

# *INSIGHT* SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR  
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES

मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

## CONTENTS

- **The third edition of the Forum for FIPIC Summit concluded at Port Moresby**
- **Democratic parties triumphed over the conservative military-backed group in Thailand' general election**
- **India and ASEAN conducted their first maritime exercise**
- **PM Modi's Australia visit witnessed a notable stride in India- Australia relations**
- **A defence and maritime cooperation agreement was signed between Papua New Guinea and the US**
- **Malaysia signed \$2.28 billion of defence deals at a trade fair**

## **Southeast Asia and Oceania Digest**

**May 2023**

The strategic importance of Pacific Island Countries (PICs) for the defense and security of the Indo-Pacific came into sharp focus recently. The United States took steps to strengthen its relationship with the PICs by renewing a security agreement with Micronesia and signing a new defence and maritime cooperation agreement with Papua New Guinea (PNG). In line with India's efforts to enhance capacity-building initiatives for PICs, Prime Minister Modi announced a "12-point development agenda" during his visit to the third FIPIC (Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation) summit. Meanwhile in the equally important geography of South East Asia, India and ASEAN conducted their first joint maritime exercise, building capacity for the region. In Thailand, in a major development, general elections saw pro-democracy parties emerge victorious defeating the incumbent conservative military-backed group.

### **The third edition of the Forum for FIPIC Summit concluded at Port Moresby**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the third FIPIC summit, which took place in Port Moresby, PNG. During the summit, PM Modi introduced a comprehensive "12-point development agenda" specifically tailored for the Pacific Island Countries (PICs). One of

the key announcements was the launch of a solar initiative for public buildings, aimed at enabling the PICs to achieve self-sufficiency in meeting their energy needs through the provision of affordable renewable energy. PM Modi also revealed plans to establish a regional IT and cyber security training hub in PNG. Additionally, the FIPIC SME Development Project was declared, showcasing support for small and medium-sized enterprises in the region. Notably, health-related infrastructure was in focus with various healthcare initiatives being provided for by New Delhi.

### **Democratic parties triumphed over the conservative military-backed group in Thailand' general election**

Pro-democracy opposition parties won the majority of seats and, consequently, the majority of the popular vote in Thailand's general election. Voters largely rejected the parties supported by the military that dominated Thailand for almost a decade. Pheu Thai —the major opposition party and a pro-military conservative faction led by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha were expected to compete closely in this election. However the most successful party, with the most seats in parliament was the Move Forward Party. Democratic parties campaigned on a reformist program that aspired to topple the military-backed establishment's authority over the nation, in power since the coup in 2014.

### **India and ASEAN conducted their first maritime exercise**

India and ASEAN nations concluded the inaugural joint maritime exercise, the ASEAN India Maritime Exercise (AIME) 2023. This exercise was focused on enhancing interoperability and aimed to demonstrate the collective ability of the Indian Navy and ASEAN navies to collaborate effectively in promoting stability, security, and peace in the region. A total of over 1800 personnel and nine ships from the participating nations took part in AIME 2023. The exercise was conducted in two distinct phases. During the Harbour Phase, held at Changi Naval Base, operational activities such as search and seizure, as well as humanitarian aid and disaster relief exercises, were held. The participants demonstrated their capabilities and coordinated efforts in handling various scenarios. Next, the exercise progressed to the sea phase, which took place in the international waters of the South China Sea. During this phase, the participating ships monitored and responded to simulated boats of interest, receiving alerts from ASEAN international liaison officers. In addition to the maritime exercise, the ships also took part in the International Maritime Security Conference (IMSC) and the International Maritime Defense Exhibition (IMDEX-23), both of which were held in Singapore. These events provided an opportunity for further engagement and discussions on maritime security and defence cooperation among the participating nations.

### **PM Modi's Australia visit witnessed a notable stride in India- Australia relations**

The bilateral relationship between Australia and India was further strengthened during PM Modi's visit to Australia — the first such event hosted by Australian PM Anthony Albanese. The signing of the India-Australia Migration and Mobility Partnership Agreement (MMPA), aimed at facilitating the reciprocal movement of nationals between the two countries was a significant outcome of the visit. This agreement will foster collaboration to combat irregular migration while promoting the seamless movement of students, graduates, experts, researchers, educators, and businessmen. The Mobility Arrangement for Talented Early Professional Scheme (MATES) specifically designed for India was also announced and will be implemented as part of this partnership. Mutually beneficial agreements in the fields of renewable energy sources, manufacturing capacities, and critical minerals extraction were also finalised. Both nations announced the establishment of a bilateral green hydrogen task force, aiming to enhance cooperation in the production of green hydrogen. India and Australia also reiterated their shared objective of finalizing the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) between the two countries by 2023, reaffirming their commitment to enhancing economic ties and fostering stronger trade relations.

### **A defence and maritime cooperation agreement was signed between Papua New Guinea and the US**

During the U.S.-Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Dialogue held in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea (PNG), two important agreements were signed. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and PNG's Defence Minister, Win Bakri Daki signed the Agreement concerning Counter Illicit Transnational Maritime Activity Operations and the Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA). These agreements aim to enhance regional capacity-building initiatives and address various maritime challenges. The Agreement Concerning Counter Illicit Transnational Maritime Activity Operations addresses critical maritime issues such as the smuggling of migrants, weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. This agreement will allow PNG to participate in the Shiprider program of the U.S. Coast Guard, thereby enhancing PNG's law enforcement capacities in its territorial waters. The Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) is intended to foster bilateral and multilateral activities and exchanges, promoting regional cooperation and strengthening PNG's defence capabilities. It will according to the official statement, also enable the United States to respond swiftly in emergencies, ensuring a more efficient and effective response.

### **Malaysia signed \$2.28 billion of defence deals**

At the Langkawi Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition, Malaysia successfully signed contracts worth \$2.28 billion, marking a significant step in its efforts to modernize and replace outdated military equipment. The purchase of 18 FA-50 light attack aircraft from Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI), the sole warplane producer in South Korea, is at a cost of approximately \$920 million. Additionally, Malaysia will acquire four Black Hawk helicopters from Sikorsky, an American aircraft manufacturer. Malaysia has also secured two maritime patrol planes from the Italian company Leonardo SpA and three unmanned aerial systems from Turkiye. These acquisitions align with Malaysia's long-term economic blueprint series, as the country aims to enhance its defence capabilities and keep pace with evolving regional security dynamics. Notably, Malaysia's aim to modernise its forces is reflected in the 2023 budget, which allocated a 10% increase in funding for the defence ministry, amounting to \$3.99 billion.