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# Strategic Digest

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## A Revitalized Atlantic Charter- New Rules for New Threats

President Biden and Prime Minister Boris Johnson unveiled a new version of the 80-year old “Atlantic Charter” on June 10, 2021, to redefine the Western alliance amid a growing divide between battered democracies and their autocratic rivals. Signed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Winston Churchill in 1941, the original Atlantic Charter was a foundational document in transatlantic relations and aimed to sketch out American and British aims for the Second World War and beyond. The key elements were a preference for an open international system that would allow for self-determination, the removal of trade barriers, freedom of the seas, disarmament, and peace. The results found expression in the United Nations system, in NATO, in post-war decolonization, in world trade arrangements.



Just as the original, the new charter aimed to sketch a grand vision for global relationships in the 21st century. “It was a statement of first principles, a promise that the United Kingdom and the United States would meet the challenges of their age and that we’d meet it together,” Biden declared after his private meeting with

Johnson. “Today, we build on that commitment, with a revitalized Atlantic Charter, updated to reaffirm that promise while speaking directly to the key challenges of this century.”

The new charter, a 604-word declaration, reflects a shared sense of the values that are most vital to champion in the world, including democracy, open societies, and rules-based world order. The second iteration has also been modernized, with references to contemporary challenges of cybersecurity, disinformation, and the countries’ nuclear deterrents. The idea behind these declarations is to signal—to friends and foes alike—not only a common orientation but also a common purpose. The new charter explicitly calls for both countries to adhere to “the rules-based international order.” Where the original charter contemplated the “final destruction of the Nazi tyranny” and called for freedom to “traverse the high seas and oceans without hindrance,” the new version focused on the “climate crisis” and the need to “protect biodiversity.” It is sprinkled with references to “emerging technologies,” “cyberspace” and “sustainable global development.”

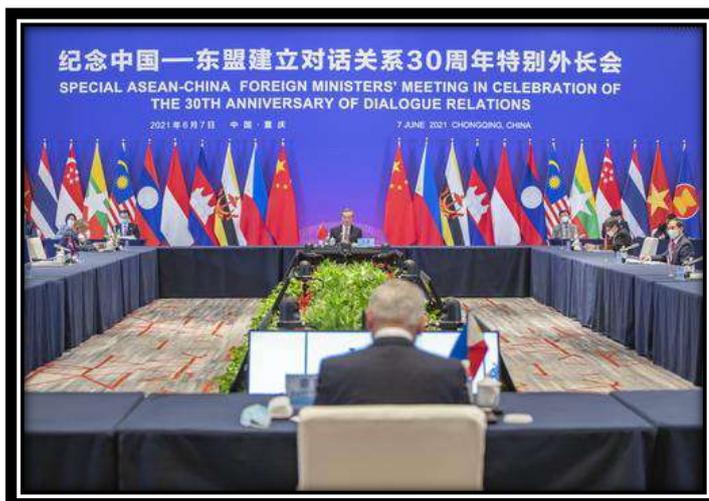
In a not so veiled reference to Russia and China, the new agreement calls on Western allies to “oppose interference through disinformation or other malign

influences, including in elections.” Recognising threats to democratic nations in a technological era, the charter affirms “shared responsibility for maintaining our collective security and international stability and resilience against the full spectrum of modern threats, including cyber threats.”

### **ASEAN China Foreign Ministers Meet- Emphasizing the Positive; Continued Wariness**

On June 7, foreign ministers from the ASEAN states met for talks with their Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in the Chinese city of Chongqing. The Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, intended to mark this year’s 30th anniversary of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations, took place against the backdrop of intensifying rivalry between Beijing and Washington in the Asia-Pacific. On the side-lines of the special meeting, China also held bilateral meetings with foreign ministers of ASEAN states and the ASEAN Secretary-General.

China pulled out all the stops to ensure the success of the Chongqing meeting through bilateral channels. The Chongqing meeting was the first in-person ministerial engagement between ASEAN and a Dialogue Partner since the Covid-19 pandemic broke out last year. The COVID-19 pandemic, the South China Sea, and the political crisis in Myanmar topped the agenda.



ASEAN expressed appreciation about China’s provision of vaccines, medical supplies and technical assistance to ASEAN and its Member States during the COVID crisis.

The meeting reviewed the outcomes and experience of China-ASEAN cooperation in the past 30 years and focussed on combating COVID-19 and promoting economic recovery, better dovetail strategic plans and foster new highlights in practical cooperation to upgrade the relationship. The Co-chairs statement at this special meeting also discussed approaches to advance ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership to new heights by forging closer cooperation. Wang Yi, Chinese Foreign Minister, had indicated Chinese preference to elevate China-ASEAN relations to the comprehensive strategic partners and set a new benchmark for China-ASEAN cooperation.

Notwithstanding the reiteration of commitment of close cooperation from both sides in the Co-Chairs statement, it needs to be highlighted the co-chairs' statement is a step-down from the originally proposed joint statement which would carry greater political significance befitting of the meeting's high profile. According to reports, a joint statement did not materialise due to differences on some key issues, especially regarding the SCS situation and how to move forward with the negotiations on a code of conduct (COC). Taking up three out of 14 operative paragraphs of the co-chairs' statement – more than any other issue – the SCS remains the sore point in ASEAN-China relations particularly due to China's growing assertiveness.

Despite Beijing's latest efforts to boost relations during the first face-to-face meeting of foreign ministers, Southeast Asian countries are still worried about China. The latest incidents of Chinese assertiveness include the swarming of Whitsun Reef within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and the violation of Malaysia's EEZ by the Chinese Air Force. The Chongqing meeting's less-than-fulsome outcome shows that ASEAN states have their agency in defending their interests. Unless China takes genuine steps to address the legitimate security concerns of ASEAN states, its economic largesse and charm offensive are unlikely to make the disquiet go away.

### Iranian Navy's Long Range Deployment in the Atlantic Ocean

An Iranian Navy flotilla comprising of destroyer *Sahand* and support vessel Makran is currently sailing in the Atlantic Ocean on a rare long-range deployment far from Iranian waters. As per Adm Habibollah Sayyari, Deputy Chief of Iranian Navy, Warships are deployed on the Iranian navy's longest and most challenging voyage in the Atlantic's unfavourable weather conditions. He also highlighted that the warships would not call at any other ports during the mission. In late May, the website Politico cited anonymous officials of the US suggesting that Iranian flotilla could be bound for Venezuela carrying millions of gallons of fuel in a ploy to get around U.S. sanctions.



Iran maintains close ties with the Venezuelan president, Nicolás Maduro, and has shipped gasoline and other products to the country amid a US sanctions campaign targeting fuel-starved Caracas under Iranian flagged tankers. While Iranian flagged tankers destined to Venezuela has not been stopped, the US claims to

have intercepted several ships sailing under non-Iranian flags but purportedly carrying Iranian fuel for Caracas. Tehran denied owning the intercepted petroleum but condemned Washington's attempts to intercept such shipments as state piracy.



Satellite images from Planet Labs Inc suggest that the Iranian Flotilla left Bandar Abbas sometime after April 29, 2021. Iranian Support Vessel Makhran was observed to be in fully loaded condition and could be carrying three million tons of oil. In addition, Images from Maxar Technologies dated April 28,

2021, suggests that the retrofitted carrier is also loaded with at least seven fast-attack boats alongside the purported shipment of fuel. The fast-attack craft aboard warship Makhran is the type that the Guard uses in its tense encounters with US warships in the Persian Gulf and its narrow mouth, the Strait of Hormuz. It's not immediately clear what Venezuela's plans would be for those ships.

Even though Iran remains tight-lipped regarding the two ships' mission in the Atlantic or likely destinations, the US has already expressed concerns regarding the nature of the endeavour. US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin said he was worried that the Iranian warships might be delivering weapons to neighbouring states. As per reports, The White House is pressuring Caracas and Havana over diplomatic channels not to allow the vessels to dock in their countries.

The US has so far been less than forthright about its plans concerning the reported Iranian arms shipment. US State Department spokesman that the White House is ready to act in response to attempts by the countries to trade weapons that allegedly violate "international obligations". It is unclear, however, what violation an arms shipment from Iran to Venezuela would constitute since there have been no UN approved bans on weapon sales to Caracas and the sanction on Tehran expired last year. It would be pertinent to highlight that the mere completion of a journey across the Atlantic would be a significant step for Iran's navy, demonstrating the ships' capabilities and potentially increasing Tehran's access to the Western Hemisphere.