

INSIGHT SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES

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The region continued its quest to seek stability to combat the rising geopolitical tensions and growing unpredictability in the Indo-Pacific. Australia released its public version of the Defence Strategic Review, which sets the stage for ambitious defence posture and structure transformation. In order to preserve a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, the assessment upheld the significance of the alliance with the US and Japan along with like-minded partnerships with India, ASEAN, Pacific Island Countries, European Union and the United Kingdom. Even and the US and Philippines continued to underpin their security commitments in the region through bilateral exchanges and military exercises, China continued to project its power in the Taiwan Strait through military drills but also in Myanmar's Coco Islands through military infrastructure build-ups.

Australia releases a new Defense Strategic Review

The Australian government has made public the Defence Strategic Review, its response to the review, and the National Defence Statement 2023. The public version of the review acknowledges the changing strategic landscape in the region and globally, characterized by a significant buildup of both conventional and non-conventional military capabilities without strategic confidence. The review emphasizes deterrence, specifically

through a strategy of denial by deterring from a distance. It outlines an ambitious but necessary reform of the Defence's posture and structure, with immediate directions given and a systematic and comprehensive process for long-term and sustainable implementation. The review also highlights the importance of addressing climate change, which is seen as the culmination of Australia's previous efforts. While the review highlights economic interdependence on China and doesn't label it as direct military threat, the concerns over China's militarisation of Australia's strategic neighbourhood are implicit.

Satellite images reveal military modernization on Myanmar's Coco Islands

According to a UK-based policy institute, recent activity on Myanmar's Great Coco Islands, includes the expansion of an airstrip and aircraft hangar, as well as military modernisation efforts. Experts believe that China is responsible for the military built-up on these islands. Satellite images captured by Maxar Technologies in January show evidence of recent military modernisation such as an extended 2,300-meter runway, two new hangars, and a radar station. There is imagery showing land-clearing efforts on the southern end of the island, suggesting further construction work. The latest military expansion could pose a significant security challenge to India and threaten its strategic interests in the area, as the Coco Islands are close to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which house Indian naval and air force bases.

US and Philippines conduct their largest military exercise “Balikatan”

Following China's three-day military exercises near Taiwan, the Philippines and the US conducted their largest combat exercise commenced in the South China Sea (SCS) and the Taiwan Strait. The recent iteration of Balikatan, held until April 28, was the largest in 30 years, with approximately 5,400 Filipino forces and 12,200 US military personnel with 111 Australian troops participating in it. The exercises encompassed various training scenarios, such as amphibious and aviation operations, cyber defence, urban operations, counter-terrorism, and humanitarian and disaster relief. In addition, the drills featured an amphibious landing exercise on an island, the sinking of a decommissioned ship, and the inaugural firing of weapons by US and Filipino frigates in the SCS. According to reports, the military exercises are expected to improve strategies, methods, and protocols for various military activities. Notably, the drills are taking place only a few weeks following the announcement of new locations for military bases.

US- Philippines 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue convened in Washington D.C

On April 11th Philippine's Secretary of Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo and Philippines Secretary of National Defense Carlito Galvez Jr. and their US' counterparts Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd

Austin met in Washington, D.C. for the third U.S.-Philippines Ministerial Dialogue. During the meeting, the two nations agreed on several measures to enhance and update their mutual security relationship, while also reaffirming their dedication to unhindered legal trade and adherence to international law, encompassing freedom of navigation and flight in addition to other legal maritime uses. The approval of a "Security Sector Assistance Roadmap", which will aid in deciding on the allocation of resources for critical defense systems over the next 5-10 years and directing “joint defence modernisation investments”, was also announced by both nations. Reports say that the US and the Philippines also discussed providing "priority defence platforms" to boost their integrated deterrence. These platforms included military transport planes drones, coastal and air defence systems, and radar equipment.

Singapore and China commence joint naval exercise “Maritime Cooperation”

On April 28, PLA (Navy) of China and the Republic of Singapore Navy began a bilateral maritime exercise. This is the second iteration of the exercise after it began in 2015. It is divided into two phases: a shore phase at RSS Singapura - Changi Naval Base (CNB) and a sea phase conducted at sea in international waters in the southern SCS. Personnel from both navies take part in professional exchanges, cooperative planning exercises and

coordinated training at the Damage Control Trainer throughout the shore phase. The ships engage in a variety of tasks during the sea phase, including simulated minefield transits, restocking-at-sea approaches, gunnery firing, communication and manoeuvring drills, cross-deck helicopter landings, and rescue operations. Chinese navy contributed a missile-bearing frigate, the Yulin, and a mine-hunting vessel, the Chibi. This naval exercise highlights Singapore's efforts to maintain a balance between China and the U.S. amid increasing strategic competition.

Negotiations for Free Trade Agreement between Vietnam and Israel concluded

Israeli Minister of Economy and Industry Nir Barkat and Vietnamese Minister of Industry and Trade Nguyen Hng Diên met in Israel where it was announced that Vietnam and Israel would sign a free trade agreement later this year. This comes after 12 rounds of negotiations over seven years between them. Experts believe that even though the concrete economic benefits of the agreement for Vietnam are less notable, it has the chance to increase its presence in West Asia with the signing of

VIFTA. Additionally, Diên expressed interest in Israel sharing its knowledge and technology in areas such as the digital economy, digital transformation, and energy transition. According to the Vietnamese Ministry of Industry and Trade, Israel is currently Vietnam's fifth-largest trading partner and third-largest importer in West Asia.

More than 100 dead in Myanmar's military airstrike

In one of the deadliest attacks in Myanmar, reportedly up to 100 villagers were killed and over 50 injured when the military bombed a crowd of hundreds in Kanbalu township of Sagaing region. This airstrike is believed to be the worst military attack carried out by Myanmar's military in the last two years since the coup. According to sources, the junta has conducted air attacks for 258 days between February 1, 2021, and January 25, 2023, with many of these attacks occurring in various states and regions such as Sagaing, Magwe, Kachin, Kayar, Kayin, Chin, and Shan. The ongoing aerial campaign by the military is seen as retaliation against the civil and armed resistance to military rule.