

# *INSIGHT* SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR  
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES

मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

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## Southeast Asia and Oceania Digest October 2022

The rivalry for influence in Southeast Asia is very natural for large powers as strategic upper hand in the region also translates to formidable presence in the Indo-Pacific. China and the US have engaged with governments of Southeast Asia in order to promote their strategic interests, but the role of Russia may also be observed carefully to assess the developing geopolitics of the region. Since the Ukraine crisis, Russia could be seen as embroiled in its neighbourhood but its visibility in the international relations has significantly increased. It has been the largest arms supplier to Southeast Asian nations, and if its arms production capabilities dwindle due to the war in Ukraine, its influence in Southeast Asia may also decline.

However, that doesn't seem to be the case as Russia is [still a preferred partner](#) for many Southeast Asian nations, particularly Myanmar which has made substantial outreach to Moscow in recent times. Russia's aircraft seems to have emboldened the junta's rule in Myanmar, encouraging a deeper relationship. Not only Myanmar, other Southeast Asian nations also have a working relationship with Russia given their dependencies for maintenance of military hardware or imports. Any country seeking to strengthen its diplomatic and strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific therefore, cannot ignore the role of Russia in its geopolitics.

## India and the US held 2+2 and Maritime Security Dialogue

Both countries engaged in India-USA 2+2 Intersessional meeting and Maritime security Dialogue where the delegations discussed strengthening of the [bilateral defence partnership](#), especially in new domain areas such as AI, space and cyber. To further streamline their capabilities, officials from two sides reviewed the progress on operationalising bilateral initiatives aimed at creating synergy in information sharing, defence industry and inter-service engagements. The delegations reaffirmed sustaining a maritime security order that is free, open and inclusive which can support growth and development for all. Naval cooperation and logistics cooperation are also areas where the US and India can collaborate to engage Southeast Asia. Washington and New Delhi are largest military powers within the Quad, and have a shared interest in maintaining status quo in the Indo-Pacific. Further cooperation and deepening of ties may be expected between the two countries to tackle emerging challenges in the Indo-Pacific.

## Philippines' Marcos Jr. visits Indonesia and Singapore

The newly elected Filipino president Ferdinand Marcos Jr. made a [state visit to Indonesia](#) from 4-6 September, 2022 and met his counterpart president Joko Widodo. The two sides agreed to review maritime border demarcation efforts and also

discussed the role of ASEAN in the region's increasingly volatile security. The Philippines will procure arms from Indonesian defence contracts under a five year diplomatic action plan.

Marcos Jr. also made a [state visit to Singapore](#) from 6-7 September, 2022 and met his counterpart prime minister Lee Hsien Loong. Bilateral arrangements were finalised and MoUs were signed for cooperation in the areas like digital, counter-terrorism, infrastructure, data protection, water, and healthcare. Economic and defence ties between the two nations were also discussed. These were Marcos Jr.'s first state visits as president of the Philippines and signify the special importance given to Indonesia and Singapore in Southeast Asia. While Jakarta houses the ASEAN headquarters and is the most populated and largest ASEAN economy, Singapore is a global finance and technology hub.

### **Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos Conclude Joint Exercises**

The armies of the three countries of Indo-China peninsula- Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, conducted joint disaster training exercises from 15 September, 2022 in Laos. The [joint rescue exercises](#) included both maritime and land-based operations and was attended by 500 military officers from the respective armies. It would equip them with training for contingencies like floods, landslides, chemical spills etc. The defence ministers of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos met for an annual meeting in Vientiane on 14 September, 2022. They discussed

regional and international issues that affects security and economy of their countries, and also decided to better coordinate over the issues of transnational crimes as well as non-traditional security challenges. They agreed that more attention may be given to educating the militaries and also [elevating the role](#) of their countries on multilateral forums like ADMM Plus. Vietnam's defence minister Pham Van Giang invited his counterparts to attend defence exhibition in December, 2022, organised by Ministry of Defence of Vietnam in Hanoi. The Indo-China peninsula is of significant strategic value, and the countries in this region hedge among large powers to avoid taking sides.

### **Thailand PM allowed by Court to Retain his Position**

The highest court of Thailand has allowed the Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-Cha to [retain his position and contest for general elections](#) to be held next year in the country. Large number of people had protested against his government and demanded that he may be removed from office given his tenure would exceed eight years in 2022. However, the court has ruled that his tenure will not be counted from 2014 when the coup happened but instead from 2017. It is expected that 2023 elections will see a close contestation between the military government and the pro-democracy groups. Thailand is one of Southeast Asia's most vibrant and stable economies, however, the political crises since the past decade has attracted public anger. The COVID-19 worsened the problems by adding economic crises.

## Myanmar Increasingly Relies on Russia

The leader of Myanmar's junta government Min Aung Hlaing made his [second visit to Russia](#) in less than two months. The regime has been diplomatically isolated after the ASEAN countries decided not to allow political representation from Myanmar in any of the ASEAN meetings. Russia provides military hardware to a number of ASEAN nations but for Myanmar it has become a primary source of arms and ammunition. The state media of Myanmar reported that the junta leader will visit factories and universities, attend an economic summit, and meet senior officials and his counterpart. Given the comprehensive sanctions on Russia, it is speculated that Myanmar may be looking to purchase oil from Moscow. The junta government may continue to receive arms support from Russia and escape sanctions imposed by western countries. This will only lead to protracted violent struggle between the ethnic armies, NUG-led People's Defence Forces and the junta forces. The instability in Myanmar is a major cause of concern for ASEAN nations who have not been able to facilitate peace in the country.

## Australia-India-Indonesia Trilateral Meeting held in New York

On the sidelines of the 77<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly, External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar met his counterparts from Indonesia and Australia at the first meeting of the Australia-India-Indonesia Trilateral on 23 September, 2022 in New York. Dr. Jaishankar highlighted the convergence of the three countries over issues of maritime security, blue economy, clean energy, and cyber. He also added that their cooperation will contribute to ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific. Both New Delhi and Canberra have close relations with ASEAN and find it in their interest to [promote ASEAN centrality](#) in order to maintain the balance of power in the region. Indonesia has taken a greater interest in leading ASEAN on contemporary issues and therefore, a trilateral between Indonesia, India and Australia will be crucial in strengthening regional security architecture.