

INSIGHT SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
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China's economic and military influence has grown multifold in the past two decades, and may be elemental in how security situation in the Indo-Pacific is shaped in the coming years. Several ASEAN members have been pushing against China's vast, unfounded territorial claims in the South China Sea. The United States and allies have recognized the need to deepen engagements with Southeast Asia, in order to prevent China's aggressive actions in the region. Recently, the US and Japan held a [strategic dialogue](#) on Southeast Asian affairs to coordinate efforts aimed at maintaining balance in the Indo-Pacific region.

Relief on Import of Solar Panels from Southeast Asia

The US administration has decided to allow tariff-free import of [solar panels](#) from four Southeast Asian nations of Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Vietnam. There had been pressure within the US to increase tariffs on these products given that they impact domestic manufacturers. But the clean energy developers had opposed the move. The panels from these countries accounted for 85 percent of solar capacity imported to the US in 2021. Some analysts caution against becoming too dependent on imports for critical energy requirements as many companies in these countries may be owned and operated by the Chinese. Geopolitically, President Biden's decision may serve number of objectives like boosting solar energy production in the country, and improving relations with these Mekong

countries. All these nations are in China's neighbourhood and the US has invested effort in upgrading relations with them.

Officials Reaffirm Five Power Defence Arrangements Pact

On the sidelines of the Shangri-La dialogue, top officials from Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and Malaysia reaffirmed confidence in the [Five Power Defence Arrangements](#) (FPDA) pact, which was signed 51 years ago in 1971. The member countries were all part of the British Commonwealth and a series of bilateral defence relationships characterised the pact. Malaysia's Senior Minister of Defence expressed his concern that rising tensions in the region have a potential to spiral out of control, and in the absence of a pact such as the FPDA, the likeliness of that happening is much higher. Other members including Australia expressed their commitment to the pact. As tensions over territorial conflict have risen in South and Southeast Asia, more minilateral organisations have emerged. The efficacy of large, multilateral organisations like ASEAN has been viewed with skepticism. While ASEAN remains relevant for joint cooperation on a number of areas, minilaterals comprising of few members, sometimes with external powers like in this case, are becoming more preferable for deliberation on urgent matters of security.

India and ASEAN Hold Special Meeting

Foreign Ministers from India and ASEAN held a [special meeting](#) on 16-17 June, 2022. India and Singapore co-chaired the session and the ministers talked about strengthening

relations between the two blocs. The developments in Ukraine and its impact on economic and security situation across the region were a vital agenda. The ministers also attended the Delhi Dialogue on the sidelines of the summit. Special emphasis was laid on development of infrastructure projects to enhance connectivity between India and ASEAN, and cooperation on areas like strategic technologies. The ministers also agreed to accelerate the process of review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement for better economic relations between India and Southeast Asia. India recognises the importance of the ASEAN region in terms of geopolitics and trade. Its “Act East” policy announced by the government in 2014 aims to boost engagements with ASEAN nations through meaningful exchange of trade and knowledge as well as greater alignment on issues of security and defence.

Australia’s Deputy PM Visits India

Australia’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, Richard Marles met his counterpart Defence Minister Rajnath Singh in India during his visit on 20-23 June, 2022. The Indian Airforce will be participating in [Exercise Pitch Black](#), which will be hosted by Australia in August, 2022. He talked about China’s effort towards transforming the global order, and said that India and Australia may cooperate on areas of interest to prevent conflict in the Indo-Pacific region. He added that India was central to Australia’s worldview. Australia is closely tied with the US in alliance and is a member of Quad alongside India. Its relations with India have improved over the past years but carry more

potential. Some level of distrust from the past may have drawn limitations in their relationship, but Canberra is now more focused on building its defense in the region. This entails strengthening security ties with India and increasing economic and diplomatic exchange between the two countries. Marles said that longer-term reciprocal access arrangements between India and Australia may be the next step in their bilateral defence relations.

ASEAN holds 16th Defence Ministers’ Meeting

Defence ministers from ASEAN countries met in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on 22 June, 2022 to discuss key [security challenges](#) in the region. The meeting was chaired by Cambodia’s defence minister Tea Banh. Interestingly, Myanmar’s Defence Minister Gen. Mya Tun Oo also [attended](#) the meeting. Myanmar has been under heavy US-led sanctions from the West, and ASEAN has abstained from inviting political representatives from the junta government. The junta government officials have been under accusation of human rights violations and brutal crackdown on the protestors in Myanmar. However, Cambodia has maintained from the beginning of its ASEAN chairmanship this year that the bloc must include Myanmar in its activities. Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen had also visited Myanmar earlier this year to forge dialogue with the junta leader Min Aung Hlaing. The junta government and domestic groups fighting against the government are still far from reaching any resolution.

Launch of the Partners in Blue Pacific Initiative

The UK, the US, Australia, Japan and New Zealand have launched an informal grouping on 24 June, 2022 called [Partners in the Blue Pacific](#) (PBP), which will focus on strengthening economic and diplomatic ties with the Pacific island nations. The security concerns were ramped up after China signed agreements with Solomon Islands, Samoa and Kiribati for infrastructure and financial assistance. Australia views itself as the primary partner for the Pacific island nations due to shared geography and history between their countries. These islands are also crucial for the defence of the Pacific against a belligerent China. The PBP has been formed in consultation with France and the EU, although they are present only in observer capacities at the moment. The Pacific region is strategically important as it is the US' link with the Indo-Pacific and its ally Australia. As the Pacific island states are concerned about the existential threat of climate change, it may be expected that initiatives like PBP will focus on creating resilience capacities for these countries against such challenges.

Taiwan Crisis may Spillover to Southeast Asia

The US and China came at loggerheads over the [Taiwan issue](#) as China's Minister of National Defence Wai Fenghe said that Beijing will not hesitate to start a war over Taiwan. He was meeting the US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin on the sidelines of the Shangri-La dialogue in Singapore held from 10-12 June, 2022. Defence Secretary Austin called on China to refrain from its aggressive

actions in the region and opposed unilateral changes to the status quo. The security situation in Taiwan straits is significant for the entire region of South China Sea, and therefore East and Southeast Asia, where several ASEAN members are claimants in the South China Sea dispute. While Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida expressed concern that the Taiwan issue could destabilise the region, Defence Secretary Austin also met with ASEAN defence ministers at Shangri-La to reassure them of US' [close watch](#) on the regional developments.

Sara Duterte Takes Oath as Vice-President

After Ferdinand Marcos Jr's overwhelming victory in the Philippines general elections, former President Rodrigo Duterte's daughter Sara Duterte also garnered large number of votes for the position of Vice-President, and [took her oath](#) on 19 June, 2022. Many analysts see the election of Marcos Jr and Duterte as the return of dynasty politics in the Philippines. Former President Duterte has been criticised for his brutal crackdown on drug users and peddlers in the country which some civil society organisations have deemed as crimes against humanity. But Sara Duterte's win indicates huge popularity for the Dutertes across the country. The Filipino foreign policy is not expected to change much under the new Marcos-Duterte presidency as Manila may continue to engage with the US as its primary security partner. The new government's perception of the regional security issues and emerging unilateral organisations will lead the nuance in its foreign policy.