

INSIGHT SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
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It's been a season of high level summits in the region with Chinese Premier Li Qiang's visit to Australia, a first by a senior Beijing leader since 2017 which saw Australia moving cautiously towards a thaw in ties. Philippines was the centre of high diplomacy amidst escalating tensions in the South China Sea. It held a bilateral commission on managing tensions in the SCS with China, welcomed Vietnam's decision to negotiate their overlapping claims to the undersea continental shelf in the SCS and agreed to strengthen their security and defense cooperation through the signing of a Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA) with New Zealand. Vietnam saw closer strategic cooperation with Russia after a state visit from President Vladimir Putin amidst the backdrop of a protracted conflict with Ukraine. The geopolitics of the Pacific islands continues to bristle with PM of Solomon Islands making his first pit stop in Australia to reaffirm ties ahead of a two week visit to Beijing.

Chinese Premiere Li Qiang's visit to Australia

Chinese Premier Li Qiang's visit to Australia, a first by a senior Beijing leader since 2017, signalled a rapid thaw in bilateral ties at a time of escalating security tensions in the larger Indo Pacific. Since Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government took power in 2022, they have pursued a diplomatic approach to Beijing looking for a stabilisation of ties. While Albanese and his government have stuck firmly to language geared toward "stabilizing" the relationship with China, Beijing has pushed for closer ties. Amidst the big announcements, China and Australia have agreed to provide each

other's citizens with multiple-entry visas of up to five years for tourism and business. During Li's trip to Australia, he said China would also include Australia in its visa waiver scheme, allowing Australians to visit the country for up to 15 days without visa. Official statements also outlined signing a range of agreements to foster closer cooperation on trade and economic issues, education, climate change and notable agreement to boost military-to-military communication. In Perth, leaders attended the Australia-China CEO Roundtable—the first since 2017. The platform is important given that two-way trade with China, Australia's largest trading partner hit a record \$327 billion in 2023, accounting for 27 per cent of Australia's total goods and services trade. Premiere Li's visit to Western Australia highlighted China's strategic interest in new energy partnerships, particularly in the lithium sector.

China and the Philippines agree to de-escalate tensions in the South China Sea

Amidst months of escalating tensions in the South China Sea, China and Philippines held the 9th Bilateral Consultation Mechanism. Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Chen Xiaodong and Philippines Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Theresa P. Lazaro addressed their positions on Ayungin Shoal and reaffirmed their commitment to de-escalate tensions without jeopardising their respective positions. Noting recent incidents in the SCS, both sides recognised that there is a need to restore trust, rebuild confidence, and create conditions conducive to productive dialogue. The two sides agreed to continue discussing the possibility of reinstating a combined Coast

Guard committee and marine cooperation between the various Coast Guard departments. The Chinese coast guard was accused by the Philippines of using motorboats to repeatedly block and ram two Filipino rubber boats, damaging the naval vessels with machetes, knives, and hammers, and taking eight M4 weapons that were cased. Over the conflict in the South China Sea, the Philippines has claimed \$1 million (£800,00) in damages from China.

PM of the Solomon Islands visits Australia before heading to Beijing

On June 26, 2024, the Solomon Islands Prime Minister visited Australia for a leadership dialogue. Both leaders commemorated significant recent achievements, such as the successful Pacific Games and the safe and secure elections held in the Solomon Islands, which were made possible by the security cooperation of the Pacific Islands Forum members (Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea). They agreed to collaborate more closely to help the Solomon Islands strengthen its sovereignty and resilience to move more quickly toward achieving its goals for security, development, and the economy. Both sides discussed measures to find an approach for regional law enforcement and policing which hinted at measures to counter the China factor in regional politics. Climate Change and health were a key focus of discussions with the focus of helping Solomon Islands achieve the goal to eradicate malaria by 2035. Interestingly the Solomon PM's visit to re-affirm ties came ahead of a two week visit to Beijing which has a growing role in the strategic and economic profile of the island.

The Philippines and Vietnam agree to settle overlapping claims to the undersea continental shelf in the South China Sea

In a landmark move, the Philippines has welcomed Vietnam's recognition of Manila's U.N. filing to secure its rights on the extended continental shelf in the South China Sea (SCS). Philippines had filed a claim with the United Nations for an extended continental shelf beyond its 200 nautical miles exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Its Foreign ministry welcomed Vietnam's decision, reiterating that it was ready to hold talks with Hanoi to resolve any issues. Notably, China's foreign ministry had recently opposed the Philippines' "unilateral" submission, which it said infringed on its sovereign rights and jurisdiction. The foreign ministry of the Philippines stated that it was prepared to discuss any outstanding issues and negotiate a settlement with Hanoi.

Putin's visit to Vietnam

Russian President Vladimir Putin's state visit to Vietnam sealed further strategic cooperation. The military ceremony put on to greet Putin, who was welcomed by both Vietnamese President To Lam and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, was said to be the kind reserved for the highest heads of state, similar to the reception given to U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping who visited Vietnam last year. The two presidents witnessed the exchange of 11 agreements and memorandums of understanding, including deals on oil and gas, nuclear science and education. Observers have highlighted that Putin's recent visits to China and now North Korea and Vietnam are attempts to "break

the international isolation". Russia continues to be important to Vietnam as its the biggest supplier of military equipment and Russian oil exploration technologies help maintain its sovereignty claims in the contested South China Sea.

Terror group Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia announces disbanding

Jemaah Islamiyah have announced that they will disband the group. They confirmed their commitment to the Indonesian state law and order. Jemaah Islamiyah is a terrorist organization group which uses violent jihad techniques. They are Al-Qaeda-linked militant groups accused of the 2002 bombing that killed more than 200 people. JI runs a boarding school which is in line with orthodox Islam.

The Philippines and New Zealand to sign Mutual logistical support Agreement

The Philippines agreed to strengthen their security and defense cooperation through the signing of a Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA) with New Zealand. This announcement is the outcome of the bilateral meeting between Philippine President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. and New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon in earlier this year. This military partnership facilitates joint training exercises and sharing of military equipment and assets between the countries. Foreign Affairs Secretary Enrique Manalo also expressed gratitude to New Zealand for steady fast support amid the challenges faced by the Philippines in the South China Sea.