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Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



Yangon Recollection
Photo Courtesy- Udai Bhanu Singh

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Editor:

Dr Uday Bhanu Singh

Compiled by:

Akash Sahu

**Southeast Asia and
Oceania Centre**

**Manohar Parrikar Institute
for Defence Studies and
Analyses (MP-IDSA)**

**No. 1, Development Enclave, Rao
Tula Ram Marg, Delhi Cantt, New
Delhi – 110 010**

Tel. (91-11)2671 7983,

Fax: (91-11)2615 4191

Email:

southeastasia.centre@gmail.com

Website: <http://www.idsa.in>

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Southeast Asia

ASEAN

Joint Ministerial Declaration between the ASEAN and the UK was released underlining shared commitment to principles of “open, free, non-discriminatory, transparent, predictable, and stable multilateral trading system”.¹ The increasing role of digital innovation and human capital was acknowledged. Special emphasis was laid on economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, resilience of supply chains and importance of maintaining open markets. Both sides reviewed progress of cooperation on areas such as Sustainable growth, MSME development and Skills & Education

ASEAN members have agreed to reach a region-wide digital economy pact by 2023 and to start negotiations on an ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement by 2025. The decision was taken at the 53rd ASEAN economic minister’s meeting held virtually.² The meeting was chaired by Brunei, also the ASEAN chair for 2021, and ministers endorsed the Bandar Seri Begawan Roadmap which sets an agenda for greater integration of digital economies of Southeast Asian countries by 2025.

Brunei

Brunei and China have been working towards strengthening mutual cooperation. Brunei is a part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative and China has proposed ‘Long-Range objectives’ through the year 2035 for Brunei. Director-General of Department of Asian Affairs of China’s foreign ministry Liu Jinsong met with Brunei’s Ambassador to China Pehin Dato Rahmani.³ They held talks on China-Brunei bilateral cooperation, East Asia cooperation and issues of regional and international importance.

Cambodia

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi visited Cambodia on his Southeast Asia tour and met with Prime Minister Hun Sen. Bilateral talks were held on issues of trade and investment, education and security. China also pledged a grant aid to Cambodia worth US\$ 272 million.⁴ There have been concerns regarding their bilateral relationship as Cambodia assumes the chairmanship of ASEAN next year and may use its position to further Beijing’s agenda in ASEAN-led forums. However, excessive reliance on China is perhaps not entirely missed in Vientiane. Cambodia hired a Washington-based lobbying firm to “provide strategic communications and media relations services” in an attempt to mend relations with the US.⁵ India recently supplied and installed 1500 hand-pumps in Cambodia that will benefit a rural population of 400,000 across 433 villages. It

¹ Department for International Trade, “UK-ASEAN Joint declaration”, 15 September, 2021

² Kang Wang Chern, “Asean ministers to start talks on regional digital economy agreement by 2025”, *The Straits Times*, 12 September, 2021

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Director-General of the Department of Asian Affairs of the Foreign Ministry Liu Jinsong Meets with Bruneian Ambassador to China Pehin Dato Rahmani”, 14 September 2021

⁴ Sopheang Cheang, “China’s FM Wang offers aid and friendship on Cambodia visit”, *AP News*, 12 September, 2021

⁵ Sebastian Strangio, “Cambodia Hires Beltway Lobby Group to Boost Ailing International Reputation”, *The Diplomat*, 27 September, 2021

will increase the coverage for safe drinking water from 27 percent to 40 percent.⁶

Indonesia

Indonesia expressed concerns of an arms race in the region due to the newly constituted AUKUS pact among Australia, The United States and the United Kingdom.⁷ Under the pact, Australia will acquire nuclear-powered submarines which may have regional security implications. Some disturbances in Indonesia's eastern provinces of Papua could also be observed, as four personnel from Indonesian armed forces were killed by Papuan rebels.⁸ The history of conflict between the Indonesian state and Papuan region can be traced to independence from the Dutch. Papuans have not recognized Indonesian authority over their lands and sustained a freedom movement. A UN rights expert had urged Indonesia to grant bail to Papuan rebel under urgent medical attention.⁹ However, the government refused on account of the charges against him

Laos

The relations between Laos and China have only improved in the recent years. In a latest development, Laos will inaugurate its most expensive infrastructure project, a 471 km long railway line, linking capital Vientiane to its border with China.¹⁰ Chinese imports from

Laos amounted to US\$ 1.7 billion in 2019, and might register a 20 percent increase per year. The share of Chinese FDI in Laos was 87.7 percent or more than US\$ 967 million by end of 2020. The development of a 445 km highway connecting Vientiane to Boten along the border with China is also underway. COVID-19 impact on Laos has been less as compared to other Southeast Asian countries due to timely lockdowns. The country is set to receive around 2.4 million doses of coronavirus vaccine from Chinese and Australian governments in 2021.¹¹ So far it has received more than 5.5 million doses of an assortment of coronavirus vaccines from various sources including India.

Malaysia

The country's new Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yakob has managed to muster support from the opposition within a month since his term began. A pact that will be signed between his government and about 88 lawmakers from opposition will give him their support in lieu of a number of reforms.¹² Some of those include laws to prevent party defections and limiting tenure of a PM to 10 years. Malaysia has recorded two million COVID-18 infections and more than 20,000 deaths so far. By last week of September, Malaysia had vaccinated 80 percent of its adult population. Interstate travel, tourism and economic activities are expected to resume in full swing once the target for 90 percent vaccination rate for adult population is achieved.¹³ Many leisure activities may start from the month of October.

⁶ "India supplies, installs 1500 hand pumps in Cambodia for augmentation of rural water supply", *ANI*, 27 September, 2021

⁷ Kate Lamb and Agustinus Beo Da Costa, "Indonesia warns against arms race after Australian nuclear sub pact", *Reuters*, 17 September, 2021

⁸ AP, "4 soldiers killed in attack in Indonesia's Papua region", *Times of India*, 2 September, 2021

⁹ Kate Lamb, "U.N. rights expert says Papuan held in Indonesia at risk of dying", *Reuters*, 21 September, 2021

¹⁰ Nareerat Wiriyapong, "Connecting with Laos", *Bangkok Post*, 20 September, 2021

¹¹ Huaxia, "Laos to receive over 2 mln doses of COVID-19 vaccine", *Xinhua*, 21 September, 2021

¹² AP, "Malaysia PM wins opposition support as Parliament resumes", *Times of India*, 13 September, 2021

¹³ Ram Anand, "Malaysia to allow interstate travel, tourism when 90% of adults are vaccinated against Covid-19", *The Straits Times*, 22 September, 2021

Myanmar

The shadow government of Myanmar, National Unity Government (NUG), called for a nationwide uprising against the military early September.¹⁴ The NUG will continue fighting the military through the People's Defense Forces, a coalition of rebel armies and ethnic forces in Myanmar. Military spokesman has dismissed the call for revolt. As a consequence of the fighting that may follow, the adjoining Indian state of Mizoram prepares for wave of refugees. Around 60 people from Myanmar crossed over to Mizoram's southernmost district of Lawngtlai within just two days of the uprising call.¹⁵ On the other hand, the military has released Buddhist Monk Wirathu, who has been accused of inciting violence against the Rohingya Muslims.¹⁶ Myanmar's treatment of Rohingyas has attracted criticism from many countries across the world.

Philippines

Elections are scheduled in the Philippines in 2022 for around 18000 posts ranging from the president to the town councilor.¹⁷ The constitution renders the current president Duterte ineligible to run for a third term and so speculations have been rife over who might replace him. The president's daughter Sara

Duterte and his ally Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos are likely strong candidates in the race. The Mayor from Manila actor-turned-politician Isko Moreno has also announced his decision to run for the post of president.¹⁸ In another development, Filipino military officials have held talks with their American counterparts on the Mutual Defense Treaty between the two countries.¹⁹ The renewal of the treaty, likely possible, will irk China as it requires both the US and the Philippines to come to each other's aid in the event of an attack.

Singapore

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi also visited Singapore as part of his recent tour. He met the Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Hoong and top officials from the government. PM Lee shared on his social media that the two leaders has a "productive and candid" discussion on international as well as regional developments.²⁰ Notably, Singapore was also the stop for US Vice-president Kamala Harris's Southeast Asia tour. Singapore foreign minister Vivian Balakrishnan welcomed Chinese interest in the CPTPP- an 11-member free trade agreement- of which Singapore is a part. The Singaporean Parliament has recently also ruled in favour of sustaining the India-Singapore Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) without any change.²¹ There was opposition to influx of foreigners under the agreement and competing with Singaporeans for local jobs.

¹⁴ Reuters, "Myanmar shadow government calls for revolt against military rule", *Indian Express*, 7 September, 2021

¹⁵ PTI, "Mizoram braces for second refugee wave as clashes break out between military, civilians in Myanmar", *India Today*, 11 September, 2021

¹⁶ "Myanmar military frees Wirathu, notorious anti-Muslim monk", *Al Jazeera*, 7 September, 2021

¹⁷ AFP, "'It is a circus': Philippines election season gets under way", *The Guardian*, 1 October, 2021

¹⁸ Cliff Venzon, "Manila Mayor Isko Moreno to run for Philippine president", *Nikkei Asia*, 21 September, 2021

¹⁹ AP, "US, Philippines assessing defense treaty, China wary", *Times of India*, 30 September, 2021

²⁰ Zen Soo, "Top Chinese, Singapore officials meet to reaffirm ties", *AP News*, 14 September, 2021

²¹ PTI, "Singapore parliament passes motion on jobs, livelihood for Singaporeans", *Business Standard*, 16 September, 2021

Thailand

Thailand has witnessed political turmoil in the past year over the legitimacy of the ruling faction. Recently, Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-Cha had to face a no-confidence motion in the Thai parliament.²² Even though he survived the position, more than 300 protestors came out on streets in Bangkok demanding his government to step down from power. Since the pandemic, there is considerable public anger over mismanagement of COVID-19 and procurement of vaccines. The government is trying to radically increase the vaccination rates. It borrowed US\$ 45 billion in September to improve delivery of vaccines and rejuvenate the local economy.²³ Only 22 percent of 72 million Thai citizens were fully vaccinated until last month.

Vietnam

The Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi spoke with Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Pham Binh Minh warning that Vietnam's unilateral actions in South China Sea could lead to loss of hard-won peace and stability in the region. Wang was on his four nation tour in Southeast Asia where Vietnam was his first stop.²⁴ The two countries have been in conflict over claim

on islands in the South China Sea. India and Vietnam have maintained close relations and early September Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh announced his maiden visit to India by end of 2021 in a view to strengthening bilateral relations.²⁵ On similar lines, Vietnam and Japan have recently signed an agreement which will allow Tokyo to transfer defence equipment and technology to Vietnam.²⁶ Given its geography, Vietnam has maintained a strategy of hedging among large powers.

Australia

Australia signed a defence pact AUKUS with the United States and the United Kingdom which will allow it to use sensitive nuclear submarine technology of the US.²⁷ The deal was conceived in secret and attracted concerns and skepticism from many of Australia's partners. China has condemned the development while the reactions from Southeast Asia have been mixed. Indonesia and Malaysia have expressed concerns and Philippines has welcomed it. Australia will receive nuclear-powered submarines under the pact and its deal with France for 12 conventional submarines will stand void. The deal for conventional submarine between France and Australia was worth US\$ 66 billion and was followed by active bilateral political engagement.²⁸ It would emboldened their mutual objectives on Indo-Pacific and benefitted the French naval industry. France has called it "stab in the back".

²² AFP, "Thailand pro-democracy activists protest in Bangkok as PM survives no-confidence vote", *Firstpost*, 4 September, 2021

²³ Reuters, "Thailand to accelerate vaccinations, stimulus measures: PM", *Times of India*, 22 September, 2021

²⁴ "China's Wang Yi tells Vietnam to avoid magnifying sea dispute", *Al Jazeera*, 11 September, 2021

²⁵ PTI, "Vietnam Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh to undertake maiden visit to India in December", *The Print*, 1 September, 2021

²⁶ PTI, "Japan, Vietnam sign defence transfer deal amid China worries", *Business Line*, 12 September, 2021

²⁷ "Aukus: UK, US and Australia launch pact to counter China", *BBC*, 16 September, 2021

²⁸ C. Raja Mohan, "An Expert Explains: Why the defence deal among US, Australia and UK has irked France", *Indian Express*, 21 September, 2021

New Zealand

The country witnessed a terror attack by Ahamed Samsudeen as he stabbed six people at marketplace. He was shot dead on the site by police personnel. Samsudeen had arrived from Sri Lanka ten years ago on student visa and had stayed as a refugee later.²⁹ He was inspired by the ideology of ISIS and had been on the watch of police since 53 days when he

was released from prison. The attack has exposed New Zealand's vulnerabilities to jihadist terror and shortcomings of its counterterrorism. The Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern expressed her disapproval of the attack. She also said that he had been on the watchlist of many agencies and she was personally aware of him.³⁰ New Zealand also reported the first death due to Delta variant of the COVID-19 in September.³¹ Auckland has been the epicenter of the outbreak with more than 700 cases.

²⁹ AP, "Extremist who attacked officers in New Zealand prison killed for stabbing", *The Hindu*, 7 September, 2021

³⁰ "Jacinda Ardern calls New Zealand stabbing 'terrorist attack'; suspect shot dead", *WION News*, 3 September, 2021

³¹ Reuters, "New Zealand reports first death from Delta variant of Covid-19", *Times of India*, 4 September, 2021

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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Commentary (900 - 1300 words)

Photo Essay (10-12 photographs, each with a caption,
accompanied by a 1000 words essay)

Please E-mail: southeastasia.centre@gmail.com

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