

# *INSIGHT* SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



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## **Insight Southeast Asia July 2023**

The 56th ASEAN Foreign Minister's Meeting held in Jakarta Indonesia discussed the possible approaches to the crises in Myanmar and Ukraine. The blocs talks with China also indicated consensus on accelerating negotiations for the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. Meanwhile India's Foreign Minister visited the region and reviewed the progress in cooperation in areas like fintech, food security and the maritime domain across several forums. The Indian navy handed over INS Kripan to Vietnam and Australia saw several developments in defence cooperation with Germany, US and India. The political future of both Thailand and Cambodia after the elections has left regional observers worried.

### **56th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, July 11-12, Jakarta, Indonesia**

The 56th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting was held on July 11-12, in Jakarta, Indonesia. The Myanmar crisis topped the agenda of the meeting, as leaders from the bloc discussed how to approach the ongoing situation in the country ravaged by deadly violence since a military coup against leader Aung San Suu Kyi's government in 2021. The joint communique by ASEAN regarding Myanmar strongly condemned the continued acts of violence, including air strikes, artillery shelling, and destruction of public facilities, and urged all parties involved to take concrete action to immediately halt indiscriminate violence, denounce any escalation, and create a conducive environment for the delivery of humanitarian assistance and inclusive

national dialogue. The bloc and China also agreed to accelerate negotiations for the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. Both sides welcomed the progress achieved so far in the ongoing negotiations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC), including the completion of the second reading of the Single Draft COC Negotiating Text (SDNT) and encouraged continued positive momentum in this regard. The bloc also welcomed the adoption of the objective and criteria-based Roadmap for Timor-Leste's Full Membership in ASEAN at the 42nd ASEAN Summit in May 2023.

### **India's Engages Southeast Asia: EAM Jaishankar's week-long visit to Jakarta and Bangkok**

India stepped up its outreach to Southeast Asia with External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar's visit to the region. EAM participated in the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meetings and other forums including ASEAN-India, East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum, scheduled between 13-14 July 2023 and reviewed the progress in cooperation in areas like fintech, food security and maritime domains. He also held bilateral meetings with his counterparts from Singapore, S.Korea, Indonesia etc. On the sidelines, EAM participated in the India – Indonesia – Australia trilateral, and discussed shared security concerns in the maritime domain. After Jakarta, EAM went to Bangkok, Thailand to participate in the 12th Foreign Ministers' Meeting of Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Mechanism on 16 July 2023. MGC, one of the oldest mechanisms of lower Mekong region, is an extension and result of India's Act East Policy. This was followed up with an attendance in

Foreign Minister's Retreat for the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) on 17 July 2023, where steps to focus and deepen the BIMSTEC agenda and strengthen the organisation were discussed. India is keen to assure the ASEAN region of its centrality to India's Indo Pacific vision and revitalise pre-existing platforms like the BIMSTEC to deliver on the region's requirements.

### **Vietnam Receives INS Kirpan from India**

India's growing defence partnership with Vietnam saw further exchange with the Indian Navy handing over INS Kirpan, to Vietnam. The momentous occasion marked the first time India has transferred a fully operational corvette to a foreign country. In 2022, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh handed the country 12 high speed patrol guard boats, five of these were built in India while the rest were built in Vietnam under an Indian Line of Credit. India has also helped the country build its defence technological capabilities and sponsored the establishment of an Army Software Park with a \$5 million grant. India has also signed a mutual logistics support agreement with Vietnam.

### **Australia's confirms AUD 1 billion Defence Deal with Germany amidst growing defence cooperation**

Australian Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese confirmed a deal worth more than \$1bn to sell Australian-made armoured vehicles to Germany ahead of the NATO summit. Australia has signed a deal to deliver 100 Brisbane-made Boxer heavy weapon carriers to Germany and the first

deliveries will be made by 2025. One of the largest defence export deals in Australia's history, comes against the backdrop of Germany's urgent need to expand its defence capabilities in a tight time frame amidst the Russia – Ukraine War. Prime Minister Albanese also declared that an Australian Air Force Boeing E-7A Wedgetail surveillance aircraft would be based at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany for six months, starting in October. This aircraft will be part of NATO surveillance of the alliance's eastern flank, in particular European logistical hubs supporting Ukraine. The Wedgetail will be able to detect aircraft approaching the Baltic States or Poland in the east. With this, Australia will share the burden of continual air patrols in Eastern Europe.

### **Australia to buy 20 Hercules Military Planes from the US , conducts Talisman Sabre Military Exercise**

On July 24, 2023 Australia announced that it would buy 20 new C-130 Hercules from the US in a 9.8 billion Australian dollar (US \$6.6 billion) deal. This will increase the size of the Australian air force's fleet of its second-largest heavy transport aircraft by two-thirds. According to Australian Defense Industry Minister Pat Conroy, the first of the new four-engine Hercules is expected to be delivered in 2027 and the new aircraft will eventually replace the fleet of 12 Hercules currently operated by the Royal Australian Air Force from RAAF Base Richmond near Sydney. The announcement came while the US and Australia conducted their biennial Talisman Sabre military exercise along the Australian coast. This year, it involves 13 nations and more than 30,000 personnel as

global concerns intensify over an increasingly assertive China in the Indo – Pacific Region.

### **8th India – Australia Defence Policy Talks Held in Canberra**

The 8th India-Australia Defence Policy Talks (DPT) was held at Canberra in Australia on 24 and 25 July 2023. Both sides reviewed the bilateral defence cooperation between the two countries and focused on identifying ways to strengthen partnership in co-development and co-production of defence equipment. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to fully implement the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership – which they share since June 2020 and defence is a key pillar of this partnership. India also emphasised on the potential of the Indian defence industry with capacity and capability to cooperate with Australian Armed forces in its shipbuilding and maintenance plans. The talks also reviewed the outcomes of maiden 2+2 Ministerial talks conducted in September 2021. Both sides agreed for early finalization of the hydrography agreement and exchanged views on geo-political situation, regional and global issues of shared interest.

### **Fiji's Prime Minister Cancels Visit to China**

Fiji's Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka said he was forced to cancel an official visit to China after enduring a minor head injury that required him to stay at home. According to him, he had been forced to cancel the visit after tripping on the stairs while looking at this phone, resulting in an injury to his head. Interestingly, the visit was announced on July 25th by the Chinese embassy in Fiji, which said Rabuka would

attend the opening of the World University Games in Chengdu, alongside Chinese President Xi Jinping as part of China's push to ramp up cooperation with the Pacific Islands. Rabuka's cancellation of the visit comes as his government announced that Fiji was reviewing a police cooperation agreement with China, signed a decade ago by the former government. Meanwhile Fiji had signed a defence agreement with New Zealand in June to strengthen military training and maritime security.

### **Three months after elections, Thailand faces an uncertain future :**

Thailand has struggled for nearly three months to form a government and select a new leader since the elections in May. Thailand's parliament blocked the prime ministerial nomination of the winner of May's nationwide elections, Pita Limjaroenrat, a blow to his progressive opposition party Move Forward, after nearly a decade of military-backed rule. Pita, was temporarily suspended as a lawmaker by the country's constitutional court after a complaint filed by the Election Commission against the Move Forward Party leader accusing him of violating election laws for allegedly holding shares in a media company. Pita has denied he broke election rules and previously accused the Election Commission of rushing the case to court. The Move Forward Party had pledged deep structural reforms including changes to the military, the economy, the decentralization of power and even reforms to the previously untouchable monarchy. Thailand's political future seems uncertain, as Pita who was stopped by the Senate, has now approached the Constitutional Court for a chance to go for a floor test for the second time. Observers predict that it seems

highly unlikely that he will be able to rule the country and now the search is on for a more “centrist” candidate —one who is more tolerable to both the military and the monarchy of the country.

### **Elections in Cambodia and the Extended Control of Hun Sen**

Predictably Cambodia’s Prime Minister, Hun Sen, and his party, the Cambodian People’s Party won the General Elections, with a landslide victory. He has been in power since 1985, being the longest serving PM of the country. These elections have been dubbed as rigged and the least free and fair elections in decades. Hun Sen has threatened that protestors will face legal

consequences. Opposition leaders like Kem Sokha, have also been arrested, leaving absolutely no possible competition for the reigning leader and his son, who has now succeeded him. A few days later after the election result, he resigned as Prime Minister and appointed his eldest son Hun Manet as PM. Manet until recently the commander of the Royal Cambodian Army, as his successor. Hun Sen said his son would be appointed prime minister on 10 August, and that he is retaining the President post of his party. This development has caused further concerns fearing that an even more authoritarian rule is inevitable for Cambodia.