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Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



Batu Caves, a popular symbol of cultural links between India and Malaysia.

Photo Courtesy- Millie Saroha

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Editor's Note

With Covid-19 not quite over yet, Singapore's popular Shangri-La Dialogue had to be cancelled a second time, but the pursuit of the perceived 'national interest' by the regional states did not abate. It was the 30th Anniversary of multilateral dialogue between China and ASEAN, but many of Southeast Asian countries continued to have a strained relationship with China in the South China Sea and this included not only the Philippines and Vietnam but also Malaysia and others. Meanwhile in India's close neighbourhood the Myanmar political pot kept boiling with attempts by Thailand to mediate in the Myanmar internal conflict. Brunei has issued a Defence White Paper in the year that it is also chairing ASEAN. India and Indonesia revived their maritime cooperation with naval exercises for improved interoperability. Additionally, Australia and India engaged with France in the first ever trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the G7 meeting. At another end Cambodia's diplomatic relations with the US became strained.

Insight Southeast Asia has attempted to revive some of its earlier features in this newsletter. We have included a Commentary on 'China's Quest for Infrastructure and Influence in Mainland Southeast Asia' by eminent Australian academic, Dr Greg Raymond in this issue. The mainstay of this newsletter remains its Newstrack which has been compiled by Millie Saroha. She has also contributed the Photo-Essay on Batu Caves.

Udai Bhanu Singh

China's Quest for Infrastructure and Influence in Mainland Southeast Asia

Dr Greg Raymond

Dr Greg Raymond is an academic at ANU, teaching and researching Southeast Asian politics and is a former policy adviser to the Australian government.

His Lowy Institute Analysis *Jagged Sphere: China's Quest for Infrastructure and Influence in Mainland Southeast Asia* was released in June.

If there is anywhere that China might expect to establish a sphere of influence, it is in mainland Southeast Asia. Here China, the world's second-largest economy, towers over the Mekong region, where three countries (Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar) are still classified as Least Developed Countries - countries with low incomes and educational levels, high mortality rates, and vulnerability to environmental and economic shocks. Their embrace of China's trillion-dollar Belt and Road infrastructure project is allowing China to extend its geo-economic influence well beyond its borders. But the wariness of two stronger states, Vietnam and Thailand means China's sphere of influence in the Mekong will likely be uneven and incomplete.

China has reason for seeking greater influence in this part of the world; its economy is still highly dependent on seaborne energy supplies from the Middle East. These pass through the straits of Malacca, where the United States, with fifteen military commands in Singapore, could mount a blockade in the event of a crisis. This means China needs alternative routes to the sea, which it is seeking with its Belt and Road projects. One of these, the China-Laos rail project, is due to complete in December this year. The World Bank has said that completion of the entire Singapore to Kunming Rail high-speed rail project could mean that an additional 1.5 million tonnes of trade

between China and ASEAN currently transported via maritime routes could be transported instead by rail.

The railway is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, a program that Beijing would reasonably assess as a good fit for mainland Southeast Asia. Mekong governments have long seen connective infrastructure as crucial to their development prospects. In the aftermath of the Cold War they signed up to the Chinese-sponsored Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) multilateral initiative which targeted economic growth through roads, rail and investment. But the GMS, like ASEAN's Master Plan for Connectivity, could never progress faster than the funding available from the Mekong states; now with the trillion-dollar BRI supercharging infrastructure investment, the prospects for China reshaping the region's economies are strong.

A new paper released by the Lowy Institute analyses China's infrastructural ambitions in two dimensions: *lines of access* and *nodes of control*. The *lines* are multi-lane highways and high-speed rail, which poorer countries bordering China, such as Myanmar and Laos, have been receptive to, given their weak land transport infrastructure. The *nodes* in mainland Southeast Asia are China's Special Economic Zones. China's SEZ brand is a strong one; its successful economic experiment near Hong Kong in the coastal province of Shenzhen has encouraged China's neighbours to experiment with their own SEZs. Some of these, like in Sihanoukville in Cambodia's south,

are run on conventional lines: Chinese investors employ locals in factories to produce goods for exports under generous tax regimes. Others, such as the Boten and Golden Triangle SEZs in northern Laos and the Shwe Koko in eastern Myanmar, are different. Connecting to new Chinese-funded transport infrastructure, they appear as expansive Chinese enclaves, cities carved out of the rural surrounds, combining residential and tourist development with other activities such as gambling and industry. Boten SEZ, sitting in Laos on its northern border with China and set to become a city of 300,000 people, appears to be crystallising the prediction of Singaporean diplomat Bilahari Kausikan that with the economic integration of southern China and mainland Southeast Asia, “borders would become no more than lines on a map”.

These enclave SEZs risk eroding the sovereignty of their host country. In Boten and the Golden Triangle SEZs for example, Chinese administrators control almost every aspect of life, including security. This warrants close observation: seemingly innocuous transport infrastructure such as airstrips and deep-sea ports in Cambodia’s Dara Sakor casino project could conceivably serve China’s strategic ambitions, as its Djibouti port has done in Africa.

Other states in the region appear to be resisting China’s southward thrust. The two strongest Mekong states, Vietnam and Thailand, seem to have cooled in their support for China’s infrastructure appetite. Thailand has declined to open up its stretches of the Mekong to Chinese shipping and has not committed to build high-speed rail to the Laos capital of Vientiane. Instead, with the support of Japan, it is prioritising its own Eastern Economic Corridor project, linking its ports, airports, and industrial heartland with ports in Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar, establishing an ASEAN sea transportation hub.

The region’s patchy responses to the allure of the BRI have left China with a highly variegated footprint in mainland Southeast Asia. The strong states Vietnam and Thailand are looking to other development partners such as Japan, while weaker states such as Laos are at greater risk of being drawn into China’s infrastructural sphere of influence. But the Mekong’s embrace of China is far from absolute.

Batu Caves of Malaysia and the India Connect

Millie Saroha

“We have had our cultural and historical ties over centuries, but what excites us is the future. People here (in India) are more confident of the future and this is why we have decided that India will be a major strategic partner for Malaysia.”- Malaysian Prime Minister Mohd. Najib (2010).



Batu Caves, a popular symbol of cultural links between India and Malaysia.

Photo Courtesy: Millie Saroha



Temple Inside Batu Caves

Photo Courtesy: Millie Saroha

Ancient history scholar of the Malaya peninsula Dato’ Roland Braddell, states that “no understanding of ancient history of these regions can be obtained without that of India... Malaya... is in the main... a highway of migration and trade, a meeting point of civilizations.”¹ Given these ancient links, movement between India and Malaysia dates back to the pre-Christian era when Hindu merchants, traders, and kings started influencing the Malaya peninsula through maritime travel.² The period since then has seen steady movement and connectivity between the two states. The largest movement of Indians to Malaysia came between 1911-1930 when plantation workers from India

¹ Veena Sikri, *India and Malaysia: Intertwined Strands*, ISEAS, 2013, 63.

² Amit Singh, “India-Malaysia Strategic Relations,” *Maritime Affairs Journal* 7, no. 1 (2011): 87.

were brought to the country by the British colonial forces.³ A 2010 Malaysian census report found that 1.8 million Indians in Malaysia were third and fourth generation naturalised citizens. In fact, Malaysia houses the largest population of diaspora Indians in Southeast Asia. Ethnic Indians are the third-largest ethnic group in Malaysia at 6.8% of the population after Malay and Chinese citizens.⁴ As a result, deep-rooted Indian influences are prevalent in today's Malaysian society, and Batu Caves is a popular cultural representation of these links.

Batu Caves are located 13 kilometres north of Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia. It is one of Malaysia's biggest tourist attractions, with a 142-foot-tall, gold plated concrete statue of Hindu deity Lord Murugan standing at the base of 272 steps that lead into a series of limestone caves. A Tamil Hindu community

leader in Malaysia, K Thamboosamy Pillay, built the temples within the caves in 1891. Subsequently, pilgrims started celebrating the Tamil Hindu festival devoted to Lord Murugan, Thaipusam, at the Batu Caves.⁵ The religious tourist destination now attracts thousands of pilgrims annually, with the figure reaching one million attendees in 2001. The Tamil festival also attracts Indians of other religious backgrounds like Sikhs, as well as members of the Sinhalese and Chinese communities.⁶ Moreover, inbound Indian tourists are also a large source of cultural and people to people links between Malaysia and India. These links form the basis of India's relationship with Malaysia today.

³ Ibid, 88.

⁴ Amit Singh, "Indian Diaspora as a factor in India–Malaysia relations," *Diaspora Studies* 7, no. 2 (2014): 131. . Also see Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal for latest updates.

⁵ "Batu Caves," Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Batu-Caves>.

⁶ Azilah Kasim, "Balancing Tourism and Religious Experience: Understanding Devotees' Perspectives on Thaipusam in Batu Caves," *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management* 20, no. 3-4 (2011): 445.

Southeast Asia

ASEAN

ASEAN Representatives Meet with Myanmar's Military Junta

ASEAN chair for the year, Brunei's second Foreign Minister Erywan Yusof, and ASEAN secretary-general Lim Jock Hoi of Brunei, met with Myanmar's military junta leaders on 4th June 2021 to present a list of nominees for the post of ASEAN special envoy to Myanmar. The envoy will have the task of mediating between the military leaders and the pro-democracy block. The envoy will also help oversee an immediate cessation of violence and aid in the implementation of ASEAN's five-point consensus issued back in April.⁷ The ASEAN consensus calls for 1) the immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar 2) constructive dialogue among all parties concerned to seek a peaceful solution in the interest of the people 3) mediation to be facilitated by an envoy of ASEAN's chair with the assistance of the secretary-general 4) humanitarian assistance provided by ASEAN's AHA centre and 5) a visit by special envoy and delegation to Myanmar to meet all parties concerned.⁸ The ASEAN consensus and visit by its representatives to Myanmar comes at the backdrop of pro-democracy elements losing faith in the regional block.

ASEAN was criticised for failing to meet the shadow National Unity Government. In a chairman's statement, ASEAN representatives also referred to junta leader General Min Aung Hlaing as the "Chairman of the State Administrative Council of Myanmar". The title sparked controversy as it provided *de facto* recognition to the General as the leader of Myanmar. The statement has since been removed from the ASEAN website.⁹ However, the deputy foreign minister of the shadow National Unity Government Moe Zaw Oo, speaking in a live-streamed news conference, stated that they had "little confidence in ASEAN's efforts" anymore.¹⁰

India and ASEAN

8th ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus

The 8th ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus, chaired by Brunei, was held via videoconference on 16th June 2021. It included the Defence Ministers of the 10 ASEAN states and 8 dialogue partner countries, including China, Australia, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, the United States of America, and the Republic of Korea. The goal of the meeting is to promote trust and confidence building measures between defence establishments through forums of dialogue and cooperation. Addressing the ADMM plus meeting, Indian Defence Minister Shri Rajnath Singh "called for an open and inclusive order in the Indo-Pacific," "respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations," and a "peaceful resolutions of

⁷ "ASEAN Submits List of Nominees for Special Envoy to Myanmar Military Regime," Business Standard, June 7, 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/asean-submits-list-of-nominees-for-special-envoy-to-myanmar-military-regime-121060700069_1.html.

⁸ "ASEAN leaders agree 5-point plan for Myanmar," Bangkok Post, April 25, 2021, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2104915/asean-leaders-agree-5-point-plan-for-myanmar>.

⁹ "102 Days Later, ASEAN Finally Appoints Envoy to Myanmar," Radio Free Asia, Aug 4, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/envoy-08042021173546.html>.

¹⁰ "Myanmar coup opponents say no faith in ASEAN as envoy visit," Aljazeera, June 5, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/5/myanmar-coup-opponents-say-no-faith-in-asean-as-envoys-visit>.

disputes.” There was a special focus on freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea.¹¹

China and ASEAN

30th Anniversary of Multilateral Dialogue between China and ASEAN

As this year commemorates the 30th anniversary of multilateral dialogue between China and ASEAN, meetings have been a regular undertaking. On 18th May 2021, the 27th ASEAN-China Senior Officials’ Consultation was held via video conference. Discussions included the peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea amid increasing activity in the region.¹² In a subsequent face to face meeting, China’s state councillor and foreign minister Wang Yi met with ASEAN Foreign Ministers in Chongqing, China on 7th June for a Special ASEAN-China foreign ministers’ meeting. The discussions included the possibility of a comprehensive strategic partnership between China and ASEAN to bolster future cooperation. Moreover, the paused negotiations on the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea are set to

resume at the earliest. The strategic uptake in Chinese engagement with Southeast Asia comes at a time when the U.S. is intensifying its efforts to engage with the region. However, U.S. efforts fall short at times, as was evident in the technical glitch that resulted in the cancellation of a virtual meeting between ASEAN foreign ministers and the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on May 25th.¹³

UN in the Indo-Pacific

UN Rebukes the Military Junta in Myanmar by Passing Landmark Resolution

On 18th June 2021, the United Nations General Assembly issued a rebuke to the military junta and their lethal use of force and violence in Myanmar. They passed a resolution, 119 to 1, in favour of calling for a return to democracy in Myanmar and “prevent the flow of arms” into the country.¹⁴ Belarus voted against the resolution while 36 abstained, including India. The UNGA stated their support for ASEAN taking the helm in dealing with the negotiations in Myanmar and called for the ASEAN five-point consensus to be implemented swiftly.¹⁵ The U.S., Canada, and the United Kingdom has previously (17th May 2021) announced sanctions on

¹¹ Ministry of Defence, “Raksha Mantri calls for open & inclusive order in Indo-Pacific at the 8th ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus,” June 16, 2021, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1727467>.

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Assistant Foreign Minister Wu Jianghao Attends ASEAN-China Senior Officials’ Consultation,” May 19, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1876865.shtml.

¹³ James Crabtree, “A Confused Biden Team Risks Losing Southeast Asia,” Foreign Policy, June 27, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/27/southeast-asia-asean-china-us-biden-blinken-confusion-geopolitics>.

¹⁴ Oren Samet, “There is No ASEAN Consensus on Myanmar,” The Diplomat, June 22, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/there-is-no-asean-consensus-on-myanmar/>.

¹⁵ UNGC, “Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 18 June 2021,” <http://undocs.org/en/A/RES/75/287>.

Myanmar's State Administrative Council and individual entities providing material assistance to the junta. However, no multilateral UN sanctions have been imposed.¹⁶

Brunei

Brunei Issues a Defence White Paper

The Ministry of Defence Brunei Darussalam published its newest Defence White Paper, *Defending the Nation's Sovereignty*, on 31st May 2021. The release was planned to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the Royal Brunei Armed Forces and Brunei's chairmanship of ASEAN. The White Paper comes ten years after the publication of the last edition.¹⁷ The paper outlines Brunei's intended response to its strategic environment for the next fifteen years, highlighting the threat of major power dynamics in the region. The Defence White Paper also stresses the need for force structure and personnel management reform, inducing an increasing focus on self-reliance. However, ASEAN centrality remains crucial to Brunei, with ASEAN Defence Ministers' forums

“serving a pivotal role in fostering stability, instilling regional norms and international law, and facilitating dialogue.”¹⁸

Cambodia

Diplomatic Strain between Cambodia and the U.S.

Satellite images of Cambodia's Ream Naval Base published by American Think Tank Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative showed two new constructions believed to be Chinese funded upgrades.¹⁹ The subsequent landmark meeting between Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen and U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman on 1st June 2021 focused more on the topic of Chinese military involvement in Cambodia and its possible negative ramifications for U.S.-Cambodia relations, instead of Prime Minister Sen's goal to “reset ties” with the U.S.²⁰ As a result, on June 11th the defence attaché to the U.S. embassy in Cambodia, Colonel Marcus M Ferrara, was granted a visit to the Ream Naval Base to assuage U.S. fears. However, the visit did not go as planned as the U.S. official demanded “full access” to the base, beyond the bounds of the planned itinerary. Cambodian military officials denied the demand.²¹ The diplomatic

¹⁶ “US, Canada and UK impose new sanctions on Myanmar military,” Aljazeera, May 17, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/17/us-canada-and-uk-impose-new-sanctions-on-myanmar-military>.

¹⁷ Prashanth Parameswaran, “What Does Brunei's New Defense White Paper Reveal About Its Future Security Outlook?,” The Diplomat, June 28, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/what-does-bruneis-new-defense-white-paper-reveal-about-its-future-security-outlook/>.

¹⁸ Ministry of Defence of Brunei Darussalam, “Defending the Nation's Sovereignty,” Defence White Paper 2021, <https://www.mindef.gov.bn/Defence%20White%20Paper/DWP%202021.pdf>.

¹⁹ “Update: Rapid Construction at Cambodia's Ream Points to China,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, May 29, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/changes-underway-at-cambodias-ream-naval-base/>.

²⁰ “Shifting out of Chinese patronage, Cambodia looks to ‘reset ties’ with US,” ANI, June 3, 2021, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/shifting-out-of-chinese-patronage-cambodia-looks-to-reset-ties-with-us20210603004746/>.

²¹ Niem Chheng, “US wants ‘full access’ to Ream Naval Base,” The Phnom Penh Post, June 12, 2021, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-politics/us-wants-full-access-ream-naval-base-0>.

miscommunication caused by the event threatens to create further tensions between the U.S. and Cambodia. The U.S. has subsequently ended its military service academy programme for Cambodian students.²²

Indonesia

India and Indonesia Defence Engagement

The Indian and Indonesian Navies conducted the latest Passage Exercise (PASSEX) on 8th May 2021 to improve interoperability and maritime cooperation. The Indian navy ship INS Sharda and Indonesian Corvette KRI Sultan Hasanuddin were part of the exercise.²³ These exercises are conducted regularly in line with the upward trend in strategic cooperation between India and Indonesia. On 10th June, a virtual meeting was held between the Indian Minister of State for External Affairs V Muraleedharan, and the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia Mahendra Siregar, to review current trends in cooperation. In the meeting, both sides agreed to strengthen the 2018 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and review bilateral ties in different areas of cooperation.²⁴

U.S. Set to Construct \$3.5 Million Dollar Base in Indonesia

U.S and Indonesia have started construction on a new \$3.5-million-dollar training base for the Indonesian Coast Guard (Bakamla) in a ceremony attended by U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia Sung Y. Kim, on 25th June 2021. The centre will be constructed on a strategic island at the meeting point of the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea, only a short distance away from the U.S. Navy's Changi Naval Base, considered their primary base in the region. The centre will also operate in collaboration with the U.S., who wish to support "Indonesia's leading role in advancing regional peace and security by countering domestic and transnational crime."²⁵

Laos

Laos and Vietnam Strengthen Bilateral Relations

President of Laos Thongloun Sisoulath, met with General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong, on 28th June 2021 in Hanoi, Vietnam to strengthened their bilateral relations. The talks were a precursor to the signing of a Strategic Agreement on Vietnam-Laos Cooperation for 2021-2030, along with a series of other documents to promote the special relations

²² "United State ends military academy program for Cambodia amid strained ties," The Economic Times, July 1, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/united-states-ends-military-academy-programme-for-cambodia-amid-strained-ties/articleshow/84018396.cms?from=mdr>.

²³ "Indian and Indonesian navies carry out military drill in southern Arabian Sea," India Today, may 9, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-indonesia-navy-military-drill-southern-arabian-sea-1800381-20210509#:~:text=The%20navies%20of%20India%20and,improving%20their%20interoperability%2C%20officials%20said.>

²⁴ "India, Indonesia Agree to Strengthen Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," NDTV, June 10, 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-indonesia-resolve-to-strengthen-comprehensive-strategic-partnership-centre-2461128>.

²⁵ "Indonesia, U.S break ground on joint strategic maritime centre," Reuters, June 26, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/indonesia-us-break-ground-joint-strategic-maritime-centre-2021-06-26>.

between the two states and increase cooperation on various aspects like defence, trade, party to party links, and regional infrastructure development.²⁶

Malaysia

Malaysia Protests Chinese Infringement in its Sovereign Territory

On 31st May 2021, Malaysian radars intercepted 16 Chinese aircrafts flying in formation on approach towards Malaysian airspace. After initial attempts to contact the pilots failed, the Royal Malaysian Air Force scrambled their fighter jets to positively identify the planes as Chinese strategic transporters Ilyushin Il-76 and Xian Y-20. The Chinese planes were flying at commercial altitudes, between 23,000 and 27,000 feet.²⁷ The planes were first picked by the radar over disputed territory in the South China Sea, near Malaysian-Administered Luconia Shoals. The Chinese planes then came within 60 nautical miles of Malaysian state Sarawak on Borneo Island. Malaysian Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein called the incident a “serious threat to national sovereignty and flight

safety.” The Chinese embassy called the activity routine freedom of overflight exercise and denied Malaysian criticisms that Malaysian airspace was violated. These activities pushed the Malaysian government to issue a diplomatic protest, the seventh of its kind since 2016.²⁸ In line with these events, on 22nd June, the Malaysian Defence Ministry launched a tender to acquire new light combat aircrafts to address threats and enhance its defence and strike capabilities in line with its 2019 Defence White Paper. The tender will remain open till 22nd September 2021.²⁹

Myanmar

Political Unrest Continues in Myanmar

On 1st February 2021, the Myanmar military headed by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing overthrew the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi for their alleged voting fraud in the landslide elections of November 2020. Months on, the political unrest is yet to be resolved. As of June 28th, 880 people have died in the nationwide protests, while another 4000 people have been detained by the military junta since February.³⁰ Ethnic rebel groups like the Kachin Independence Army and Karen National Liberation Army have maintained

²⁶ “Top leaders of Vietnam, Laos vow to beef up special ties,” Vietnam Plus, June 28, 2021, <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/top-leaders-of-vietnam-laos-vow-to-beef-up-special-ties/203751.vnp>.

²⁷ “Malaysia says 16 Chinese military jets threatened its sovereignty,” Business Standard, June 1, 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/malaysia-says-16-chinese-military-jets-threatened-its-sovereignty-121060101377_1.html.

²⁸ “Malaysia to summon Chinese envoy over alleged jet intrusion,” ABC News, June 2, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/malaysia-16-chinese-jets-threatened-sovereignty-78017322>.

²⁹ Abdul Rahman Yaacob, “Can Malaysia afford frugality in air force modernization?,” East Asia Forum, July 9, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/07/09/can-malaysia-afford-frugality-in-air-force-modernisation/>.

³⁰ “Trial of Myanmar’s Suu Kyi to overrun as prosecution needs more time,” The Times of India, June 28, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/trial-of-myanmars-suu-kyi-to-overrun-as-prosecution-needs-more-time/articleshow/83922450.cms>.

their offensive against the military forces across the country. With government workers on strike and popular resistance being thrown behind the federal style National Unity Government, the junta has failed to create stability in Myanmar.³¹ Their spokesperson, Major Kaung Htet San, stated that until security and stability is achieved they will not cooperate with ASEAN regarding the selection of a special envoy to Myanmar.³²

India in the Crosshairs of Myanmar's Political Turmoil

The instability in India's neighbour to its East threatens further delays in construction and operation of flagship projects under India's "Act East" policy. The construction of the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway will be affected because of the unrest, and the newly constructed Sittwe deep water port in the Rakhine state is yet to be operational. India abstained from voting in the 18th June UNGA resolution, stating the resolutions failure to include a "constructive and consultative approach involving neighbouring countries" to achieve a "peaceful resolution of the issue." Furthermore, India called the resolution unconvincing "to aid our joint efforts towards strengthening the democratic process in Myanmar."³³

Philippines

Philippines Protests Chinese Activity in the South China Sea

Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs issued a statement on 3rd May 2021, protesting the dangerous manoeuvring and blocking by the Chinese Coast Guard of the "legitimate maritime patrols and training exercises" conducted by the Philippines Coast Guard near Bajo de Masinloc, which the Philippines considers its sovereign territory. Moreover, the statement highlighted the increasing and unauthorised presence of hundreds of Chinese fishing and maritime militia vessels in the Philippines maritime zones.³⁴ The department of foreign affairs also protested the Chinese imposed fishing moratorium in the disputed territories of the South China Sea on the 17th May. The heightened tensions fly in the face of President Rodrigo Duterte's efforts to maintain positive relations with China. On 17th May, President Duterte issued a gag order on public officials' other than himself and his spokesperson from making statements on maritime disputes. This comes after the Foreign Minister of the Philippines fired off a profane tweet on 3rd May asking Chinese vessels to leave the Philippines' maritime region.³⁵ On 21st May,

³¹ "100 days in power, Myanmar junta holds pretence of control," The Hindu, may 11, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/100-days-in-power-myanmar-junta-holds-pretense-of-control/article34532600.ece>.

³² "Myanmar army says no ASEAN envoy visit until stability restored," Aljazeera, May 8, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/8/myanmar-junta-says-no-asean-envoy-visit-until-stability-restored>.

³³ "India abstains from voting on UNGA resolution on Myanmar, says 'our view not reflected'," The Print, June 19, 2021, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-abstains-from-voting-on-unga-resolution-on-myanmar-says-our-views-not-reflected/680760/>.

³⁴ Department of Foreign Affairs, Republic of the Philippines, "Statement: On the Illegal Presence of the Chinese Coast Guard in Bajo de Masinloc, and their Belligerent Actions Against the Philippine Coast Guard," May 3, 2021, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/statements-and-advisoriesupdate/28926-statement-on-the-illegal-presence-of-the-chinese-coast-guard-in-bajo-de-masinloc-and-their-belligerent-actions-against-the-philippine-coast-guard>.

³⁵ Neil Morales, "Philippines' Duterte issues gag order over South China Sea," Reuters, May 17, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-duterte-issues-gag-order-cabinet-over-south-china-sea-spat-2021-05-17/>.

the Philippines also hosted the 6th meeting of the Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea virtually with China. The meeting was meant to ease tensions in the region and serve as a confidence-building measure to promote maritime cooperation.³⁶

Pragmatic Philippines Keeps up its Strategic and Diplomatic Engagement

In what could be called a pragmatic approach to the dispute, the head of the Philippines Armed Forces, Cirilito Sobejana, visited a coral island occupied by the Philippines in the disputed territory of the South China Sea on 7th June. Such visits are a recurring feature according to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, a U.S. based think tank. According to their satellite imagery estimates, Philippine military vessels have made 57 visits to the disputed waters of Spratly Island and Scarborough Shoal between March-May. On 14th June, the Philippines also announced a suspension of the decision to scrap the U.S.-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement that governs U.S. troop presence in the country.³⁷ Subsequently, the U.S. State Department approved three deals that would provide the Philippines' forces with new F-16 fighter jets and Sidewinder and Harpoon missiles.³⁸ Japan

has also announced a new defence aid package to the Philippines.³⁹

Singapore

Shangri-La Dialogue Cancelled Second Year in a Row

The Shangri-La Dialogue, a regional Track-1 security summit scheduled for 4-5 June in Singapore, has been cancelled due to rising local Covid-19 cases, second year in a row. The summit is a gathering of top-level officials, including heads of state, defence and security policymakers, academic experts, and industry leaders. U.S. Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin was also set to attend and deliver a speech on the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.⁴⁰

Thailand

Thailand Meets with UN Envoy to Myanmar

On 14th May 2021, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand Don Pramudwinai and the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand General Prayut Chan-o-cha, met with the special envoy of the UN to Myanmar, Christine Schraner, to discuss the situation in Myanmar and exchange views on promoting

³⁶ Department of Foreign Affairs, Republic of the Philippines, Philippines, China Convene Mechanism to Ease Tensions, Explore Cooperation in South China Sea," May 22, 2021, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/dfa-releasesupdate/28997-philippines-china-convene-mechanism-to-ease-tensions-explore-cooperation-in-south-china-sea>.

³⁷ "Philippines delays scrapping of US visiting forces agreement," CNN, June 15, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/14/asia/philippines-us-visiting-forces-agreement-intl-hnk/index.html>.

³⁸ "US approves possible sale of F-16s, missiles to the Philippines," Aljazeera, June 25, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/25/us-approves-possible-sale-of-f-16s-missiles-to-the>.

³⁹ Richard Javad Heydarian, "Anti-China alliance coalescing in the south China Sea," Asia Times, May 7, 2021, <https://asiatimes.com/2021/05/anti-china-alliance-coalescing-in-south-china-sea/>.

⁴⁰ Justin Ong, "US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin to speak in person at Shangri-La Dialogue in early June," The Straits Times, May 4, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/us-defence-secretary-lloyd-austin-to-speak-at-shangri-la-dialogue-in-early-june>

dialogue and finding a sustainable solution.⁴¹ While Thailand is battling a rise in Covid-19 cases, it is also keeping an eye on the conflict in Myanmar, which provides a different set of border security issues and socio-economic problems as a neighbouring state to Thailand.⁴²

5th Thailand-China Strategic Dialogue

On 25th May, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand hosted the 5th Thailand-China Strategic Dialogue via teleconference. The meeting was co-chaired by the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand Thani Thongphakdi and the Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs of China Wu Jianghao. The meeting agenda included a review and strengthening of the Thailand China Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership. Both sides also discussed the implementation of the 3rd Joint Action Plan on Thailand-China Strategic Cooperation 2017-2021, and the completion of the drafting of the 4th Joint Action Plan 2022-2027. The situation in Myanmar and the South China Sea were also important points of discussion as Thailand and China reaffirmed their commitment to multilateralism and cooperation as effective mechanisms of increasing mutual trust in the region.⁴³

Vietnam

Vietnam Deploys Ships in the South China Sea

In the midst of growing Chinese presence in the disputed regions of the South China Sea, Vietnam deployed a maritime militia unit consisting of nine ships equipped with light weapons. The move came on 13th June 2021, off the coast of Vietnam's southernmost province. The deployment is set to bolster Vietnam's Naval presence and safeguard fishing activities through routine patrols. The Vietnam Defence Ministry justified the necessity of the action as a reason to "protect the sovereignty of the sea and islands" in Vietnam's maritime territories. Vietnam remains vocal in its claim to the resource-rich Spratly and Paracel Islands that China also lays claim to under the auspices of the Nine-Dash Line.⁴⁴

Australia

Australia and India Engage with France in First Ever Trilateral Meeting

On May 4th 2021, India, France and Australia held their first Trilateral Ministerial Dialogue on the sidelines of the G7 Foreign Ministers Meeting. India's External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar, France's Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr Jean-Yves

⁴¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, "Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Exchanged Perspectives and Views on the Situation in Myanmar with UNSG Special Envoy," May 14, 2021, <https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/dpm-united-nations-special-envoy-myanmar?cate=5d5bcb4e15e39c306000683c>.

⁴² Kavi Chongkittavorn, "Myanmar Crisis Poses Strategic Challenge for Thailand," *The Irrawaddy*, May 31, 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/myanmar-crisis-poses-strategic-challenges-for-thailand.html>.

⁴³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, "The 5th Thailand - China Strategic Dialogue between the Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs of Thailand and Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China," May 28, 2021, <https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/sdthailandchina25052021-2?cate=5d5bcb4e15e39c306000683e>.

⁴⁴ Joe Saballa, "Vietnam Expands Maritime Presence Amid South China Sea Tension," *The Defence Post*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2021/06/14/vietnam-expands-maritime-presence/>.

Le Drain and Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs Marise Payne, met in London to discuss their shared commitment to working towards “a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific.” The Ministers discussed the situation in Myanmar and reaffirmed their commitment to ASEAN centrality. They also discussed their support for freedom of navigation and overflight and a rule-based maritime order in the Indo-Pacific that functions based on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.⁴⁵

Jeanne d’Arc21 Naval Exercises Conducted between 11-17th May 2021

China and Australia relations face deteriorations as the Royal Australian Navy joins the U.S., France and Japan in the Jeanne d’Arc 21 (ARC21) joint training exercise from May 11th to May 17th 2021. In its first edition, the exercise included the warships of the respective navies practising cooperation in an amphibious assault, urban warfare and anti-aircraft defences in the East China Sea. China’s foreign ministry spokeswomen, Hua Chunying,

downplayed the manoeuvres stating that they had “no impact” on China.⁴⁶ This comes at a time when China has “indefinitely” suspended economic dialogue with Australia and placed sanctions on key Australian exports.⁴⁷ India is hoping to deepen trade ties with Australia in the backdrop of the Australian trade disruption with China. Agricultural Minister of Australia, David Littleproud and Agricultural Minister of India, Narendra Singh Tomar, held a virtual meeting on 1st June to discuss greater access to each other’s markets.⁴⁸

Increasing Cyber Engagement between India and Australia

India and Australia held their first meeting of a Joint Working Group on Cyber Security virtually on 10th June. Ms Paulomi Tripathi, Director of Oceania Ministry of External Affairs of India and Ms Rachel James, Special Advisor Cyber Affairs at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Australia, headed the discussion on cyber security cooperation between the two countries and the implementation of the 2020-2025 Plan of Action of the cooperation framework. Under the framework, they agreed to share cyber security threats and national strategies to increase the cyber security capabilities of both states.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “India-France-Australia Joint Statement on the occasion of the Trilateral Ministerial Dialogue,” May 5, 2021, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33845/IndiaFranceAustralia_Joint_Statement_on_the_occasion_of_the_Trilateral_Ministerial_Dialogue_May_04_2021.

⁴⁶ Jamie Seidel, “China lashes out at Australia for joining military exercise with Japan, France and US,” News.com.au, May 23, 2021, <https://www.news.com.au/technology/innovation/military/china-lashes-out-at-australia-for-joining-military-exercise-with-japan-france-and-us/news-story/9261b9b18ad52d1717ae780c4a10d63d#:~:text=Beijing%20has%20lashed%20out%20at,commentator%2C%20told%20the%20Global%20Times>.

⁴⁷ “China ‘indefinitely’ suspends key economic dialogue with Australia,” BBC News, May 6, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-57004797#:~:text=China%20has%20%22indefinitely%22%20suspended%20key,from%20building%20its%205G%20network>

⁴⁸ Zia Haq, “Amid China high tariffs, India, Australia ramp up farm trade,” Hindustan Times, June 3, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/amid-china-s-high-tariffs-india-australia-ramp-up-farm-trade-101622694609374.html>.

⁴⁹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “1st Meeting of the India- Australia Joint Working Group on Cyber Security Cooperation.” June 10, 2021, <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/33903/1st+Meeting+of+the+India++Australia+Joint+Working+Group+on+Cyber+Security+Cooperation#:~:text=Center%20%E2%80%BA%20Press%20Releases-,1st%20Meeting%20of%20the%20India%20%2D%20Australia%20Joint,Group%20on%20Cyber%20Security%20Cooperation&text=The%20first%20meeting%20of%20Joint,Affairs%20of%20India%20and%20Ms>.

ABOUT US

The Southeast Asia and Oceania Centre focuses on policy-relevant research in respect of the ten ASEAN states, East Timor and Oceania, including Australia and New Zealand. The Centre studies India's bilateral and multilateral relations with states of the region with a view to providing contemporary relevance to India's Look East policy. It has a futuristic approach and examines the emerging trends in the regional security architecture. The Centre studies the potential for India's enhanced defence cooperation (including maritime issues) and cooperation in non-traditional security issues with the region. It examines internal developments of countries in this region, especially political transition and the role of the military, and their implications for India. The Centre seeks to promote Track-II institutional linkages with the region.

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accompanied by a 1000 words essay)

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