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Overview

October 2026 witnessed significant developments across Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific, reflecting the region's security dynamics and growing emphasis on strategic partnerships. The 13th ADMM-Plus and the Squad Defence Ministers' meeting in Cebu highlighted continued efforts to strengthen regional defence cooperation, maritime security and deterrence through both ASEAN-led and minilateral frameworks. Meanwhile, developments along the Bangladesh–Myanmar border, particularly the Arakan Army's proposed relocation of villages, underscored the persistent security and humanitarian challenges arising from Myanmar's internal conflict. On the non-traditional security front, Singapore and Indonesia's engagement on transboundary haze reflected continued efforts to address shared environmental concerns through bilateral cooperation. Similarly, the 32nd Australia–Papua New Guinea Ministerial Forum reaffirmed Australia's commitment to strengthening its strategic, defence and economic engagement in the Pacific. These developments illustrate the increasingly interconnected nature of traditional and non-traditional security challenges and the growing importance of bilateral, minilateral and multilateral mechanisms in shaping the regional order.

The 13th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) was held in Cebu, Philippines

The 13th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) was held in Cebu, Philippines, on 29 October 2026, under the chairmanship of the Philippines and the theme "Navigating Our Future, Together." The meeting brought together Defence Ministers from the ten ASEAN member states and eight dialogue partners, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia and the United States to deliberate on evolving regional and international security challenges. Discussions focused on strengthening practical defence cooperation, reinforcing ASEAN Centrality and promoting dialogue-based approaches to maintaining regional peace and stability. Particular attention was given to traditional and non-traditional security concerns, including maritime security, counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), and emerging threats associated with technological advancements.

A key outcome of the meeting was the adoption of a Joint Statement on Youth, Peace and Security, recognising young people's role in conflict prevention, peacebuilding and regional security. The meeting also reaffirmed the significance of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), marking its 50th anniversary, as a foundational framework for regional peace and stability. For the wider Indo-Pacific, the meeting was significant in reaffirming ASEAN's role as a central platform for regional security dialogue at a time of intensifying geopolitical competition, maritime tensions and emerging non-traditional security threats.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh participates in the 13th ADMM-Plus

India was represented at the 13th ADMM-Plus in Cebu, Philippines, by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, who led the Indian delegation on 28–29 October 2026. In his

address on "Exchange of Views on Regional and International Security Issues," Singh reiterated India's commitment to ASEAN Centrality and its vision of a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific. He highlighted the importance of collective regional efforts in addressing emerging security challenges, particularly terrorism and maritime security. Emphasising India's experience in combating cross-border terrorism, he expressed New Delhi's willingness to share its counter-terrorism expertise with ASEAN countries and other dialogue partners through joint military exercises, capacity-building programmes and intelligence-sharing mechanisms.

A key aspect of India's participation was its emphasis on translating defence diplomacy into practical cooperation. India's participation thus reflected the growing convergence between its Act East Policy and Indo-Pacific vision, with greater emphasis on defence capacity-building, counter-terrorism, maritime cooperation and defence-industrial partnerships.

Squad Defence Ministers meeting on the sidelines of the ADMM-Plus

The Defence Ministers of Australia, Japan, the Philippines and the United States held a four-way meeting, commonly referred to as the Squad, on 28 October 2026 in Cebu, Philippines, on the sidelines of the 13th ADMM-Plus. The discussions focused on strengthening defence coordination, enhancing interoperability and advancing practical cooperation among the four countries in support of regional peace and stability. Japan proposed strengthening policy consultations, building on the consultations and joint military exercises undertaken over the preceding year. The ministers agreed to advance various forms of four-way defence cooperation, including regular policy-level engagements and joint exercises.

An important dimension of the discussions was the focus on operational coordination in and around the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the context of growing maritime security challenges in the South China Sea. The meeting is significant in understanding the evolving nature of minilateral security arrangements in the Indo-Pacific. While the ADMM-Plus provides an inclusive platform for defence dialogue involving ASEAN and its eight dialogue partners, the Squad brings together four countries with converging security interests and a stronger emphasis on operational coordination and maritime deterrence.

Arakan Army Firms Up Relocation Plan For Villages on Bangladesh-Myanmar Border

The Arakan Army (AA), which exercises control over large parts of Myanmar's Rakhine State, is preparing a plan to relocate several villages along the Bangladesh–Myanmar border to relatively safer and better-connected areas within Maungdaw district. The proposed relocation primarily concerns remote border settlements inhabited by ethnic communities, including the Mro, Rakhine Buddhist and Khami populations.

The situation, however, extends beyond the relocation of non-Rohingya communities. Reports emerging in October have also raised concerns about the displacement of Rohingya populations in northern Rakhine.

The development carries important implications for Bangladesh's border security and the wider Rohingya crisis. Any further displacement from Rakhine could increase pressure on Bangladesh, which already hosts a large Rohingya refugee population in Cox's Bazar.

Singapore and Indonesia discuss bilateral issues of Haze

Singapore and Indonesia agreed to establish a Joint Task Force to address the recurring issue of transboundary haze caused by forest and land fires in Indonesia. The decision was announced following a meeting between Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and his Indonesian counterpart Arrmanatha Nasir in Jakarta on 27 October 2026. The discussions took place amid worsening air pollution across parts of Southeast Asia, with smoke from fires in Sumatra and Kalimantan affecting air quality in neighbouring countries, including Singapore and Malaysia. Both sides acknowledged that the haze issue required coordinated action.

The proposed Joint Task Force will facilitate information-sharing, financial intelligence cooperation and cross-border evidence gathering to investigate companies linked to the fires. The development highlights the continuing limitations of ASEAN's efforts to address transboundary environmental challenges, particularly the recurring haze problem.

32nd Australia-Papua New Guinea Ministerial Forum held in Port Moresby

The 32nd Australia–Papua New Guinea Ministerial Forum was held in Port Moresby on 20 October 2026, co-chaired by Papua New Guinea's Foreign Minister Justin Tkatchenko and Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong. The meeting was particularly significant as it marked the first ministerial-level engagement since the Australia–Papua New Guinea Mutual Defence Treaty, known as the Pukpuk Treaty, entered into force on 8 July 2026, formally elevating the bilateral relationship to an alliance. Discussions covered a wide range of issues, including defence and security cooperation, trade and investment, infrastructure development, telecommunications, healthcare, education and labour mobility.

A key outcome was the agreement to deepen defence and security cooperation through the implementation of the Pukpuk Treaty and the existing Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA). The two countries also advanced arrangements to facilitate greater Australian Defence Force (ADF) presence and operational access in Papua New Guinea. The forum highlighted cooperation in telecommunications and digital infrastructure, including the completion of the PNG Telecommunications Blueprint, which aims to improve internet affordability, connectivity and cybersecurity. Australia also announced a new ten-year primary healthcare programme to strengthen healthcare delivery in Papua New Guinea, particularly maternal and child health services. The forum reflects Australia's efforts to institutionalise and deepen its strategic engagement with Pacific Island countries amid growing geopolitical competition in the region.