

INSIGHT SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES

मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

CONTENTS

- Southeast Asia at APEC and G20: Key Highlights
- Myanmar: Resistance Group Open to Talks with Military Junta
- Philippines: New Maritime Laws and Tensions with China
- U.S.-Philippines Defence: New GSOMIA Agreement
- Vietnam Expands Military Presence in Spratlys
- Vietnam-Malaysia: Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP)
- Malaysia-South Korea: Strategic Partnership and Defence Cooperation
- Australia Signs Enhanced Defence Pact with Japan
- Pacific Islands Strengthen Security Ties with the U.S., Focus on Climate Resilience at Regional Summit

Overview

November 2024 has seen significant shifts in Southeast Asia and Oceania's geopolitics, with deepening security alliances between the U.S. and Pacific nations, heightened maritime disputes in the South China Sea, and strategic partnerships across key regional players. With rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific and climate resilience emerging as a core issue, the region remains a focal point for global geopolitical dynamics.

Southeast Asia at APEC and G20: Key Highlights

Southeast Asian leaders participated in the APEC Leaders' Meeting in Lima, Peru (November 14-16, 2024), with all ASEAN members except the Philippines sending heads of state. Indonesia's President Prabowo Subianto emphasized APEC's role in economic resilience and innovation, while Vietnamese President Luong Cuong warned against protectionism and stressed the importance of robust supply chains. Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim called for strategic neutrality in the U.S.-China technology rivalry and raised concerns over the Gaza crisis. On the sidelines, Presidents Biden and Xi Jinping reaffirmed their commitment to managing U.S.-China competition peacefully. Following APEC, leaders traveled to Rio de Janeiro for the G20 Summit, where they reached a consensus on global crises, including

the Gaza conflict and Ukraine war. Despite Russia's absence from the statement, the G20 summit showcased Southeast Asia's commitment to economic cooperation and global stability.

Myanmar: Resistance Group Open to Talks with Military Junta

The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), a prominent rebel group in Myanmar, has signaled a willingness to negotiate with the military junta after inflicting significant defeats on the Myanmar military over the past year. The TNLA has called for an end to the junta's airstrikes in areas under its control, acknowledging China's efforts to mediate a peace settlement. As part of its diplomatic pressure, China has urged TNLA and other ethnic armed groups like the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) to halt their attacks and engage in talks. Furthermore, China has proposed a joint security company to ensure the safety of its investments and personnel in Myanmar. Beijing has also provided the junta with 1 billion yuan for a national census and infrastructure projects aimed at facilitating the country's 2025 elections. Meanwhile, the MNDAA recently distanced itself from the Myanmar National Unity Government (NUG) and aligned with China, marking a shift in the conflict dynamics and signaling a growing Chinese influence in Myanmar's internal affairs.

Philippines: New Maritime Laws and Tensions with China

On November 7, 2024, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. signed two significant pieces of legislation—the Philippines Maritime Zone Act (PMZA) (RA 12064) and the Philippines Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act (ASLA) (RA 12065). These laws aim to formalise the country's maritime zones based on the standards of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), asserting control over Philippine waters and defining archipelagic sea lanes for foreign vessels and aircraft. In a statement, Marcos emphasised that the laws underscore his administration's commitment to safeguarding the country's maritime resources, conserving biodiversity, and ensuring the sustainability of waters that provide vital livelihoods for Filipinos. However, on November 10, China issued a statement on Scarborough Shoal, asserting its territorial rights and declaring that the baselines around the shoal were established in accordance with UNCLOS. The Philippines responded on November 12 by filing a diplomatic protest, contesting China's sovereignty over the feature and the legality of establishing straight baselines around it, intensifying maritime tensions in the region.

U.S.-Philippines Defense: New GSOMIA Agreement

On November 18, 2024, U.S. Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and Philippine

Defence Secretary Gilberto Teodoro signed the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) at Camp Aguinaldo, Manila. The agreement, which has been under negotiation for years, aims to enhance military intelligence-sharing and interoperability between the two countries. GSOMIA allows the U.S. and the Philippines to exchange classified military information through secure channels, significantly improving their defence cooperation. This pact strengthens the U.S.-Philippine security alliance, providing the Philippines with access to advanced U.S. military technologies and higher capabilities, particularly in cybersecurity, intelligence operations, and military training. It also deepens the bilateral defence ties amid rising regional security challenges, particularly in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. The agreement is seen as part of the broader strategy to counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region and to bolster the Philippines' defence posture.

Vietnam Expands Military Presence in Spratlys

Vietnam is significantly expanding its military footprint in the Spratly Islands, a highly contested area in the South China Sea. Reports indicate that Vietnam is constructing a new runway on Barque Canada Reef, with an initial length of 8,000 feet, which is twice the size of the existing runway on Spratly Island. This expansion is strategically critical, as it enhances Vietnam's

capacity to deploy combat aircraft and other military assets to the region, reinforcing its claim over the disputed territories. The construction of the runway reflects Vietnam's growing military presence and strategic interests in the Spratlys, which are claimed by multiple countries, including China, the Philippines, and Malaysia. The region is crucial for global shipping lanes, rich fisheries, and potential energy reserves, making it a flashpoint for geopolitical tensions. Vietnam's move to extend its airstrip aligns with its broader strategy to fortify its territorial claims and increase operational flexibility in the face of escalating rivalries. This development also comes amid China's increasing militarisation of its own claims in the South China Sea, with the construction of artificial islands and military installations. As tensions between China and its neighbours continue to rise, Vietnam's actions highlight the growing militarisation of the South China Sea and its pivotal role in the Indo-Pacific's security dynamics.

Vietnam-Malaysia: Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP)

Vietnam and Malaysia have elevated their bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), with Malaysia becoming the first ASEAN nation to achieve this status with Vietnam. This partnership encompasses a broad agenda, including defence and security cooperation, scientific and technological collaboration, and joint efforts to ensure freedom of navigation in the South

China Sea. Both nations have emphasised the importance of self-restraint to avoid escalating tensions in the region, despite shared concerns over China's expansive maritime claims. However, Malaysia and Vietnam's overlapping territorial claims in the Spratly Islands have led to tensions, with Malaysia protesting Vietnam's island-building program and other disputes in the South China Sea. This CSP is part of a broader trend in Vietnam's omnidirectional foreign policy, which aims to strengthen relations with key global powers. Malaysia joins other major countries like China, India, South Korea, and the United States in achieving this high-tier diplomatic status with Vietnam, signalling the growing importance of ASEAN in global geopolitics.

Malaysia-South Korea: Strategic Partnership and Defence Cooperation

During Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's visit to South Korea, both countries upgraded their bilateral ties to a Strategic Partnership, with a focus on enhancing defence cooperation and trade. The partnership will see closer military collaboration, including joint defence initiatives, increased defence exchanges, and R&D in military technology. This marks a deepening of the defence relationship, which is already strengthened by a significant deal in May 2023, where South Korea agreed to supply 18 FA-50M fighter jets to Malaysia. In addition to defence, the two nations are working

to finalise a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) by 2025, aimed at boosting collaboration in sectors such as the digital economy, green technologies, and bio-economy. South Korea is Malaysia's eighth-largest global trade partner, and PM Anwar actively promoted Malaysia as an investment hub during meetings with 147 South Korean companies, focusing on semiconductors, electric vehicles (EVs), and artificial intelligence (AI).

Australia Signs Enhanced Defence Pact with Japan

In November 2024, Australia and Japan signed a landmark defence agreement, deepening their bilateral military cooperation amid growing concerns over regional security. The pact, called the Australia-Japan Defence Cooperation Agreement (AJDCA), enhances collaboration in areas such as intelligence sharing, joint military exercises, and cyber defence. It also enables the two nations to collaborate on defence infrastructure projects and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region, where both face security challenges from China's growing influence. The agreement aligns with Australia's broader strategy of strengthening defence ties with key regional allies as part of its Indo-Pacific strategy. Both nations have emphasised their commitment to freedom of navigation and regional stability, reflecting shared concerns over the increasing militarisation of the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

Pacific Islands Strengthen Security Ties with the U.S., Focus on Climate Resilience at Regional Summit

In November 2024, Pacific island nations took significant steps to bolster both security and climate resilience in the face of growing geopolitical and environmental challenges. Several countries, including Palau, Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands, deepened their security partnerships with the United States. High-level talks centred on expanding defence cooperation, with the U.S. pledging increased military support and joint operations to counter China's influence in the region. This move aligns with broader Indo-Pacific security strategies and highlights the Pacific's strategic importance in global trade and geopolitical rivalry. At the same time, New Zealand hosted a major Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) to address the escalating impacts of climate change on vulnerable Pacific nations. The summit, attended by leaders from over a dozen island nations, culminated in the adoption of the Pacific Climate Action Plan. This framework emphasises sustainable development, renewable energy, and disaster resilience, underscoring the urgency of climate action. Prime Minister Chris Hipkins reaffirmed New Zealand's leadership role in supporting its Pacific neighbours, calling for stronger global commitments to climate justice and enhanced financial and technical aid for the region's most affected nations.