

# *INSIGHT* SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR  
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES

मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

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ASEAN launched its inaugural ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO) at the 13th ASEAN Maritime Forum, held in Bali, Indonesia. The document is set to be a cornerstone in managing various maritime issues, with a special focus on streamlining processes and mechanisms for better clarity and efficiency. Maritime challenges dominated the region as Philippines accused China of breaking international law by blocking and firing water cannon at the resupply mission. Manilla which deepened Defence Cooperation with India, also undertook a striking military exercise with Australian armed forces, supported by U.S. Marines in the south China sea, conducting training to recapture an island that had been seized by hostile forces. While US cemented maritime cooperation with Palau, NZ concretised its vision for managing maritime challenges with four new defence documents. While Political imbroglio in Thailand ended with the appointment of a new PM, Myanmar's military has officially postponed the much-anticipated election to be held in August.

### **ASEAN launched its inaugural ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO)**

ASEAN launched its inaugural ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO) at the 13th ASEAN Maritime Forum, held in Bali Indonesia. Considered a touchstone vision to managing various maritime issues, the document emphasises a special focus on streamlining processes and mechanisms for better clarity and efficiency. Acting as a practical guide, the AMO is designed to navigate maritime trends and challenges in the region. By doing so, it aims to consolidate efforts, minimise redundancies and guide the bloc's actions towards more cohesive maritime cooperation. The AMO

will be refreshed triennially, with the first edition released in 2023. Additionally, AMO is committed to upholding international law norms, such as those embodied in the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Being seen as an effort of stocktaking on ASEAN's work in the maritime domain, the document also envisions collaboration with external partners, to identifying both the existing and emerging issues.

### **Philippines Accuses China Coast Guard of Water Cannon Attack on Resupply Mission to Grounded Vessel**

Maritime issues came into focus in the region with Philippines and China trading allegations over disputes in the SCS. China renewed calls to the Philippines to remove an ageing ship from a reef that Manila uses to press its stake in the Spratly Islands in defiance of Beijing's claim to nearly the entire South China Sea. The move comes after the Philippines accused China's Coast Guard of firing water cannons against boats on a resupply mission. Second Thomas Shoal is about 200 kilometres (120 miles) from the Philippine island of Palawan and more than 1,000 kilometres from China's nearest major landmass, Hainan island. Philippines had also summoned the Chinese Ambassador over the incident. The BRP Sierra Madre - deliberately grounded in 1999 in an effort to check the advance of China in the hotly contested waters - has long been a flashpoint between Manila and Beijing. Manilla says handful of Marines deployed on the crumbling vessel depend upon resupply missions to survive their remote posting. Beijing was accused of breaking international law by blocking and firing water cannons at the resupply

mission, preventing one of the charter boats from reaching the shoal. China, on the other hand, has defended its actions and accused Manila of illegal delivery of construction materials to the grounded ship.

### **Australia, the US, and the Philippines Navies Practice Drill**

*In a* striking military exercise on the north-western Philippine coast, Australian and Filipino armed forces, supported by U.S. Marines, conducted training to recapture an island that had been seized by hostile forces. This exercise took place in the vicinity of the disputed South China Sea and was observed by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and visiting Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles. The operation included simulated beach landings, assaults, and the insertion of troops via helicopters at a Philippine navy base. Approximately 1,200 Australians, 560 Filipinos, and 120 U.S. Marines participated in this joint exercise. Just days prior to this event, the same trio of nations – Australia, the Philippines, and the United States – conducted air assault maneuvers in Rizal town, located in the western Palawan province, which also borders the South China Sea. While these nations have been vocal critics of China's increasingly assertive actions in the disputed waters, the Philippine military clarified that the drills were not aimed at China. These exercises marked the largest military cooperation between Australia and the Philippines to date.

### **Indian and Philippines Coast Guards Sign MoU for Enhanced Maritime Cooperation**

In a significant step towards bolstering the bilateral cooperation between India and

Philippines, Indian Coast Guard has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) on enhanced maritime cooperation. Both the sides held their first bilateral meeting on a range of maritime issues. The MoU seeks to enhance the professional linkage between the two Coast Guards in the domain of Maritime Law Enforcement (MLE), Maritime Search & Rescue (M-SAR) and Marine Pollution Response (MPR). The initiatives follow the announcements made by the Indian Defence Minister on enhancing maritime cooperation with the region in the first ASEAN-India meeting on the sidelines of the ADMM plus in 2022. The implementation of this MoU will enhance bilateral maritime cooperation between the two nations for ensuring safe, secure and clean seas in the region. The first ever bilateral meeting between both the maritime agencies signifies the dedication in strengthening the professional bonds by sharing best practices, conducting joint exercises and enhancing training collaborations.

### **India Joins AUSINDEX-23 in Sydney; MALABAR-2023 Hosted in Australia**

Indian Navy's indigenous frontline warships INS Sahyadri and INS Kolkata participated in Exercise MALABAR 2023 scheduled at/ off Sydney, along with ships and aircraft from the US Navy (USN), Japan Maritime Self Defence Force (JMSDF) and the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). MALABAR 2023 saw two phases : the Harbour Phase involving wide-ranging activities such as cross-deck visits, professional exchanges, sports fixtures and several interactions for planning and

conduct of the Sea Phase. The Sea Phase included various complex and high intensity exercises in all three domains of warfare, encompassing anti-surface, anti-air and anti-submarine exercises including live weapon firing drills. The exercise provided an opportunity to the Indian Navy to enhance and demonstrate interoperability and also gain from the best practices in maritime security operations from its partner nations. India also joined in the 5th edition of biennial AUSINDEX maritime exercise between Indian Navy and Royal Australian Navy. Besides ships and their integral helicopters, the exercise also witnessed participation of fighter aircraft and maritime patrol aircraft.

### **US and Palau Sign New Pact over Maritime Security in Pacific Region**

In a significant development aimed at strengthening maritime governance and upholding regional sovereignty, representatives from the United States and the Republic of Palau inked an expanded bilateral law enforcement agreement during the Joint Heads of Pacific Security conference in Palau. This agreement empowers the U.S. Coast Guard to enforce regulations within Palau's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) without the presence of Palauan officers, marking a substantial regional milestone. It follows a similar pact signed with the Federated States of Micronesia in October 2022, allowing the U.S. Coast Guard to carry out boardings in FSM waters. Another noteworthy development in regional security is the bilateral defense agreement signed with Papua New Guinea in May 2023, which

now has been ratified by the parliament. This agreement will enable U.S. Coast Guard boarding officers to collaborate with their Papua New Guinean counterparts in conducting boardings within PNG's EEZ for the first time, set to commence later in the year.

### **New Zealand has Released 4 Defence Documents**

A new series of national security and defence policy documents were released by New Zealand in an attempt to renew its drive to be seen as a regional power while being keen to avoid directly antagonizing China. The first-ever National Security Strategy (NSS) was released alongside the first two parts of New Zealand's latest defence review, a Defence Policy Strategic Statement (DPSS) and the Future Force Design Principles (FFDP). Similar to the American National Security Strategy, the NSS serves as a whole-of-government policy guidance, while the DPSS and FFDP are specifically focused on the Ministry of Defence. Taken together, the documents represent the clearest statement of New Zealand's defence policy and national security thinking in years. These documents build on an earlier Defence Assessment from 2021 that argued that New Zealand needs to be more proactive in its defence posture. The DPSS states that the protection of New Zealand's interests needs to be pursued "through a more deliberate and purposeful approach to shaping our security environment, focusing in particular on security in and for the Pacific." This builds on New Zealand's "Pacific Reset" policy announced in 2018,

emphasizing warnings about increasing strategic competition in the Pacific, Southern Ocean and Antarctica and the impact of climate change on security.

### **Thailand Has A New Prime Minister**

Srettha Thavasin, a prominent figure in the real estate industry who recently entered Thai politics as a member of the Pheu Thai Party, has secured the position of Prime Minister in Thailand with parliamentary support. To assume office and establish the next government in Bangkok, Srettha needed a minimum of 375 votes, but he garnered 482 votes, decisively ending the political stalemate that has plagued Thailand since the conduct of the elections earlier this year. As the incoming prime minister, Srettha faces the challenging task of rejuvenating Thailand after nearly a decade of military rule and addressing economic concerns. Previously, in May, the Move Forward party achieved a significant electoral victory. However, their bid to lead the government was thwarted when their leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, fell short of the majority vote needed in Thailand's bicameral National Assembly to secure the top position.

### **Myanmar Military Extends Emergency and Postpones Elections**

Myanmar's military has officially postponed the much-anticipated election that had been scheduled to take place by August this year, a move that comes after the extension of the state of emergency initially imposed following their coup in 2021. In a statement broadcasted on state television, the military explained that the ongoing violence in the country was the primary reason for delaying the elections. This announcement essentially acknowledges the military's inability to exert sufficient control to hold the polls and its failure to quell the widespread opposition to its rule. This opposition includes a growing armed resistance, as well as nonviolent protests and civil disobedience. The state of emergency was first declared when the military arrested the elected leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, along with top officials from her government and members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) party on February 1, 2021. The military's justification for their power grab was based on allegations of widespread electoral fraud during the November 2020 election, which had seen the NLD return to power.