCS is noteworthy. The communiqué also highlighted that the coastguards from the two nations would engage "as soon as possible" to discuss "pragmatic cooperation," and that the two governments will have an annual discussion on security as well.

Myanmar's military launches airstrikes on insurgent group near Indian border

The Chin National Army (CNA), which has its military headquarters at Camp Victoria close to the India-Myanmar border, came under a barrage of aircraft attacks on January 10 and 11 from the Myanmar regime. The Chin National Army (CNA), an insurgent group that fights with other rebel groups to reestablish democracy in Myanmar, has its headquarters in Camp Victoria. Notably, the Junta is accused of indiscriminately targeting civilian targets, leading the UK, US, and Canada to implement further sanctions against Myanmar's military, some of which attempt to block the supply of aviation fuel to its air force.

Chris Hipkins becomes the new prime minister of New Zealand

After former PM Jacinda Ardern's abrupt departure, Chris Hipkins was sworn in as the 41st Prime Minister of New Zealand. His inauguration took place right after the announcement of numbers showing persistently high inflation. Over the past two years, the Labour government has suffered more and more in the polls as a result of rising inflation, an impending recession, and a rising opposition of conservatives. Carmel Sepuloni was also sworn in as the first person of Pacific Island ancestry to serve as deputy prime minister.