

INSIGHT SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
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Southeast Asia saw high political activity with landmark changes in leadership in Singapore as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's passes on reigns of power to Deputy Lawrence Wong. Japanese PM Fumio Kishida and Philippines President Marcos Jr. arrived in Washington for the inaugural US-Japan-Philippines trilateral summit. The 39th edition of the Exercise Balikatan between US and the Philippines also kicked off on April 22 against the backdrop of trilateral summit and increasing Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. Meanwhile Australia followed up on its 2023 Defence Strategic Review with the release of its inaugural National Defence Strategy (NDS) and the 2024 Integrated Investment Program (IIP). The NDS document establishes Strategy of Denial as the cornerstone of the country's defence planning. In Myanmar, Junta soldiers successfully recaptured the economically vital township of Myawaddy, driving away rebel groups even as political leaders in exile Aung San Suu Kyi and Win Myint made headlines following their temporary transfer from prison to house arrest. In the Pacific Islands, Chinese FM Wang Yi's visit to Papua New Guinea yielded agreements on trade and technology cooperation while Australian PM Albanese also visited PNG shortly after for Anzac Day celebrations. In a significant step towards deepening bilateral defence cooperation, PNG appointed its first ever Defence Advisor to India.

Lee Hsein Loong to step down as Singapore's Prime Minister

Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has announced his decision to resign

on the 15th of May, 2024, after staying in power for two decades. His successor, Deputy Lawrence Wong is set to take on Loong's role on May 15. This is a significant moment in Singapore's history since it is only the third time after 1965 that there has been such a change; besides, the Lee Family has always been closely associated with the country's growth and development. It was however expected to be a smooth transition for Wong given he had received overwhelming support from all members of parliament belonging to People's Action Party which has been under Lee's leadership since 2004. The succession plan has taken years rather than months due to various hurdles, among them being mistakes made during Heng Swee Keat's term. The party's previous choice, Heng Swee Keat, a former central bank chief and education minister, stepped aside suddenly in 2021 throwing the party's succession plans into disarray. This forced Lee into making appointing a different successor to avoid any delay in the political transition.

Inaugural US-Japan-Philippines trilateral summit

Washington hosted Japan Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. for the much-awaited US-Japan-Philippines trilateral summit. US President Joe Biden reaffirmed the US's 'ironclad' alliance commitments to the defence of Japan and the Philippines, reiterating that "any attack on Philippine aircraft, vessels or armed forces in the South China Sea would invoke our mutual defense treaty." The Joint Vision document denounces People's Republic of China's

(PRC) militarization of reclaimed features and unlawful maritime claims in the South China Sea, its coercive use of Coast Guard and maritime militia vessels, its efforts to disrupt other countries' offshore resource exploitation, and its attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by force or coercion in the East China Sea. The leaders affirmed the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and their commitment to the complete de-nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Women, Peace, and Security Agenda and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty were also referenced in the joint statement. The leaders called for the immediate commencement of long-overdue negotiations on a treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons. The leaders also launched the Luzon Economic Corridor, the first Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment project in the Indo-Pacific. The corridor will enhance connectivity between Subic Bay, Clark, Manila, and Batangas in the Philippines.

US Philippines conduct Exercise Balikatan 2024

The 39th edition of Exercise Balikatan, the largest annual bilateral exercise conducted between the Philippines and the United States, kicked off on April 22. Exercise Balikatan follows the joint drills by US, Japan, Philippines, and Australia in the South China Sea, prior to the US-Japan-Philippines trilateral summit. Around 16,000 troops participate over the course of 26 days. Scheduled to run until May 18, the joint exercise draws observers from 14 nations - India, France, Japan, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia,

Brunei, New Zealand, South Korea, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada. France joins the drills, in its first participation since the exercise began in 1991. Interestingly, this is the first time that the exercise is being held along the edge of Manila's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The 39th edition also marks the first active participation of the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), and the first time that a civilian entity has taken part in the drills. The PCG is deploying six vessels as a part of its engagement with the exercise.

Australia's inaugural National Defence Strategy

Following the 2023 Defence Strategic Review, the government of Australia released the country's first National Defence Strategy on April 17. The National Defence Strategy, alongside the Integrated Investment Program, will serve as a road map for implementing an ambitious transformation of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) into an integrated, focused force that can safeguard Australia's security in the long-term. According to the National Defence Strategy, *a Strategy of Denial* forms the foundation of Defence planning across all domains- maritime, land, air, space and cyber. The document identifies the alliance with the United States as critical to Australia's national security, and views AUKUS as essential to building the ADF's capacity to deliver "impactful projection across the full spectrum of proportionate response". Identifying India and Japan as key partners, the National Defence Strategy also puts emphasis on the need to deepen defence relationships across Southeast Asia, the Pacific, as well as in the

Indian Ocean and North Asia regions. Funding is crucial to the implementation of the National Defence Strategy. Therefore, the Albanese Government is investing an additional \$5.7 billion over the next four years and \$50.3 billion over the next decade in Defence funding. The Australian Defence budget is expected to grow to more than \$100 billion by 2033-34.

Papua New Guinea welcomes Wang Yi and Albanese, appoints Defence Advisor to India

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi landed in Port Moresby for an official visit. During his visit, Wang Yi criticized the AUKUS trilateral defence partnership, emphasising that the Pacific "should not be a playground for major powers". Following the bilateral meeting, China and PNG inked several deals, relating to the export of PNG cocoa and coffee, cooperation on information communication technology and USD \$1.7 million in disaster relief. Wang Yi's visit was immediately followed by the arrival of Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. The focus of the Australian Prime Minister's four-day visit was the Anzac Day celebrations- the commemoration of the joint World War II efforts. Albanese spent two days walking along the historic 16 km long Kokoda trek, along with PNG Prime Minister James Marappe. At the Anzac Day dawn service, held at the Isurava battle memorial, Albanese addressed the crowd, reflecting on the sacrifice and kindness of the people of PNG during the WWII campaigns and the "unadorned strength of the Australian spirit". Meanwhile, PNG has nominated its

first defence adviser to India, marking a significant step forward in defence cooperation between the two countries.

Aung San Suu Ki under house arrest, Junta recaptures Myawaddy

Myanmar's jailed former leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the president of her toppled government, Win Myint have been moved from prison to house arrest as a health measure amid a severe heatwave, reported the military. Suu Kyi is currently serving a 27-year prison sentence in Naypyidaw on a variety of politically motivated criminal charges- from treason and bribery to violations of the telecommunications law. Win Myint was detained in Taungoo, Myanmar's Bago Region on an eight-year prison sentence. The NUG shadow government has demanded for the unconditional release of Suu Kyi and U Win Myint. Thailand's Foreign Ministry has also urged the junta to release the detained leaders in order to advance the implementation of the ASEAN five-points consensus.

Meanwhile The Karen Nation Liberation Army (KNLA), the Karen National Union (KNU) and the People's Defense Force (PDF) who taken control of Myawaddy – a major trading hub along the Myanmar-Thailand border, have now retreated. The fall of Myawaddy prompted a counteroffensive "Operation Aung Zeya", leading to the successful re-establishment of junta troops at the 2nd Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge. The Kayin state's Border Guard Force, now the Karen National Army, is understood to have aided the junta soldiers.