

INSIGHT SOUTHEAST ASIA

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MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
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Southeast Asia and Oceania Digest

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The geopolitical flux triggered by the shock of the Israel – Hamas War, naturally drew diverse reactions from the region. Featuring prominently in the first ever ASEAN-GCC summit, the discussion on the conflict reflected their varying relationships with Israel and Palestine. While New Zealand with a new government, along with Australia and Pacific Islands had a muted public response, their stance was clear in their voting for the UN Resolution on Gaza. In other developments, India increased its diplomatic and defence engagement in the region with visits to Vietnam, Singapore, Timor Leste and Marshall Islands. Tensions continued in the South China Sea with a standoff between Philippines and China at a time when Manila is strengthening its partnerships with Japan. China continued to dominate regional headlines as it celebrated a decade of its flagship Belt and Road Initiative, engaged in outreach with Australia and appreciated Fiji's withdrawal as a party to the Joint Statement condemning China's human rights violations. Airstrikes continued in Myanmar as allegations of Indonesia suspected of selling weapons to junta surfaced.

Divergent response of Southeast Asia to Israel – Hamas War

Southeast Asian governments have reacted differently to the Israel-Hamas conflict, reflecting their varying relationships with Israel and larger identity politics in the region. Singapore and the Philippines issued strong statements in support of Israel. Meanwhile, Indonesia and Malaysia, both Muslim-majority nations, strongly

condemned Israel's actions. In the UN, a resolution passed with 120 votes in favour, focusing on the protection of civilians in Gaza without addressing Hamas attacks on Israel. The Philippines was the sole Southeast Asian nation to abstain from the vote, while other countries in the region voted in favour. In Oceania, New Zealand and Solomon Islands voted in favour. Fiji, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Tonga voted against. Countries like Australia, Kiribati, Palau, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu abstained, while Samoa did not vote.

ASEAN – GCC Summit: Key Takeaways

The first ASEAN – GCC Summit took place on October 20, 2023 at Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The leaders issued a separate statement on Gaza in which they expressed concern, called for a ceasefire, protection of civilians, and resolution of the Middle East conflict through international law and UN resolutions. Beyond that, the joint statement also stated that ASEAN and GCC will cooperate in the following key areas - commitment to peace, stability, and international law adherence; emphasis on oceanic prosperity and maritime security; endorsement of a cooperation framework (2024-2028); collaboration on economic priorities; Support for Saudi Arabia's Expo 2030 bid; promoting cultural diversity and peaceful coexistence; and advancing towards a digitally-enabled, innovative, and sustainable economy.

India's Diplomatic Engagement with Southeast Asia and Pacific Islands

In October 2023, India's External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar, embarked on

two significant diplomatic visits. The first one took him to Vietnam, strengthening the India-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The visit involved meetings with Vietnamese leaders, discussions on diverse areas of cooperation, and a celebration of shared cultural heritage, highlighting the strong bond between the two countries. During his visit to Singapore, Dr. Jaishankar engaged in bilateral discussions with Singaporean leaders, focusing on fintech, digitisation, the green economy, skills development, and food security. This visit aimed to enhance the Strategic Partnership between India and Singapore across various sectors.

Meanwhile, Minister of State for External Affairs, Dr. Rajkumar Ranjan Singh, visited Timor-Leste and the Republic of Marshall Islands. In Timor-Leste, he discussed strengthening bilateral ties and explored cooperation in various sectors, including health, agriculture, trade, and education. In the Republic of Marshall Islands, he focused on various projects and community activities. These visits showcased India's commitment to fostering partnerships and cooperation with key geographies in the Indo-Pacific region.

Philippines Eyes New Security Pact with Japan Amid South China Sea Tensions

The increasing levels of tensions, war of words and skirmishes between the Philippines and China escalated an unprecedented level, with no signs of cool off on both sides. The two countries have had numerous run-ins in areas of the South China Sea in recent months, especially the disputed Second Thomas Shoal, part of the Spratly Islands. In the most recent incident China and the Philippines traded

accusations over a collision where Chinese vessels blocked a Philippine boat supplying forces there. The Philippine government summoned the Chinese ambassador to express its deep concerns and filed its 55th diplomatic protest of the year reported media. Amidst these rising tensions, the Philippines has been considering establishing a security partnership with Japan. Both sides are working towards a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) to enhance security cooperation and joint military drills, particularly in response to China's increased military activities in the Indo-Pacific region. The RAA would be Japan's first with a ASEAN nation. Negotiations are expected to begin by the end of the year, with the aim of signing the treaty next year. Japan and the Philippines are also set to intensify joint military exercises, fostering trilateral security cooperation with the United States to deter China's territorial claims in the East and South China Seas.

Visit by ASEAN Nations and Papua New Guinea to China for BRI Summit 2023

China celebrated the 10th Anniversary of its flagship programme Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with BRI Forum for International Cooperation, 2023. President Xi Jinping unveiled the new action plan for a new logistics corridor connecting Europe and Asia by direct railway and road transportation. The Summit also focused on a range of issues like digital silk road, unimpeded trade, people-to-people bonds, and space technologies. The Summit however, saw a much dwindled participation from world leaders. All ASEAN nations were represented but leaders of only five of them – Vietnam,

Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia and Thailand were present. From Pacific Island nations, only Papua New Guinea attended. Indonesia and China reaffirmed their strong ties and willingness to strengthen cooperation in the field of digital economy, photovoltaics and new energy vehicles. Vietnam and China worked towards developing a Vietnam – China Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership. Cambodia reiterated its commitment to supporting the BRI. Papua New Guinea and China signed various documents relating to expansion of cooperation within the ambit of BRI.

Fiji withdraws from being a party to the Joint Statement on Human Rights violations in Xinjiang China

Meanwhile the Fiji Government announced its withdrawal from being a party to the Joint Statement on Human Rights violations in Xinjiang, China —issued at the UN Third Committee on 18th October 2023. Earlier, it was reported that Fiji joined a group of 51 nations supporting a "cross-regional statement" delivered by the United Kingdom, which demanded China to end human rights abuses in the province and highlighted a deeply critical report on Xinjiang by the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights. While issuing the statement after its withdrawal today, the Fiji Government said that it reaffirms its unwavering commitment to building enduring cooperation on the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and “non-interference” with the domestic affairs of diplomatic partners. Fiji also said that it attaches great value on its bilateral relations with the People’s Republic of China and use this as an opportunity to renew to China the assurances of its highest consideration and

its commitment to the relationship between the two countries.

Exercise Harimau Shakti-2023 amidst uptick in India-ASEAN defence engagements

Significant defence engagement took place between India and ASEAN nations. Exercise Harimau – Shakti 2023, between India and Malaysia, saw representation from the 5th Royal Battalion of the Malaysian Army and India’s Battalion of The Rajput Regiment. The exercise aimed to enhance military capabilities for Multi Domain Operations in a sub-conventional scenario and boost defence cooperation between the Indian Army and the Malaysian Army.

Additionally, DRDO's oceanographic research vessel 'INS Sagardhwani' embarked on the Sagar Maitri Mission-4 to establish long-term scientific partnerships with Indian Ocean Rim countries for ocean research and development, including Oman, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Myanmar. Indian Coast Guard Ship Samudra Prahari, a specialized Pollution-Control Vessel also arrived in Jakarta, Indonesia, as part of India's ASEAN initiatives for Marine Pollution Response.

Indonesian State-Owned Firms Suspected of Selling Weapons to Junta: Report

Human rights organizations have called on Indonesia to investigate alleged arms sales by state-owned companies to Myanmar, which has been embroiled in conflict since the 2021 military coup. A complaint was filed with Indonesia's national human rights commission, alleging that three state-owned arms manufacturers - PT Pindad, PT

PAL, and PT Dirgantara Indonesia - had supplied equipment to Myanmar through a Myanmar company named True North. The activists claim that Myanmar had purchased various items from the Indonesian companies, including pistols, assault rifles, and combat vehicles. PT Pindad and PT PAL did not immediately respond to requests for comment. PT Pindad's director previously stated they had not sold products to Myanmar since 2016, and PT Dirgantara Indonesia denied any contracts with Myanmar or related third parties. True North was identified in an undated company profile as having the three Indonesian arms manufacturers as "strategic partners."

Key Developments in Australia: Rejection of Indigenous Voice Referendum, US Visit, and China talks

Many developments on the domestic and foreign policy fronts kept Canberra busy. A key initiative of the Albanese government, which tried to bring the Indigenous voice to the parliament was rejected. The referendum which aimed to recognize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the constitution and create an advisory group was rejected by over 60% of the voters and reflected a highly polarised social debate in the country. Meanwhile on the international front Prime Minister Albanese on a state visit to the US, sealed significant commitments on new technology cooperation, especially in artificial intelligence and space, clean energy, resilient critical mineral supply chains and climate crisis solutions. Both sides also discussed enhanced connectivity in the Pacific, strengthening defence cooperation, AUKUS implementation, and

closer people-to-people ties, including with indigenous communities. Concrete initiatives were announced from the White House, demonstrating the broad scope of the US-Australia alliance. After the visit to the US, Albanese's government has set the table for a visit to China in a bid to re-engage after the freewill in diplomatic ties.

New Zealand Elections 2023: A New Right Government After Decades?

The composition of the 54th New Zealand Parliament was determined through the general election held on October 14, 2023. In these elections, the main candidates were Chris Hipkins of the Labour Party and Christopher Luxon of the National Party. Hipkins, the incumbent Prime Minister, led the Labour Party and campaigned for cost-easing measures. Luxon, a relative newcomer in politics, represented the centre-right National Party, which focused on reducing the cost of living, tax relief, and improving healthcare and education. While preliminary polls suggested Luxon was in the lead, the National Party would likely have to form a coalition government, possibly with the ACT party or New Zealand First. The elections were dominated by concerns about the cost of living, budget deficits, high inflation, skyrocketing rents, and unaffordable housing. Law and order, particularly sentencing for crime and youth offenders, was another key issue. Right-wing parties faced allegations of stoking racial division, with the ACT party vowing to limit the use of Maori language in everyday life and dismantle the Maori Health Authority, leading to discussions around race and Maori governance.