

INSIGHT SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES

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Overview

September brought sweeping political change and heightened regional tensions across Southeast Asia and Oceania. Thailand saw a major leadership shift as Anutin Charnvirakul became Prime Minister, replacing Paetongtarn Shinawatra, while former PM Thaksin Shinawatra was ordered to serve a prison sentence.

In the Philippines, ties with Taiwan deepened through high-level engagement and the activation of a new military base near the Taiwan Strait, drawing strong condemnation from China. Domestically, mass protests erupted over government corruption.

Vietnam marked its 80th year of independence with a large-scale military parade, and Malaysia reviewed its Defence White Paper, aiming to modernize its armed forces. In Myanmar, a junta airstrike killed 19 students while elections were suspended in dozens of constituencies, deepening the humanitarian and political crisis.

Meanwhile, the Solomon Islands hosted the 54th Pacific Islands Forum, focusing on regional unity, climate action, and economic resilience.

Political Shake-Up in Thailand: New PM Elected, Thaksin Sentenced

Thailand is undergoing a major political transition following the removal of Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and the return of her father, former PM Thaksin Shinawatra, to prison.

On September 25, parliament elected Anutin Charnvirakul, leader of the Bhumjaithai Party, as the new prime minister. Known for his role in cannabis legalization and pandemic management, Anutin now leads a minority government and has pledged to hold fresh elections within four months.

Shortly after, the Supreme Court ordered Thaksin Shinawatra, 76, to serve a one-year prison sentence for evading a previous corruption conviction. The court ruled his 2023 hospital stay was used to unlawfully avoid incarceration. He was transferred to Bangkok Remand Prison.

These back-to-back developments mark a major shift in Thai politics, raising concerns over stability, economic recovery, and foreign relations, especially with neighboring Cambodia.

Philippines Deepens Taiwan Ties, Activates Base Near Strait

The Philippines has strengthened unofficial ties with Taiwan, drawing sharp criticism from Beijing and signaling a shift in Manila's regional security approach.

In late August, Taiwanese Foreign Minister Lin Chia-lung visited Manila with a U.S.-Taiwan business delegation. Though framed as economic cooperation, the visit triggered Chinese accusations that the Philippines was violating its One China policy. Manila reaffirmed its adherence to the policy but emphasized its right to maintain economic ties with Taiwan.

Soon after, the Mahatao Forward Operating Base was activated on Batan Island, just 120 miles south of Taiwan. It is the Philippines' most significant military investment in the Batanes island chain and enhances surveillance of the Luzon Strait.

Analysts view the dual developments as part of a broader shift from neutrality to deterrence, reflecting Manila's growing concern over potential regional conflict.

Mass Protests in Manila Over Corruption

Thousands of Filipinos took to the streets in late September to protest widespread corruption across various levels of government. Civil society groups and protest leaders have called for independent investigations, transparency reforms, and stronger anti-corruption institutions. The demonstrations reflect growing public frustration with political elites and rising demands for accountability.

Vietnam Celebrates 80th Anniversary of Independence

On September 2, Vietnam marked 80 years of independence with its largest military parade in decades. The celebration included aerial displays, naval power demonstrations, and the release of nearly 14,000 prisoners. Featured hardware included Russian-made Mi-171 helicopters, Su-30 fighter jets, and domestically produced drones. The parade reflected both national pride and Vietnam's growing military and

diplomatic stature under Communist Party leadership.

Thailand–Cambodia Border Tensions Resurface Amid GBC Talks

A Special General Border Committee (GBC) Meeting between Thailand and Cambodia was held in Koh Kong on September 10. Both countries agreed to withdraw heavy weapons, clear landmines, and improve border trade cooperation.

However, tensions remain high. Cambodia accused Thailand of expanding the conflict zone, evicting civilians, and detaining 18 Cambodian soldiers in Banteay Meanchey province. Prime Minister Hun Manet appealed to ASEAN and global leaders to urge Thailand to honor ceasefire terms and stop unilateral actions. Both sides agreed to continue dialogue through bilateral mechanisms.

Malaysia Conducts Mid-Term Review of Defence White Paper

Malaysia has released a mid-term review of its inaugural Defence White Paper, outlining reforms to modernize its military into a Joint Network-Centric Multi-Domain Force by 2030. The strategy includes the integration of space and cyber capabilities, AI, unmanned systems, and smart surveillance tools. Defence Minister Mohamed Khaled Nordin emphasized the goal of creating a technologically advanced and regionally respected military force capable of addressing

emerging threats across land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace.

Myanmar Conflict Escalates: Students Killed, Elections Suspended

Myanmar's humanitarian and political crisis worsened in September amid rising violence and democratic backsliding.

A junta airstrike in Kyauktaw Township, Rakhine State, killed 19 students at a boarding school, according to resistance groups and UNICEF. The strike marks one of the deadliest incidents involving children since the military coup in 2021. Rakhine has seen escalating clashes between junta forces and the Arakan Army, which is demanding greater regional autonomy.

Meanwhile, Myanmar's military-appointed Union Election Commission announced that voting would be suspended in 65 constituencies due to "security concerns." Most affected areas are under resistance control, effectively disenfranchising large portions of the population. The move drew condemnation from opposition parties and international observers, who say it further undermines the path to civilian rule.

54th Pacific Islands Forum Held in Solomon Islands

The 54th Pacific Islands Forum was hosted in the Solomon Islands for the first time since 1992, under the theme "Iumi Tugeda: Act Now for an Integrated Blue Pacific Continent." The

summit proceeded without Dialogue Partners or observers, allowing leaders to focus on internal priorities. Key outcomes included the launch of the Pacific Financing Facility, the adoption of the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration, the endorsement of new regional partnership policies, and renewed engagement with the United States. Despite initial concerns, the forum was widely seen as a success in advancing regional unity and strategic independence in a rapidly shifting geopolitical environment.