

# *INSIGHT* SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR  
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The region continued to see hectic summit engagement with forums like the ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting and Quad Summit discussing tensions in the South China Sea and calling out coercion by China. US stepped up to reaffirm its commitment to the region with Secretary of State Anthony Blinken visiting countries in South East Asia to re-affirm ties. The Biden administration has recently announced a \$500 million military aid package to the Philippines, to strengthen the Philippines' external defence and progress on a proposed military intelligence-sharing pact given China's continuing assertiveness in the region. In a bid to strengthen resilience in the Indo Pacific, Australia announced the launching of a new Cable Connectivity and Resilience Centre, to help undersea cable networks in the Indo-Pacific. Meanwhile Myanmar continues to simmer with the junta extending the state of emergency and pushing elections back further. The issue remains divisive in ASEAN too with states accusing the Junta government of paying lip service to the five point consensus. In other significant meets, Indonesia's President-elect Prabowo Subianto stated that his upcoming administration would uphold relations with "great friend" Russia after he met with President Vladimir Putin. PM of Vietnam also visited New Delhi to meet with PM Modi and strengthen bilateral ties.

### **Myanmar, South China Sea Tensions top agenda at 57th ASEAN Foreign Ministerial Meeting**

The 57th meeting of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers was held in Laos in the backdrop of rising tensions in the South China Sea and protracted conflict in Myanmar. Indonesia's Retno Marsudi

stressed Myanmar would remain on the sidelines of the bloc until its junta honoured a peace commitment made months after seizing power in a 2021 coup. The Myanmar crisis has divided ASEAN and raised questions on its credibility. ASEAN's calls to implement its "five-point consensus" aiming to cease hostilities and start dialogue has been largely ignored by the ruling junta. While Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore have grown more vocal in their criticism of Myanmar's military, other ASEAN members, such as Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, have advocated for a "softer" approach of engaging bilaterally with the junta. Foreign Ministers also attending the East Asia Summit, discussed topics like climate, environment, and energy cooperation. ASEAN discussions on how to address Chinese aggression in the South China Sea continue to divide the group, given recent actions against the Philippines and Vietnam. For more than two decades, China and ASEAN have been working on a South China Sea Code of Conduct (COC), guidelines to lower tensions or escalation by defining rules and responsibilities for relevant states. While the Philippines and Vietnam have said the COC should be legally binding, non-claimant states within ASEAN, such as Cambodia and Laos, remain hesitant for fear of provoking China, given its considerable economic influence. Negotiations to finalize the COC are scheduled to conclude in 2026. Meanwhile Russia and China, in addition to holding a trilateral meeting with Laos, also met bilaterally at the sidelines of the ASEAN meetings, aiming to deepen co-operation to counter interference from extra-regional actors, hinting primarily at the US.

### **Antony Blinken visits Southeast Asia to reinforce US commitment & Indo-Pacific ties**

Antony Blinken embarked on a diplomatic tour, visiting SEA nations—Lao PDR, Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan, Singapore, and Mongolia—to reinforce US commitment to the region with a series of international and bilateral meetings. After attending the funeral of Vietnamese Communist Party veteran leader and General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, Blinken proceeded to participate in the 57th ASEAN Foreign Ministers 'Meeting in Laos, where he also engaged with his counterpart Wang Yi from China. They both discussed critical issues including tensions in the SCS, and China's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war. In Japan, Blinken and US Defense Secretary Austin convened with Japanese counterparts, Yoko Kamikawa and Minoru Kihara, to strategize the enhancement of their military cooperation by upgrading the command and control of US forces in East Asian Countries in light of mutual concerns regarding China and Russia—a significant change to US-Japan military ties. Blinken also attended the Tokyo Quad summit 2024. In Singapore, a 123 agreement on civil nuclear cooperation, was signed along with discussions under the Strategic Partnership for a secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific and the Critical and Emerging Technologies (CET) dialogue. During his visit to Mongolia, Secretary Blinken appreciated the movement towards the Comprehensive Strategic Dialogue.

### **US pledges \$500 Mn in aid for Philippines military modernization**

The Biden administration has recently announced a \$500 million military aid

package to the Philippines, to strengthen the defense alliance between the two nations and to boost the Philippines' external defense and progress on a proposed military intelligence-sharing pact as both allies renewed their concerns over China's continuing aggressive actions in the region. This investment is earmarked for Foreign Military Financing (FMF) to establish Roles, Missions, and Capabilities (RMC) Working groups, to implement the Philippines-Security Sector Assistance Roadmap (P-SSAR), and advance cybersecurity cooperation by integrating cyber capabilities into military exercises, including Exercise BALIKATAN. Marcos hailed "very open" communication lines between Washington and Manila, adding that the two countries' treaty alliance and key issues in the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific region "are continuously examined and reexamined so we are agile in terms of our responses." Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. had underscored the need for a U.S. military presence for Asian stability and peace.

### **Myanmar junta extends emergency rule, delays in election**

The military administration in Myanmar has officially extended the state of emergency for an additional six months. The state of emergency has been in place since a 2021 coup, as the junta battles to contain a bloody, internal rebellion that has severely tested its ability to rule. The decision the junta said was made to allow ample time for the preparation of voter lists for the forthcoming 2025 elections. The administration told the media briefing that the delay was caused due to ethnic armed groups and "terrorist activities". Meanwhile, the parallel National Unity

Government, which controls militias, also issued a statement along with three ethnic minority rebel groups saying they were open to negotiations with the military, contingent on it ceding power and bringing the armed forces under civilian control. Notably, Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing has assumed the position of Myanmar's President following the replacement of the nominal Head of State on medical leave.

### **Australia Launched Cable Connectivity and Resilience Centre for regional connectivity**

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong announced the launching of a new Cable Connectivity and Resilience Centre, to help undersea cable networks in the Indo-Pacific. Australia will invest more than USD 18 million over the next four years in the Centre, which will draw on the region's extensive undersea telecommunications cables expertise and experience according to the official statement. The investment will provide technical assistance and training across the Indo-Pacific. It aims to commission research and analysis to support Indo-Pacific governments with policy development, regulations and decision-making regarding undersea cables.

### **Quad FM Meeting in Tokyo vouch to protect sovereignty, call out Chinese coercion**

The Quad Foreign Minister's meeting in Tokyo highlighted steps for practical cooperation going forward after reviewing progress made on decisions from previous Quad meeting. It reaffirmed commitment to the UN Charter principles and stressed the importance of a free and open Indo-Pacific. The statement also emphasized the

need to advance the UN Sustainable Development Goals and take decisive action on climate change. Additionally, it highlighted the importance of upholding a rules-based international order, condemned terrorism, and called for enhanced counterterrorism cooperation. Concerns about North Korea, Myanmar, and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict were addressed, underlining the need for international stability.

The meeting also extensively discussed maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas. Looking ahead, the foreign ministers expressed plans to initiate a Quad maritime legal dialogue under the Quad Maritime Security Working Group to support maritime order in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, there was an expressed intention to strengthen the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative and extend it to critical geographies including the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Collaboration in humanitarian aid and disaster relief was identified as crucial, along with reaffirming the central role of (ASEAN) in regional affairs. Despite covering a wide range of topics, the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting faced criticism for its limited focus on security cooperation and a broad based agenda.

### **Defense Minister of Indonesia, Prabowo Subianto visited Russia**

Indonesia's President-elect Prabowo Subianto stated that his upcoming administration would uphold relations with the "great friend" Russia after he met with President Vladimir Putin. He expressed hope for stronger cooperation in the areas of defense, nuclear energy, and education. Prabowo also emphasized his commitment to enhancing this relationship and forging

ties with any country in line with his non-alignment foreign policy. Prabowo is scheduled to assume the presidency from Joko Widodo in October.

### **Prime Minister of Vietnam visits India**

Following the funeral of Late Nguyen Phu Trong, veteran general secretary of the Communist Party, Vietnam's PM Pham Minh Chinh undertook a three-day trip to India. India and Vietnam have adopted a new plan of action to strengthen and implement the bilateral 'comprehensive strategic partnership' over the next five years and are also set to establish digital payment connectivity and favour speedy conclusion of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement review said the official statement. The two countries signed six MoUs for greater cooperation in areas including agricultural research, customs capacity building, law and justice, radio & television and traditional medicines, according to the Ministry of External Affairs. India also agreed to extend two credit lines to Vietnam, amounting to \$300 million. The leaders virtually launched the 'Army Software Park' and shared their views on deepening cooperation in defense, semiconductors, green technology, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and climate action.