

INSIGHT SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
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मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

CONTENTS

- ASEAN's Foreign Ministers' Meeting was held in Manila, along with the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting on the sidelines
- For the first time, the Quad issued a dedicated joint statement on cooperation with ASEAN
- 17th Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity between the US, Japan and the Philippines
- The Arakan Army seeks international recognition
- Australia and Fiji sign two security agreements

Overview

July witnessed significant diplomatic and security developments across the Indo-Pacific, underscoring the region's continued emphasis on maritime security, strategic partnerships, and emerging technologies. ASEAN remained at the centre of regional diplomacy as Manila hosted the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM), which also provided the platform for the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting. The Quad also issued a joint statement with ASEAN for the first time. The convergence of these meetings reflected growing efforts by the Quad to reinforce their engagement with ASEAN while reaffirming support for a rules-based regional order, freedom of navigation, and practical cooperation in maritime security and critical technologies. Maritime security cooperation continued to gain momentum with the 17th Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity (MMCA) involving the United States, Japan, and the Philippines in the South China Sea. The exercise highlighted the three countries' commitment to enhancing interoperability, improving maritime domain awareness, and demonstrating a collective presence in contested waters amid persistent Chinese maritime activities.

Meanwhile, developments in Myanmar highlighted the continuing instability within the country. The Arakan Army's call for international recognition marked an important political development, signalling the group's increasing territorial control and its aspiration to gain greater international legitimacy. The Pacific also witnessed renewed security engagement as

Australia and Fiji signed two security agreements aimed at strengthening cooperation in policing, maritime security, disaster response, and transnational crime.

The month reaffirmed ASEAN's central diplomatic role, highlighted the growing convergence among like-minded partners, and underscored the continuing importance of both Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands in shaping the region's future security architecture.

ASEAN's Foreign Ministers' Meeting was held in Manila, along with the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting on the sidelines

The ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM) held in Manila reaffirmed ASEAN's central role in shaping the Indo-Pacific's diplomatic and security agenda amid intensifying geopolitical competition. Discussions focused on regional security challenges, including the South China Sea, the crisis in Myanmar, transnational crime, economic resilience, and the advancement of ASEAN Community Vision 2045. The meeting underscored ASEAN's commitment to maintaining regional stability through dialogue, inclusivity, and adherence to international law.

Held on the sidelines of the AMM, the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting brought together Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, reflecting the Quad's continued effort to engage ASEAN while reinforcing its vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. The ministers reaffirmed support for ASEAN centrality, freedom of navigation and overflight,

respect for international law, and a rules-based maritime order. They also discussed expanding practical cooperation in areas such as maritime security, critical and emerging technologies, supply chain resilience, cybersecurity, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). The back-to-back meetings highlighted the increasing convergence between ASEAN and the Quad in addressing regional challenges while signalling that the Quad seeks to complement, rather than compete with, ASEAN-led regional mechanisms.

For the first time, the Quad issued a dedicated joint statement on cooperation with ASEAN

The Quad has institutionalised its engagement with ASEAN by issuing its first standalone joint statement on ASEAN cooperation, signalling a strategic shift from merely meeting alongside ASEAN to presenting itself as an active partner in implementing the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). ASEAN has demonstrated greater strategic openness toward the Quad, indicating a willingness to engage the grouping despite China's opposition. This marks a subtle but important evolution in ASEAN's balancing strategy amid intensifying great power competition. The Quad has adopted a more confident strategic posture toward China, using the Manila meeting:

The credibility of Quad-ASEAN cooperation remains constrained by the Quad's reluctance to collectively respond to China's coercive actions, particularly in the South China Sea, creating tensions

between its support for ASEAN Centrality and its cautious diplomatic approach toward Beijing. Practical cooperation is likely to become the foundation of future Quad-ASEAN relations, with humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, maritime domain awareness, and information sharing emerging as the most politically feasible areas for expanding institutional collaboration.

17th Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity between the US, Japan and the Philippines

The 17th Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity (MMCA) was conducted by the US, Japan and the Philippines within the Exclusive Economic Zone of the Philippines from July 21-July 25. The activity reaffirmed the three countries' commitment to strengthening maritime security and upholding a rules-based regional order.

Participating units included the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force destroyer JS Yudachi; two FA-50 fighter jets, two A29B Super Tucano light attack aircraft, one C-208B intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft, and one W-3 Sokol search and rescue helicopter from the Philippine Air Force; the Philippine Coast Guard patrol vessel BRP Malabrigo; the Philippine Navy frigate BRP Antonio Luna and one AW109 helicopter; and the U.S. Navy littoral combat ship USS Santa Barbara and a P-8A Poseidon aircraft.

The exercise focused on enhancing interoperability, maritime domain awareness, search and rescue, and coordinated naval operations, reflecting

the expanding trilateral defence partnership amid persistent tensions in contested waters. Conducted against the backdrop of increasing Chinese maritime activities around Philippine-claimed features in the South China Sea, the MMCA demonstrated the partners' resolve to support freedom of navigation, respect for international law, and the 2016 Arbitral Award under UNCLOS. Beyond improving operational readiness, the exercise underscored the institutionalisation of trilateral maritime cooperation, signalling a broader shift towards coordinated deterrence and capacity-building among like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific.

The Arakan Army seeks international recognition

The Arakan Army seeks international recognition by leveraging its territorial control over Myanmar's Rakhine State. The appeal for international recognition marked a significant political development in Myanmar's protracted civil conflict, reflecting the group's growing territorial control and administrative capacity in Rakhine State. By seeking diplomatic engagement and recognition from the international community, the Arakan Army signalled its ambition to be viewed not merely as an ethnic armed organisation but as a legitimate political actor capable of governing territory under its influence.

The move underscores the shifting balance of power within Myanmar, where resistance groups have increasingly

challenged the authority of the military junta since the 2021 coup. It also presents new dilemmas for regional and international stakeholders, particularly ASEAN, which continues to advocate for a peaceful resolution while adhering to its principle of non-interference. The development highlights the evolving complexity of Myanmar's conflict and its wider implications for regional stability, humanitarian assistance, and cross-border security in Southeast Asia.

Australia and Fiji sign two security agreements

On July 6, 2026, Australia and Fiji signed two treaty-level agreements in Suva, the Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty), making Fiji Australia's fourth formal ally after the United States, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea. Hours later, a Chinese nuclear-powered submarine launched a ballistic missile into the South Pacific nuclear-free zone.

These treaties represent a significant endeavour Australia has undertaken with any country. These agreements would transform Australia and Fiji's relationship, further underscoring the region's prosperity and security for generations to come. The Vuvale Union sets out ambitious commitments and would integrate security, economies and people. The Ocean of Peace Alliance is a mutual defence treaty that commits Australia and Fiji to come to the other's aid at times of need.