

INSIGHT SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES

मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

CONTENTS

- Australia, Japan, Philippines, and U.S. Conduct Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity
- Amid tension with China, Philippines looks to modernise military with India's BrahMos
- Philippines, Japan ministers agree to further enhance defence partnership
- Australia unveils roadmap to boost trade ties with India
- China's naval maneuvers in Tasman seas cause concern
- China signs agreements with Cook Islands
- Vietnam, New Zealand Announce Comprehensive Strategic Partnership
- China deploys advanced radar near Myanmar border

Overview

The South China Sea (SCS) was at the centre of regional geopolitics in February. A multilateral maritime cooperative activity was undertaken by U.S. Australia, Japan and Philippines. Amidst China's aggressive activities, the Philippines is aiming to further modernise its military and in talk to purchase additional Brahmos missiles from India. Manila also hosted Japan's defence minister to foster defence cooperation through logistics support and equipment transfers. Australia unveiled a roadmap to boost its trade ties with India aiming to increase bilateral trade and generate more jobs. Australia New Zealand and Taiwan were on the receiving end of China's aggressive behaviour, as it conducted live-fire naval drills near their waters. Aggravating regional concerns in the Pacific, China signed agreements with the Cook Islands on collaborative development projects, maritime economic cooperation, and deep-sea mineral exploitation. China also sent undercurrents in Myanmar amidst its ongoing turmoil as it deployed advanced radar near Myanmar border which also has implications for India's missile programs. Meanwhile New Zealand and Vietnam elevated their relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership.

Australia, Japan, Philippines, and U.S. Conduct Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity

On February 5th, the combined military and defence forces of the United States,

Japan, the Philippines, and Australia conducted a Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity within the Philippines 'Exclusive Economic Zone, showcasing their shared commitment to bolster regional and global cooperation in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific. To improve collaboration and interoperability, member countries' air and naval forces worked together. The drill was the first involving the four nations since U.S. President Donald Trump returned to the White House and a day after U.S. and Philippine warplanes held a joint patrol above the South China Sea, drawing a rebuke from Beijing. A spokesperson for Chinese People's Liberation Army Southern Theatre Command said China had also conducted a routine patrol in the South China Sea right after and that their troops remain on high alert to "defend China's territorial sovereignty, maritime rights and interests, and control any military activities that disrupt the South China Sea."

Amid tension with China, Philippines looks to modernise military with India's BrahMos

To update its arsenal, the media has reported that the Philippines wants to purchase new military equipments including at least two submarines and additional BrahMos missiles from India. The Philippines is currently in the third stage of its "Horizons" modernization initiative. To challenge China's military might in the region, it has set up US\$35 billion for the build-up over the next ten years. To further strengthen its defence capabilities, the Philippines has

previously stated that it is interested in acquiring at least 40 fighter jets and mid-range missiles. It anticipates receiving at least two corvette ships from South Korea in 2025; since it upgraded its relationship with Seoul to a strategic cooperation. The military buildup in the Philippines is being viewed as a response to escalation in tensions between Beijing and Manila in the South China Sea.

Philippine, Japan ministers agree to further enhance defence partnership

On February 24, Japanese Defence Minister Gen. Nakatani and Philippine Secretary of National Defence Gilberto Teodoro agreed to establish a new high-level framework to help expand defence equipment and technology cooperation. The Japanese defence minister also revealed that the two sides have agreed to establish a “strategic dialogue” between the Self-Defence Forces and the Philippine Armed Forces personnel in charge of unit operations to deepen information-sharing and operational collaboration “in order to further elevate bilateral cooperation.” Tokyo has so far only provided Manila with air surveillance radar systems under a 2020 agreement. In October 2023, Mitsubishi Electric delivered a fixed radar system to the Philippine Air Force, followed by the handover of a mobile unit in March 2024. Japan and the Philippines both have territorial disputes with China and are located along the first island chain, which connects them to Taiwan. The agreement is largely viewed as a response to Beijing's increasing assertiveness in the region.

Australia unveils roadmap to boost trade ties with India

With an emphasis on agribusiness, clean energy, and education, Australia revealed a roadmap for strengthening its economic ties with India in February to increase trade, safeguard supply chains, and generate jobs. The blueprint named four “superhighways of growth” – agribusiness, renewable energy, education and tourism – with the broader aim of leveraging trade and investment possibilities coming from India's economic expansion. To help kick start this ambitious plan, Canberra is investing USD 16 million for an Australia-India Trade and Investment Accelerator Fund, which is expected to help Australian businesses unlock new commercial opportunities in India. The roadmap identifies nearly 50 distinct chances to boost participation in areas like technology, sports, space, and defence industries and aims to aid job creation and economic growth.

China's naval maneuvers in Tasman seas cause concern

In February 2025, China conducted live-fire naval drills in the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand. The exercises, which involved a Chinese task force of warships, caught both countries by surprise. The drills forced commercial flights to divert, as the vessels conducted live-fire activities near busy flight paths linking the two nations. The exercises took place in international waters, which meant they did not violate international law, but the lack of adequate notice raised safety and

diplomatic concerns. China's Ministry of Defence stating that the drills complied with international law and did not affect aviation safety, also accused Australia of overreacting and “hyping up” the situation. For Australia and New Zealand, China's actions mark a new phase in their security challenges. This is the first time China has conducted military exercises in the Tasman Sea, demonstrating a potential shift in Chinese naval strategy. It is speculated that the drills by China are a demonstration of its ability to block US military action in Taiwan-related issues from the western and southern Pacific.

China signs agreements with Cook Islands

China and the Cook Islands, a self-governing nation in free association with New Zealand, announced in late February 22 that they had reached a number of agreements on collaborative development projects, maritime economic cooperation, and deep-sea mineral exploitation. The agreements, when combined with other recent Chinese military and strategic inroads in the region represent Beijing's most recent attempt to project power and exert influence over the Pacific Island Countries (PICs). Cooperation on maritime transportation, fishery management, Belt and Road Initiative projects, and seabed mineral mining—all of which have been major hubs of Chinese economic activity in the area—is covered by the inked accords. Although Beijing notably did not obtain an exclusive concession on mining

rights, the agreements permit China to collaborate with local authorities on deep-sea research, logistical support, and mineral exploitation. However, the lack of consultation and transparency around the deal has raised concerns from New Zealand. Wellington says that it needs to be informed about foreign policy matters that affect defence and security constitutionally. Experts warn that the agreement could include dual-use technologies and infrastructure that may impact the security of both the Cook Islands and New Zealand

Vietnam, New Zealand Announce Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

The relationship between New Zealand and Vietnam has been elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, according to announcement made by Prime Minister Christopher Luxon and his Vietnamese counterpart, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh to commemorate 50 years of diplomatic ties. The two leaders talked about ways to strengthen and expand New Zealand-Vietnam cooperation in the areas of economics, trade and investment, defence and security, education, and people-to-people links. New Zealand is just the 10th country Vietnam has signed such a deal with, and the seventh in just the last three years. Malaysia, France, Australia, Japan, the US, South Korea have all recently inked deals with Hanoi. The leaders agreed that the upgrade to the relationship was timely, as the Indo Pacific region navigates increasing geostrategic challenges.

Luxon also addressed an Association of South East Nations forum, where he warned that rules were being subsumed by power as nations sought to advance their interests.

China deploys advanced radar near Myanmar border

China has deployed a new Large Phased Array Radar (LPAAR) in Yunnan Province, near the Myanmar border, significantly enhancing its surveillance over India. With a range of over 5,000 kilometers, the radar system allows China to monitor vast areas of the Indian Ocean and penetrate deep into Indian territory. Primarily the LPAAR will enable Beijing to detect and track ballistic missile launches in real-time and gather valuable intelligence on missile trajectories, speeds, and distance. Strategically positioned, the radar offers China an unobstructed view of the Bay of Bengal and the broader Indian Ocean Region (IOR), where India has a strong naval presence. This new deployment complements China's existing LPAAR installations in Korla and Xinjiang, which cover northern India. By adding this facility in Yunnan, China extends its surveillance reach to India's southern and eastern regions. The radar's ability to track missile tests, such as those from Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam Island, gives China a strategic advantage posing a threat to India's missile programme and deterrence capabilities.