

INSIGHT SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES

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Southeast Asia and Oceania Digest

March 2023

The AUKUS - a trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States aimed to bolster security in the Indo Pacific became the centre of global attention again as details of the security partnership are now emerging at a functional level. In a bid to strengthen internal defence cooperation, the United States reportedly will sell a minimum of three Virginia-class submarines to Australia as part of an agreement to cooperate on technology and assets to create a line of nuclear-powered submarines. To increase the potential of the allies in the Indo Pacific, the UK and Australia will construct their own fleets of brand-new nuclear-powered submarines. However due to the internal debates with Australia on the effectiveness of the deal, it appears to be moving more cautiously and pragmatically. Additionally the current thaw in its relationship with China after holding a virtual meeting with the latter's trade minister, is now becoming more prominent as other high level interactions have resumed after four years. Meanwhile South East Asia continues to remain divided over the issue of handling Myanmar.

China and Australia hold first official defence meeting since 2019

The Ministry of National Defence of China and the Australian defense officials held their first official meeting in Canberra since 2019. According to the Chinese defence ministry, the discussions were beneficial in

establishing stable relationships among their military and improving mutual understanding. The Australian defence department verified the meeting, stating that it was conducted in a professional setting, and both sides exchanged views on regional security issues. During the G20 summit held in New Delhi in March, Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang met with his Australian counterpart and announced the reopening of institutional communication and consultation between the two nations in several sectors. This meeting indicates a return to normalcy in commerce, as progress is being made towards the restart of Australian timber exports to China.

Singapore and Indonesia strengthen ties through several new agreements

During the sixth Singapore-Indonesia Leaders' Retreat, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee and Indonesian President Joko Widodo signed six government-to-government agreements. Additionally, nine business-to-business MOUs were signed between Singapore and Indonesian enterprises, with six in the healthcare, two in the educational, and one in the financial sectors. One of the government agreements was an MOU to establish a new program that will enable young technologists to work and gain experience in each other's nations for up to a year. After resolving longstanding bilateral disputes, particularly over airspace, Singapore and Indonesia are exploring new areas of collaboration, including digital talent and smart cities. In the previous retreat under a broader framework, the two nations agreed to an

extradition pact, a deal on the territorial reconfiguration of their flight information regions (FIR), and a defence cooperation agreement.

US and Australia collaborate on high-speed aircraft development for hypersonic testing

A new development has emerged in high-tech defence cooperation between US and Australia. As reported, the US Department of Defense (DOD) has selected Australia-based aerospace company Hypersonix to develop a high-speed aircraft to test hypersonic technologies. The aircraft will support America's Hypersonic and High-Cadence Airborne Testing Capabilities (HyCAT) program. This move aims to enlist the private sector and military users to alleviate the strain on government testing facilities. The US State Department has approved Australia's request to buy up to 220 long-range Tomahawk cruise missiles, making it only the second US ally after the United Kingdom to obtain the US-made weapon. The acquisition might cost up to 1.3 billion Australian dollars including maintenance and logistical support.

Vo Van Thuong elected as new president of Vietnam

During a special session held in Hanoi, Vo Van Thuong, a Politburo member of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), was elected as the country's new president to complete the remainder of the 2021-2026 term following Nguyen Xuan Phuc's abrupt departure in January. Thuong's election was the result of a majority vote by the nation's upper legislature, indicating the party's

confidence in his leadership abilities. Phuc's resignation was widely seen as an indication of the CPV's commitment to its "blazing furnace" anti-corruption campaign, which has sought to crack down on violations and wrongdoing by officials under his command. Thuong, a seasoned party member, is expected to continue the party's efforts to maintain political stability and promote economic growth in Vietnam.

Myanmar's military government dissolves dozens of political parties

The military government of Myanmar has disbanded the National League for Democracy (NLD), Aung San Suu Kyi's former ruling party, along with 39 other parties for failing to register for an election that would have extended the army's hold on power. The military coup against Suu Kyi's elected government in 2021 and its subsequent repression of opposition demonstrations weakened dozens of parliamentary parties, making it difficult for them to participate in the election. Many parties are unable or unwilling to run in the election, which is widely regarded as a sham by observers. As a result, the military government has taken steps to suppress the opposition and consolidate its hold on power.

Thai parliament dissolved ahead of elections

In preparation for upcoming elections, King Maha Vajiralongkorn has authorized a proclamation dissolving the Thai parliament. The process will involve the selection of MPs in a May election, followed by a collaboration with a Senate

appointed to choose a prime minister by the end of July. The main opposition party's leader, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, is currently the front-runner to become the next prime minister, according to polls, with her support had risen to 38.2%. Incumbent Prayuth Chan-o-cha, who came to power after the coup against Yingluck Shinawatra, stood in third place in the latest National Institute of Development Administration poll.

China and Cambodia conduct military exercise “Golden Dragon 2023”

The military exercise “Golden Dragon 2023” commenced in Cambodian waters, marking the first-ever naval drill between Cambodia and China. The exercise

involves personnel from the People's Liberation Army's Southern Military Command and the Royal Cambodian Navy, which is part of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces. More than 200 officers and soldiers from the Army, Navy, and joint logistics support units of the Chinese southern theatre initially arrived in Sihanoukville, Cambodia. According to Chinese state media, the Golden Dragon drills involve over 3,000 soldiers and 300 vehicles from both sides and will last through April 8. The joint exercises aim to train personnel for security operations in major events and humanitarian relief, in response to the needs of the two armies and to bolster potential peacekeeping cooperation in the region.