

# *INSIGHT* SOUTHEAST ASIA

Looking Eastwards From New Delhi



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR  
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## CONTENTS

- Myanmar junta airstrikes continue in Shan State, killing civilians
- The Philippines, US, Australia, Japan, and New Zealand held a joint maritime activity in the South China Sea
- Vietnamese PM To Lam meets US presidents on sidelines of UN General Assembly meeting
- US push to steer Vietnam's subsea cable plans away from China
- Indonesia ratifies five bilateral defence cooperation agreements
- Indonesia, Solomon Islands join countries banning nuclear weapons, pit Australia at odds with neighbours
- The 4th Strategic Economic Dialogue Between China and Australia convened in Beijing

South East Asia saw continued economic and security cooperation to withstand global disruptions. The Myanmar crisis looms large as the junta airstrikes in the Shan States escalated in response of loss of territory but resulted in the increase of civilian casualties amidst a political deadlock. The Philippines military conducted joint maritime exercises with Australia, Japan, the US, and New Zealand to show a collective commitment to support a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific as provocation by Beijing is seen on the rise. In a direct counter to outreach by China, US President Biden met with the head of the state of Vietnam even as US govt urged Vietnam to avoid Chinese undersea cables. Indonesia ratified five bilateral defence agreements in a bid to shore up defence preparedness and boost its defence industry. Australia and China convened the fourth Strategic Economic Dialogue as both sides attempt to normalise ties after an extended period of tension.

### **Myanmar junta airstrikes continue in Shan State, political deadlock continues**

The junta's aerial attacks on Shan State have intensified since it lost the Myanmar army's Northeastern Regional Military Command headquarters to anti-junta forces in August. The air force bombed Lashio, northern Shan State on 22<sup>nd</sup> Sept inflicting several casualties. Media like

*Irrawaddy* have carried reports saying that since early September junta's air force has escalated its campaign of aerial bombardments because junta chief Min Aung Hlaing vowed to retake lost territory with a counteroffensive. According to reports, the airstrikes continue although junta forces are no longer able to conduct ground operations in these areas, "in what appears to be a desperate campaign of attrition by the regime". The junta had invited armed groups with a proposal to start talks but the opposition had rejected the military's appeal demanding a political solution to armed conflict to which the Junta agrees to its conditions.

### **The Philippines, US, Australia, Japan, and New Zealand held a joint maritime activity in the South China Sea**

On September 28, 2024, the Philippines, United States, Australia, Japan, & New Zealand conducted a joint maritime activity in the South China Sea, known as the Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA). This significant exercise underscored the collective commitment of these nations to enhancing regional security and cooperation. The activity took place within the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) off the coast of Northern Luzon, a strategic location in the increasingly contested South China Sea. The joint maritime exercise involved a range of naval

assets, including warships and aircraft from the participating countries. This marked the first time New Zealand participated in such an activity, highlighting the growing engagement of like-minded nations in the Indo-Pacific region. The primary objectives of the MCA were to strengthen interoperability among the navies, uphold freedom of navigation and overflight, and contribute to the peace and stability of the region. The MCA included various drills and exercises, focusing on maritime domain awareness, replenishment at sea, communication exercises, and cross-deck operations.

### **Vietnamese PM To Lam meets US presidents on sidelines of UN General Assembly meeting**

During the 79<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly meeting US President Joe Biden and Vietnamese PM To Lam held talks to deepen relations to integrate Vietnam as a manufacturing hub in the process of rewiring supply chains away from China and counter Hanoi's historical ties with Russia. They reviewed progress in bilateral investments in semiconductors, minerals, and supply chains and launched unprecedented cooperation on cybersecurity. There has been concern in Washington that Vietnam's policy commitments have not been matched by concrete actions and it is increasingly being used as a manufacturing hub by

Chinese firms to circumvent U.S. curbs on imports from China. Meanwhile Hanoi believes that the meeting showcases its balanced outreach to great powers given recent state visits to China and meeting with Russian President Putin.

### **US push to steer Vietnam's subsea cable plans away from China**

The US - China strategic competition is playing out in high stakes in the under sea cable arena in Vietnam. Washington is urging Hanoi to avoid Chinese cable-laying firm HMN Technologies and others in its plan to build 10 new undersea cables by 2030. Laying of new cables has become a top priority for the government as Vietnam's five major ageing subsea connections that link it to the global internet have suffered repeated failures. Media has reported that since January 2024 U.S. officials and companies have held at least a half-dozen meetings with Vietnamese and foreign officials and business executives to discuss the Southeast Asian nation's cable strategy, since Vietnamese authorities have shown preference to China's HMN Tech cables due to their low prices.

### **Indonesia ratifies five bilateral defence cooperation agreements**

The Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR) has passed five bills ratifying defence cooperation agreements with Cambodia, India,

France, the UAE, and Brazil. This legislative move according to the Indonesian government underscores its successful defence diplomacy, building capacity to defend national interests and enhancing its defence industry without compromising national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Defence Minister, and President-elect Prabowo Subianto emphasised the importance of ratifying the defence cooperation agreements, considering the partner countries' reliable roles and technologies in the defence sector.

### **Indonesia, Solomon Islands join countries banning nuclear weapons, pit Australia at odds with neighbours**

Indonesia officially joined the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons- confirming its ratification of the pact with the Solomon Islands and Sierra Leone. Many smaller nations want the bomb banned before it's too late. The treaty, which came into force in 2021, now boasts almost 100 signatories, but has failed to secure signing off by Australia or the big nuclear powers: China, the US, Russia, India, the UK and France. Despite Australia's strong anti-nuclear stance, its alliance and reliance on nuclear superpower US has the region and many of its domestic analysts question motives and commitment to a nuclear free zone in the South Pacific. Optics were further clouded by worries over the signing of the AUKUS defence pact

with the US and UK, even though it will bring nuclear-powered submarines and not nuclear weapons to Australian shores.

### **The fourth Strategic Economic Dialogue Between China and Australia convened in Beijing**

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of Sept 2024, Beijing and Australia co-chaired the fourth Strategic Economic Dialogue (SED) in Beijing. Both sides discussed the global macroeconomic environment, growth outlook and policy settings of respective economies. They also acknowledged the strong economic complementarities, the benefits of attracting foreign investments to build more productive and resilient economies and the important role of clean energy in the global transitions to low carbon and green economy. Relations between Australia and China have warmed recently, after an extended period of tension which included trade bans and tariffs being placed on Australian goods.