

INSIGHT SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



*Southeast Asia & Oceania
Centre
Monthly Newsletter*

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The region of Southeast Asia has become more volatile with recent developments. Although the risk of open military conflict remains low due to involvement of many large powers in the region, the tensions over maritime and territorial claims could deepen. The ASEAN itself struggles to maintain coherent position on developing strategic matters. The pandemic and its subsequent waves have only added to the region's problems, especially economic recovery.

Instability in Myanmar is a cause of concern and Indian Foreign Secretary paid a visit to Myanmar from December 22 to 23, 2021.

There is growing interest in the region. The role of regional powers such as China, India, South Korea, Japan and Australia has become more significant, and external powers such as the US, France, Germany and Russia are either increasing outreach to the ASEAN nations, or at least developing strategies to manage their stake in the region.

Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla Visits Myanmar

Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla paid a working [visit to Myanmar](#) on 22–23 December 2021. Foreign Secretary Shringla's visit was intended to convey to the military rulers the urgency to restore democracy in Myanmar at the earliest. He met not only the military rulers

but also the representatives of the NLD, civil society representatives and foreign diplomats.

The US and the UK Send Representatives to Southeast Asia

The U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken conducted his [Southeast Asia tour](#) from 13th to 15th December, 2021, and visited Indonesia and Malaysia. He was forced to cut short his visit cancelling his proposed visit to Thailand. At Jakarta, he delivered a speech on his government's Indo-Pacific policy and significance of Southeast Asia for it. He also expressed support for [Indonesia's leadership](#) in the region, and called out China's aggressive actions. In response, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman said the US must "Washington should respect the ways the region maintains peace, especially through Asean". The UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss had also visited these three countries in November on her Southeast Asia tour, and stressed on building [Britain's partnerships](#) in the region. The Foreign Office added that she would focus on infrastructure investments in her conversations with ASEAN leaders. While it may be clear that Southeast Asia is fast becoming the center of attention in global geopolitics, it may also be observed that China's actions have strengthened transatlantic relations, especially the US and the UK. The signing of AUKUS was only a step in America and Britain's increasingly streamlining foreign policy and involvement in the Indo-Pacific.

China and ASEAN Conduct Special Summit Without Myanmar Representation

China and ASEAN concluded their special summit on 22nd November, 2021 to commemorate 30 years of dialogue partnership. Reportedly, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei objected to China's bid for inviting Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing to the summit. As a result, [Myanmar was not represented](#). At the summit, President Xi said that China will not bully its smaller neighbours and not seek hegemony. He also announced '[Strategic Comprehensive Partnership](#)' with the ten-member bloc. China expressed willingness to work with ASEAN for a nuclear-weapons free zone in Southeast Asia. Cambodia's PM Hun Sen opined that [Myanmar's junta leadership](#) must be allowed in ASEAN meetings and summits, and conveyed that it will be invited for all ASEAN deliberations during the time of its ASEAN chairmanship in 2022.

US' Relations with Cambodia Deteriorate

The US has [imposed an arms embargo](#) on Cambodia and alleged human rights abuses by armed forces, corruption in the government, and increasing Chinese military influence. The embargo will prevent defence related goods to be supplied to Cambodia without a review by US administration. Meanwhile, China's Ministry of National Defence has [donated COVID-19 medical equipment](#) to Cambodia along with vaccination supplies

and medicines. Cambodia's Minister of National Defence Tea Banh said that the Chinese 'friends' have always supported the Cambodian Army. Chinese Ambassador to Cambodia said that both armies are like 'brothers'. Given that Cambodia is the rotating chair of ASEAN for the year 2022, its growing relations with China are significant from regional security perspective and collective ASEAN stance on contentious issues such as the South China Sea dispute.

Indonesia Seeks to Boost Defence Against Chinese Threat

After the signing of AUKUS which effectively cancelled the conventional submarine deal between France and Australia, Paris is keen on improving ties with Indonesia. France has been involved in [negotiations with Indonesia](#) for sale of 36 Rafale fighter jets. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian met Indonesian counterpart Retno Marsudi during his [visit to Jakarta](#) in November 2021, and signed an action plan to strengthen their bilateral strategic partnership. Shortly after this visit, [China had raised objections](#) to Indonesia's drilling activities in its own coastal maritime region claiming that it was a disputed area. Indonesia has asserted sovereignty over the Natuna Sea region where the Chinese have made incursions repeatedly. Interestingly, Indonesia has expressed willingness in greater [cooperation with India on defence](#) matters and joint defence production in an effort to strengthen its security against Chinese threats. Both countries may focus on

boosting capabilities in local defence manufacturing. As the largest ASEAN economy and owing to its unique geography in Indo-Pacific, Indonesia will be courted by large powers and it may have to cast its foreign policy accordingly.

China's BRI Railway Line Functional in Laos

The [first railway line project](#) in Laos, built under China's Belt and Road Initiative, became functional on 3rd December, 2021. The rail line connects Vientiane in landlocked Laos with Boten in China. Chinese president and his Laotian counterpart witnessed the opening through a video link. China's impact on Laos through infrastructure projects and loans is profound. The project cost Laos [US\\$ 5.9 billion](#), of which 60 percent was funded by China's EXIM bank. There is skepticism over its feasibility and increased possibilities of debt-trap. Recently, Sri Lanka has requested China for [debt-restructuring](#) to be able to pay off its huge debts. China's BRI projects in Sri Lanka have made news for their unsustainable nature and huge costs.

South Korea Engages Thailand and Singapore

[Thailand and South Korea](#) have agreed to strengthen their strategic partnership after the visit of South Korean Defence Minister Suh Wook to Bangkok on 20th December, 2021. Thailand's Prime Minister expressed gratitude for South Korea's investment in Eastern Economic Corridor and hoped that bilateral defence and economic cooperation

will further consolidate. Wook paid a three day visit to Singapore thereafter and [met Singaporean Defence Minister](#) on 23rd December to discuss regional security cooperation and joint efforts to fight terrorism. South Korea is a significant player in Asia-Pacific geopolitics and has also made efforts to engage ASEAN countries in the past, such as Mekong-ROK Cooperation. It is an American ally and thus invested in preventing China's dominance in regional balance of power.

Security Situation in Myanmar Escalates

The junta government launched [airstrikes](#) on Karen National Union (KNU)-controlled region along the border with Thailand, a rebel group reported on 24th December. It has led to hundreds fleeing across the border to Thailand. Earlier, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, had said that [Aung San Suu Kyi's guilty verdict](#) after a trial before military-controlled court was a sham, and politically-motivated. In another incidence of military attack on civilians, more than 30 people were killed and burnt in [Kayah state](#) which included two staff members from 'Save the Children' organization. The junta regime has been fighting the ethnic rebel armies in Myanmar in many areas of the country. If the current situation continues with conflicting parties not finding common grounds for an agreement, Myanmar may get further embroiled in more violent clashes within the country. Such escalation of conflict may potentially compel regional powers to deliberate more

seriously on the Myanmar crisis, and engage with the junta regime and opponents to find a solution.

Southeast Asia in Russian Geopolitical Strategy

Russia and the ASEAN nations conducted [first ever naval joint exercise](#) ARNEX-21 from 1st to 3rd December, 2021. The exercise saw participation of navies from Russia and seven ASEAN members including Myanmar. The theme was “Joint Action to Ensure the Safety of Maritime Economic Activity and Civil Navigation” and exercise was [conducted in Indonesian waters](#) off the coast of Sumatra. According to SIPRI, Russia has been the largest arms supplier to Southeast Asia (worth US\$ 10.7 billion) in the period between 2000 and 2019. Even though Russian power projection in Southeast Asia remains limited compared to the US or China, it has shown an inclination to engaging the bloc as the region assumes greater geopolitical significance. US Secretary of State Blinken’s visit coincided with Russia’s National Security Advisor [Patrushev in Indonesia](#), indicating the recognition of Jakarta’s increasingly substantial security role by Moscow.