

INSIGHT SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES

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Southeast Asia & Oceania Digest

June 2022

The ASEAN-US special summit in Washington underscores the significance of Southeast Asia in American foreign policy. The summit was held on 12-13 May, 2022 in the White House. President Biden announced a [US\\$ 150 million](#) package of which a large portion will be allotted to clean energy infrastructure financing, and regional maritime initiatives. In his address, he expressed the need to elevate US' engagement with the region and hoped to work more closely on matters of shared interest. The summit saw representation from all ASEAN countries except Myanmar, but the leaders did not seem convinced of Washington's commitment to the Southeast Asian region. China's economic heft and deep linkages to these countries may not be easy to match or overcome by the US, which has largely maintained its influence in the region as a security partner and less as an economic partner.

Japan and Thailand will Sign New Defence Deal

Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida met Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha on 2 May, 2022 and the leaders agreed to sign a [defence pact](#) between their countries which would facilitate transfer of defence hardware and technology from Japan to Thailand. They also plan to upgrade their bilateral economic relations, possibly under a five year partnership. Japan will also provide a loan assistance of US\$ 385 million to Thailand for COVID-19 mitigation efforts. Japan is a prominent foreign investor in Thailand and given the strategic landscape, it has stakes in maintaining good relations with Bangkok to balance China's influence in the region.

Notably, there have been problems in a [submarine deal](#) between Thailand and China which got stalled as the German manufacturer of the engine used in the submarine refused to supply it. The talks are ongoing as Thailand is unwilling to accept the submarine with a Chinese manufactured engine.

Quad Summit and Economic Outreach to Southeast Asia

The Quad leaders met in Tokyo for the latest summit on 24 May, 2022. They discussed evolving geopolitical situation in the Indo-pacific and highlighted the need to sustain a rules-based order in the region. Global health and COVID-19, climate change, cybersecurity, emerging technologies, and maritime awareness were some [subjects of the discussion](#), but US\$ 50 billion plan for infrastructure assistance and investment in the next five years in the Indo-Pacific stands out among them. The details on the breakdown of this large financial plan have not yet been disclosed. One day prior to the Quad summit, President Biden also unveiled the [Indo-Pacific Economic Framework](#) which will include all Quad members, South Korea, New Zealand, Fiji, as well as ASEAN nations (except Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia) as its initial members. The ASEAN nations, while showing support for the US' IPEF initiative, seem disillusioned due to lack of a trade element and clarity of terms. Some countries like Singapore have maintained that they will engage with the US in IPEF but continue to engage with China on platforms such as the CPTPP.

Quad's Maritime Initiative can Curb China's Illegal Fishing

The Quad countries have also come together for a [maritime domain awareness](#) partnership

under which a stream of data on maritime activity in the region will be available for countries in the Indo-Pacific. More effective patrolling of the Indian and Pacific oceans will be possible with the technology providers outlined in the initiative, such as with American commercial operator in the field Hawkeye360. The data will be shared with a number of regional data centres including Indian Ocean Region Information Fusion Centre in India. This initiative is being seen as one of Quad's most formidable, which will be able to deliver public goods to Southeast Asian and Pacific countries. Reportedly, China is responsible for 95 percent of [illegal fishing](#) in the Indo-Pacific maritime territories, and this initiative seeks to upgrade surveillance and monitor illegal fishing, regardless of ships turning off their transponders. At the same time as the Quad summit, China and Russia conducted a [joint aerial patrol](#) over the Sea of Japan, East China Sea and Western Pacific. These activities on both sides indicate increased tension in the Indo-Pacific, uncertainty, and possibilities of escalation.

Cambodia Releases New Defence White Paper

Cambodia, also the chair for ASEAN in 2022, has released a [new defence white paper](#) on 12 May, 2022. It talks about the government's long term strategy for defence and security related sectors, defence modernisation, enhancement of international cooperation, and relationship with civil sectors. It also dismisses accusations that China will be allowed to have a military presence at its Ream Naval base. Previous defence white papers were released in 2000 and 2006. Cambodia's close relationship with China has bothered the US and its allies which view it as a threat to ASEAN's

collective stance on contentious issues like the South China Sea dispute. During Cambodia's last chairmanship of ASEAN in 2012, the regional organisation had failed to reach consensus on the South China Sea issue. Cambodia and China have close economic, diplomatic and security relations.

Ferdinand Marcos Jr will be President in the Philippines

The presidential elections in the Philippines witnessed overwhelming win for [Ferdinand Marcos Jr](#), son of former Dictator Ferdinand Marcos who was accused of human rights abuse and had to flee the country during a People Power revolution in 1986. The win marks a return of [dynasty politics](#) in the Philippines as Marcos is believed to be supported by powerful political families in Manila, including the Dutertes. Sara Duterte, daughter of President Rodrigo Duterte, ran for the vice-presidential post alongside Marcos. While there may be some ambiguity regarding Marcos' policies as a president, many expect him to follow the same foreign policy as the Duterte regime with inclination to its ally, the United States. He is also expected to continue Duterte's infamous 'War on Drugs' which has been touted as blatant abuse of power and violation of human rights.

No Talks with the NUG in Myanmar

The junta regime has [protested against](#) Malaysian Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah's remarks on possibilities of ASEAN meeting the National Unity Government (NUG) openly to discuss negotiations. It has rejected the idea and stated that it could encourage increase in terrorist activity. The junta government classifies most opposition groups, including the NUG, as terrorists. The government

cautioned Malaysia against contacting, communicating or providing assistance of any kind to the NUG. The Myanmar crisis has been seen as a failure for ASEAN as the members have been divided on how to tackle the crisis. The ASEAN five-point resolution, which includes immediate cessation of violence by the junta forces, has shown no progress. India shares a long border with Myanmar and challenges may arise as refugees continue to illegally cross the border trying to escape the junta government. India's economic and [logistics projects](#) have all been stalled since the coup happened in February, 2021.

China Seeks to Increase Sway in the Pacific

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi arrived in Solomon Islands on 26 May, 2022 and met his counterpart, Jeremiah Manele. The newly-elected Australian Prime Minister Albanese commented that China is seeking to increase influence in the Pacific where

countries have had Australia as their [preferred security partner](#) for decades since Second World War. China signed a security pact with the Solomon Islands which sent shockwaves across the Western nations. The island nations in the South Pacific are strategically located near Australia, which is a close ally and security partner of the United States. China's increasing influence in the region could translate into geopolitical tensions and create grounds for escalation. Under the [new pact](#), China could send security forces to Solomon Islands at the government's request, and make port calls to resupply and provide recreation. China's foreign ministry also released a [position paper](#) on its relations with the Pacific island countries on 30 May, 2022 mentioning a number of potential areas for mutual cooperation with the region. It said "China is committed to deepen its comprehensive strategic partnership" (with the region), reflecting Beijing's plan to boost and sustain its presence in the Pacific.