

# *INSIGHT* SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR  
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Regional crises deepen with the Junta in Myanmar losing ground across the country. The regime has made public its plan to offset the loss of military personnel through the enforcement of the People's Military Service Law. The announcement has led to further displacement of civilians seeking to evade mandatory conscription. In a move clearly aimed at Chinese assertiveness, Philippines has passed a historic legislation that seeks to strengthen Philippines' sovereign rights in the waters and underwater formations surrounding it- such as the West Philippine Sea and the Benham Rise. In Oceania, Australia and New Zealand engaged in an inaugural 2+2 dialogue where New Zealand's newfound interest in the AUKUS Pillar II was one of the key focus of discussions. Cooperative frameworks in the PICs are growing — Indonesia and Papua New Guinea have a Defence Cooperation Agreement, which is now ratified, Tuvalu's newly elected government has reaffirmed ties with Taiwan even as Nauru's pivot to China earlier this year had cast doubts on Tuvalu's Taiwan policy. On the other hand, US govt faced criticism for the delay in the approval of the Compacts of Free Association (COFA) funds that secure its relations with the Freely Associated States (Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, and Palau).

### **Myanmar junta enacts mandatory conscription law as it loses ground**

As the Tatmadaw completes three years in power, the regime appears to be losing ground against the armed rebels. The Myanmar military is estimated to have higher rates of attrition, down been to a

mere 130,000 since the launch of OP1027. To combat this, the junta regime announced the enactment of the dormant mandatory conscription law. The People's Military Service Law, rolled out by the outgoing military regime in 2010, mandates mandatory military service for men between the ages of 18-35 yrs and women aged 18 to 27yrs. According to statements released by the Tatmadaw, women are currently exempt from compulsory conscription. The junta announcement has caused further chaos in a country that has already seen mass displacement of its population. The junta is also alleged to be clamping down on ethnic Rakhine civilians returning from Yangon. It is reported that at least a hundred ethnic Rakhine passengers at Yangon and Kyaukphyu airports have been detained on suspicions of desiring to join the Arakan Army (AA).

To assist the unfolding humanitarian crisis, Thailand is planning to establish a humanitarian safe zone at Mae Sot-Myawaddy crossing, located near the Thai-Myanmar border. The initiative, a collaborative effort with the Myanmar Red Cross, will involve supplying the Myanmar civilians on the other side of the border with medical supplies and food.

### **Philippines Senate passes Maritime Zones Bill**

The Philippines' Senate has passed a historic legislation that aims to demarcate the Philippines' maritime zones- its exclusive economic zones as well as its internal maritime bodies. Drawing on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the 2016 arbitral

award, Senate Bill 2492 seeks to reassert Philippines' sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the West Philippine Sea and the Benham Rise, an underwater plateau that forms a part of the country's extended continental shelf. The maritime zone legislation comes against the backdrop of conflicting maritime boundary claims and increasing Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. Earlier this month, the Marcos administration had issued directives for the rotational deployment of Philippines Coast Guard and Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources vessels in the Bajo de Masinloc (Scarborough Shoal).

### **Australia and New Zealand 2+2**

The New Zealand Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Winston Peters, along with the Minister of Defence, Judith Collins, attended the inaugural Australia – New Zealand Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations (ANZMIN 2+2). The Ministers deliberated on measures to increase defence cooperation such as participation in war fighting exercises, high-level exchanges, joint training and common capability (CC).

The representatives also welcomed “Quad’s commitment to an open, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific region and its positive and practical agenda to support Indo-Pacific countries’ priorities and needs”. Notably, despite its anti-nuclear position, New Zealand has expressed interest in joining the AUKUS albeit in a non-nuclear role. Minister of Defence Collins has suggested that New Zealand could offer space and technology expertise under the second pillar of AUKUS.

Consequently, as agreed upon during the 2+2 dialogue, Australian officials arrived in Wellington to brief New Zealand counterparts on Pillar II of AUKUS. The Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Defence, New Zealand, has clarified that the meeting was “a background briefing for information only and not intended to address the issue of NZ joining Pillar II”.

### **US Critiqued over COFA funding delay for PICS**

The US Congressional budget impasse generated anxiety among the island states of the North Pacific. Leaders of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Palau, and the Marshall Islands (RMI) had jointly written to the Congress regarding the delay in passing the Compacts of Free Association (COFA) funding. Presidents of Palau and RMI, Surangel Whipps and Hilda Heine respectively, have repeatedly written to the US Congress, highlighting the strategic significance of the Freely Associated States (FAS) to the United States. The leaders also cautioned Washington that failure or delay to approve the funding programmes would play directly into the hands of Chinese ambitions for the region. Australia and New Zealand’s ambassadors to the United States also jointly lobbied the US Congress, underlining the importance of the COFA in securing mutual interests of the US and the two Pacific countries. The new funding programmes as stipulated by the Compacts, renegotiated in 2023, require the provision of an additional sum of US\$ 2.3 billion. However, the COFA funding stands impacted by the broader congressional

debates regarding international military and humanitarian assistance.

### **Tuvalu reaffirms diplomatic relations with Taiwan**

In a “Statement of Priorities” released by the newly sworn-in administration, the Tuvaluan government reaffirmed its diplomatic relations with Taiwan, seeking to continue outgoing Prime Minister Kausea Natano’s friendly approach to the Republic of China-Taiwan. Tuvalu is one of the three remaining Pacific Island countries that recognises the ROC. Relations with Taiwan hung in balance after a statement by the former Finance Minister and Prime Ministerial candidate, Seve Paeniu, signalled a possible post-election switch in diplomatic recognition to the People’s Republic of China. Paeniu’s statement followed Nauru’s official recognition of the PRC. However, despite expressing an alignment of principles with the Falepili Union, the Feleti Teo government has indicated it may review the security and migration pact with Australia.

### **Indonesia and Papua New Guinea ratify defence deal after a decade**

Papua New Guinea signed the Instrument of Ratification for the Defence Cooperation Agreement with Indonesia on February 21st, 2024. Signed on 12 March 2010, ratification of the Papua New Guinea-Indonesia Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) has been pending for 14 years. The pact was ratified by Indonesia’s Yudhoyono administration the year 2012. The DCA aims to strengthen the bilateral defence cooperation between the states through

strategic and security dialogues, training, information sharing, joint operations and the provision of logistical support. The defence pact will aid the two states in dealing with common cross-border issues such as illegal movement of transnational criminals and illegal settlements. It will also facilitate more effective border surveillance and management. The agreement is set to be reviewed after a period of five years. In the absence of a ratified DCA, the Indonesian government had been engaging with the PNG Defence Force in a limited way.