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GEO-STRATEGIC SCAN

16 - 30 NOVEMBER 2023

**Indian Armed
Forces'
Contingent
Leaves For
Australia To
Take Part In
Joint Military
Exercise
'Austrahind-23'**

***Pakistan
Officially
Applies For
BRICS
Membership***

**What is APEC and
the APEC
Economic
Leaders' Week
(AELW)?**

**Cabinet Okays Deal For
Release Of 50 Israeli
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**India, Australia Hold
2+2 Ministerial
Dialogue To Step Up
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Cabinet Okays Deal For Release Of 50 Israeli Hostages In Exchange For 4-Day Gaza Truce

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/cabinet-approves-deal-for-return-of-50-hostages-in-exchange-for-multi-day-ceasefire>

In a pivotal vote, the full Israeli cabinet approved an agreement to secure the release by Hamas of roughly 50 Israeli hostages who were abducted and taken into Gaza during the terror group's October 7 terror onslaught. Some 240 hostages are being held overall. The deal was approved by 35 votes to three. A first group of some 12-13 hostages was released on 24th October 2023.

COMMENTS

Key Developments So Far

On the 21st of November, Israelis and Hamas struck a deal for the releasing of 50 hostages since the gruesome October 7 invasion on Israel. The Knesset's authorization of the deal in exchange over a brief pause, a substantial amount of energy, and the eviction of female and minor-aged convicted from Israeli detention facilities exemplifies what renders Israel's uniqueness while making it highly vulnerable. The pause will be automatically stretched by a single day to accommodate every ten additional freed hostages Hamas exceeded the initially set of fifty consented to.

Hamas handed the initial batch of hostages to ICRC. As part of the November 24 hostage arrangement, 72 Israeli and dual-national hostages were freed. Israel had freed around 200 Palestinian inmates, all of whom were women or minors. In accordance with a parallel arrangement involving Hamas and Russia, three Israeli-Russian dual citizens had been set free. An aggregate of 24 foreign hostages had been released, including 23 Thais and one Filipino, who were not included in the hostage deal. Prior to the agreement, at least 5 captives had been released: 4 by Hamas along with one rescued through an Israeli assault.[1]

While the danger of further hostilities lingers across the shattered enclave, Israel and Hamas decided to prolong the temporary pause in Gaza for an additional seventh day. The Israelis pledged to implement a "clear plan" to safeguard civilians prior to commencing the military offensive in Gaza. [2] Israeli authorities have been outspoken in their opposition to expanding the halt to a longer-term cease-fire.

1] Afp. (2023, November 30). 6 hostages return to Israel ahead of extended truce deal-end. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/6-hostages-return-to-israel-ahead-of-extended-truce-deal-end-101701382079214.html>

[2] Afp. (2023, December 1). Blinken tells Netanyahu 'imperative' to protect Gaza civilians. Arab News. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2417961/middle-east>

The Drivers for the Deal

The deal was revealed following rounds of consultations between America, Egypt, and Qatar, which played the role of mediators. Qatar also harbours the legislative branch of Hamas. With its diplomatic efforts amid the Gaza conflict, which included assistance in organising a temporary pause and hostage-release agreement that went into effect on 24th Nov, solidifies the ultrarich Muslim country as Washington's favoured counterpart with radical extremist groups and pariah states in West Asia and progressively within the globe as well. [3]

This deal, though a major development, will not end the war nor tackle the core causes of the conflict with Hamas. This pause and hostage trading have been facilitated by Qatar and Egypt's orchestrating the diplomatic arrangement, Israeli domestic political exertion on Netanyahu, and Hamas' determination to obtain the return of Palestinian detainees. Israel may have additionally conducted a strategic assessment to determine whether its 46-day combat assault demonstrated that they were serious regarding eliminating Hamas completely. However, it is tough to demolish a terrorist group that is affiliated with a larger political or social cause.

Larger Humanitarian Question

Two million individuals reside in Gaza's southwards, a million of them have migrated here since Israel began attacking the area in its response to requests that they leave the conflict zone. [4] That hasn't hindered Israel's air force from pounding the southern region, but it has shattered the north's defences. Earlier, Israel indicated the construction of a buffer enclave for humanitarian purposes in al-Mawasi, about 1 kilometre broad and 14 kilometres lengthy plot of land situated along the Mediterranean but the WHO strongly opposed the initiative.



Source: Harvard Political Review

Trying to squeeze a large population into such a tiny space with infrastructure infra and poor utilities would drastically raise hazards for individuals who are currently at danger.[5] Since the first four-day pause following 48 days of conflict, vehicles carrying vital aid have managed to come into Gaza's borders through Rafah, Egypt, since November 24. However, the quantity of assistance that has reached Gaza's citizens is simply insufficient.

[3] Wintour, P. (2023, November 22). Why is Qatar often a mediator and what is its role in Israel-Hamas war? The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/21/why-is-qatar-often-a-mediator-and-what-is-its-role-in-israel-hamas-war>

[4] Guyer, J. (2023, November 22). Israel-Hamas war: The deal to release hostages and pause fighting, explained. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/world-politics/2023/11/21/23971841/israel-hamas-biden-qatar-hostage-deal-explained>

[5] Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #50 [EN/AR/HE] - occupied Palestinian territory. (2023, November 26). ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-50-enarhe>

Humanitarian distribution in northern Gaza is hampered by the several demolished or damaged highways in that area. [6] The Rafah crossing, which is the sole route connecting Egypt and the Gaza Strip, has turned into an "essential corridor" for the people in Gaza imprisoned in the embattled area. [7]

While negotiations to prolong the pause are still underway, the IDF continues to make preparations for a return of warfare within days, risking triggering an unparalleled humanitarian catastrophe amidst an ongoing refugee crisis. [8] Israel is determined to gain authority over the southern portion of the Gaza Strip, particularly Khan Younis, the region which is believed to be housing the current commander Yahwa Sinwar in order to annihilate the terrorist organisation's strategic and leadership capability. However, the potential of a prolonged battle and, most importantly, repeated evacuations to an ever-shrinking area of the territory worries humanitarian groups and raises larger questions about Israel's primary objective to depopulate the entire area. However, it is not entirely apparent how Israel may strike in the southern region without causing the worst possible outcomes for two million or more individuals, given the limited territory that remains.

Regional & Global Response

The Palestinian problem has become increasingly important in international and regional politics primarily as a result of the ongoing war in Gaza. It is the most severe episode of violence in the MENA region in years, with more than twenty thousand casualties in addition to the humanitarian situation that is looming. The scope of the October 7 massacre and the Hamas strike have drastically changed Israeli discourse on Palestinian concerns, and these changes are probably going to persist for decades to follow. The possibility of a large-scale Palestinian exodus across Gaza towards Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and a sharp escalation in assaults on occupied West Bank settlements have raised alarms. Overall, the situation in the Strip has placed the strategy for Arab normalisation with Israelis on full evaluation, which is the main reason behind the American efforts to reach an agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Divisions within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Arab League underscored the absence of regional agreement on the extent of distancing Arab/Islamic states from Israelis to take punitive action. Regardless of the intra-regional disagreements over normalisation, neither of the GCC states were on the "conservative" side at the conference or offered remarks comparable to those of the presidents of Libya and Turkey. [9] The long-term effects of the Gaza War and the unease in the region over America's stance may hasten the polarisation of diplomatic relations in the wider Middle East and North Africa.

[6] Wasserman/Maariv, B. M. (2023, November 26). Who is the boss in the Middle East? Battle between Qatar, Egypt reaches boil. The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com. <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-775171>

[7] Dettmer, J. (2023, November 12). Israel, Hamas at critical juncture in negotiations for hostage deal. POLITICO. <https://www.politico.eu/article/israel-hamas-hostage-deal-critical-juncture-gaza/>

[8] Keinon, B. H. (2023, November 21). Israeli hostage deal: What makes Israel special and vulnerable. The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com. <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-774470>

[9] Othman, B. M. a. a. B. (2023, November 28). Diplomatic deadlock: OIC and Arab League's stalemate on Israel-Palestine - Australian Institute of International Affairs. Australian Institute of International Affairs. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/diplomatic-deadlock-oic-and-arab-leagues-stalemate-on-israel-palestine/>

ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT

The long-term effects of the Gaza War and the unease in the region over America's stance may hasten the polarisation of diplomatic relations in the wider Middle East and North Africa. On Nov 20, the Saudi Foreign Minister met the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing together with other foreign ministers from Jordan, Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, Indonesia, and the chairman of the OIC. In preparation for joining the broader BRICS+ alliance in 2024, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates also participated in a virtual gathering of BRICS officials on November 21. [10] The Houthi rebel strikes on Israel and the recent capture of shipping vessels in the Red Sea threaten Saudi Arabia's intentions to negotiate a peace agreement involving the rebels operating within the region. Saudi Arabia seeks to keep the Yemen negotiations isolated from the Houthis' assaults on Israel, but there is currently a push from the United States and Britain to reclassify the Houthis under a terrorist group, which could undermine the ongoing pause.[11] Even so, Saudi Arabia wants intensive negotiations to be initiated with the goal to create a Palestinian state following the boundaries of 1967, by putting international agreements regarding a two-state solution into action. On the other hand, offering to increase collaboration and support Iran's sanctioned economic status, Saudi Arabia has reached out to Tehran on the condition that it prevents its regional proxies from escalating the Israel-Hamas war into becoming a larger battle.[12]

Although it is too soon to tell if heightened international endeavours will result in meaningful as opposed to symbolic outcomes, it is interesting to observe the efforts made to create a "force multiplier" impact by strengthening the diplomatic standing of GCC states that have important non-Western allies. However, it is possible that the GCC states are making an effort to persuade the US administration to act as a more sincere peacemaker in the Middle East given their ambition to expand their circle of influence people in the international arena outside their historical ties to the US.



Source: India Today

[10] India, T. O. (2023b, November 21). Brics calls an extraordinary virtual meeting on the Gaza issue. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/brics-calls-extraordinary-virtual-meeting-on-gaza-issue/articleshow/105369808.cms>

[11] Wintour, P. (2023b, November 24). Houthi attacks on Israel jeopardise Saudi peace efforts in Yemen. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/24/houthi-attacks-on-israel-jeopardise-saudi-peace-efforts-in-yemen>

[12] Dagher, S. (2023, November 29). Iran: Saudi proposals seek to deescalate tensions amid Israel-Hamas war. Bloomberg.com. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-11-29/iran-saudi-proposals-seek-to-deescalate-tensions-amid-israel-hamas-war>

Russia-Ukraine Conflict: A Glance

1. *Hindustan Times*: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/ukraines-first-advance-in-months-pushed-russia-from-dnipro-river>

2. *Indian Express*: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2023/nov/19/ukraine-and-russias-capitals-targeted-by-exchange-of-overnight-drone-attacks>

3. *TOI*

http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/105351858.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

4. *The Newsweek*: <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-cluster-bombs-glide-rbk500-ukraine-donetsk><https://www.newsweek.com/russia-loss-military-superiority-report-1846854>,

5. *European Times*: <https://www.eurasiatimes.com/ukraines-kamikaze-drone-boat-washes-ashore-on-crimean-coast/>

<https://www.eurasiatimes.com/compromises-germany-us-plan-to-finally-end-ukrain/Ukraine-Counteroffensive>

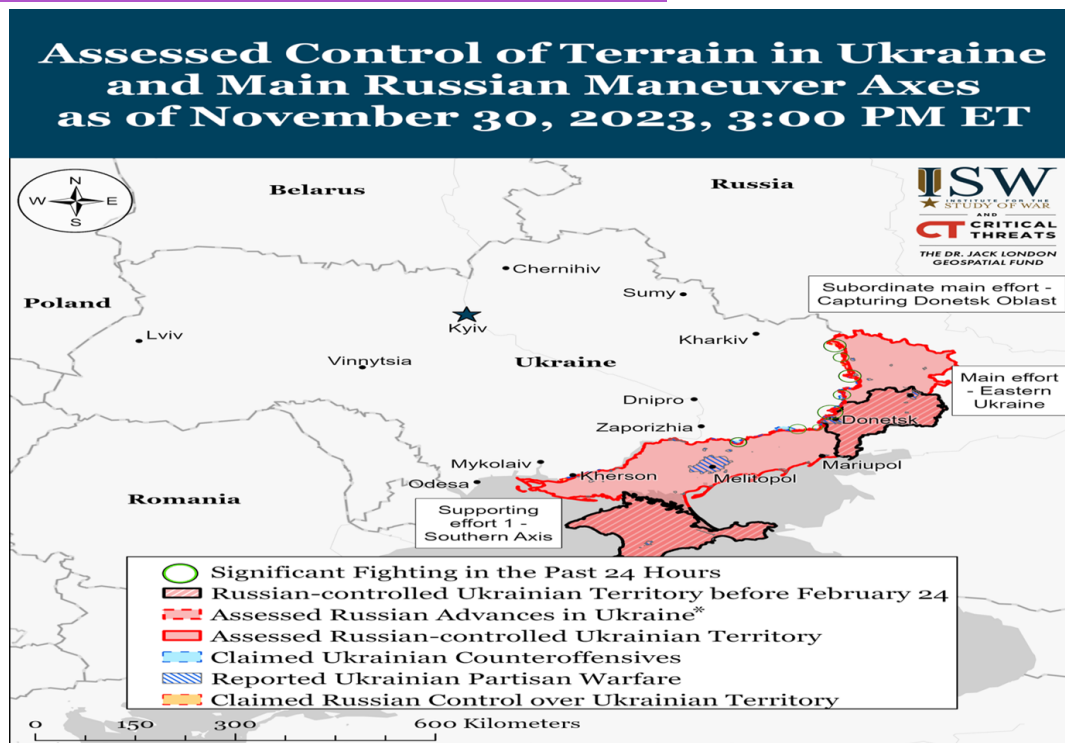
Read more at: <https://www.deccanherald.com/world/winter-storm-causes-power-outages-road-closures-in-ukraine-2786364>

UKRAINIAN COUNTER OFFENSIVE

The Ukrainian Army on Nov19,2023 stated that it had pushed Russian forces back three to eight kilometres from the banks of the Dnipro river, which would be meaningful advances by Kyiv's forces months. FPV drones are facilitating Kyiv's efforts to maintain and expand small bridgeheads across the broad waterway, which has formed an imposing barrier to any Ukrainian advance for a year. Most of all, damaged or destroyed Russian equipment was attributed to FPV kamikaze drones fired by the Ukrainian Army. Ukraine has used a long-range attack drone called "Beaver", which has a range of 500 km, to carry out strategic attacks on Russian Facilities. Fighting in recent weeks has been particularly fierce in areas where the Ukrainians are advancing in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, as well as around the Donetsk city of Avdiivka, where Moscow's troops are grinding forwards. Along the banks of the Dnieper River, drones are also facilitating Kyiv's efforts to maintain and expand small bridgeheads across the broad waterway, which has formed an imposing barrier to any Ukrainian advance for a year. A severe snowstorm bringing strong winds blanketed Ukraine on Nov 27, 2023, leaving more than 2,000 settlements across 16 regions without power and more than a dozen motorways closed to vehicles.

A fully intact Ukrainian kamikaze drone boat washed up on the Crimean shore on November 22 after reportedly veering off control while attacking Russian warships in the Black Sea near Sevastopol.

Military Aid. The German Defense Ministry said on November 23 that as part of a military aid deal valued at over €1.3 billion (\$1.4 billion), Germany would give Ukraine an extra four IRIS-T SLM medium-range air defense systems. The systems will be available starting in 2025. The package includes directional anti-tank mines, artillery shells, satellite communications, demining vehicles, drones and drone-defense systems, and electronic warfare equipment. These are all intended to meet the urgent demands of the Ukrainian armed forces.



Source: <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-november-30-2023>

RUSSIAN OFFENSIVE AND DEFENCE

Russian Attacks

Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, came under air attack on Nov 19, 2023, and another on Nov 26, 2023, by Shahed drones. The Russian attacks are expected to hit the Ukrainian energy system, paralysing the country's heating and electricity supplies through the winter. Russian Air Force has modified RBK-500 cluster bombs as glide bombs resembling the JDAMS, which can be launched from "stand-off "ranges. Meanwhile, the drones fired by Ukraine targeting Moscow were destroyed by the Air Defence System over the territory of the Bogorodsky urban district near Moscow. Russian troops have made progress in their offensive efforts toward Avdiivka, as reported on Nov 27, 2023. However, Ukrainian sources say their troops are still holding positions in some parts of the eastern city in the Donetsk region.

COMMENTS

On Nov 21, 2023, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said Ukraine had lost a "colossal" 13,700 troops this month, according to a report from Russian-state media outlet RT. Shoigu also claimed that Ukraine had lost 1,800 units of tanks and "other heavy weaponry" during November. Meanwhile, the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine[1] reported Tuesday that Russia had lost a total of 319,820 troops since the war began, a figure that includes 17,400 Russian soldiers purportedly killed this month. Russia controls roughly 17.5% of Ukrainian land, in addition to Crimea, which it took over in 2014.

[1] <https://conflictandwarreport.com/europe-and-central-asia/russia-could-quickly-annex-four-occupied-ukrainian-regions/>

RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT

Vladimir Putin's plan consists of biding its time until the West becomes weary of what appears to be a non-binding agreement; long-term combat suits his advantages. Though the Russian economy is doing well, it needs additional soldiers, officers, and weaponry to conduct a protracted battle. Only Ukrainian men aged between 27 and 60 can be mobilised by draft officers. Men aged 18 and 26 can't be drafted, though they can enlist voluntarily. Ben Wallace, Britain's defence minister, said that, until the end of August, the average age of Ukrainian soldiers at the front was over 40 and suggested it was time to "reassess the scale of Ukraine's mobilisation". The victory of Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, whose far-right Freedom Party won a plurality, has sent a chill through NATO. He opposes arming Ukraine and could relinquish its leading role in supplying F-16 jets to Ukraine. Winter will probably also mean a slowdown in the Ukrainian counteroffensive. There has been the increasing ability of Russian Electronic Warfare (EW) to counter the multitudes of drones that Ukraine has been using for everything from battlefield reconnaissance and communications to exploding on impact against targets such as tanks or command nodes. A peace that keeps things as they are presently on the ground is not in the interests of either Russia or Ukraine.

The lessons from Ukraine have been stark. Command and Control (C2) nodes have been remarkably found, fixed, and destroyed. The Ukrainians and Russians have changed how their tactical-level command posts operate. The nature of both Ukrainian and Russian unmanned operations has been growing. Ukraine Army has displayed increased use of FPV kamikaze drones to hit Russian Forces, whereas the Russian use of Shahed 136 drones for their strikes. Russians have proved that Electronic Warfare (EW) plays a critical role, especially as drones frequently fall victim to EW attacks. It highlights the need for intelligent integration of electronic warfare as a protective layer on the battlefield.



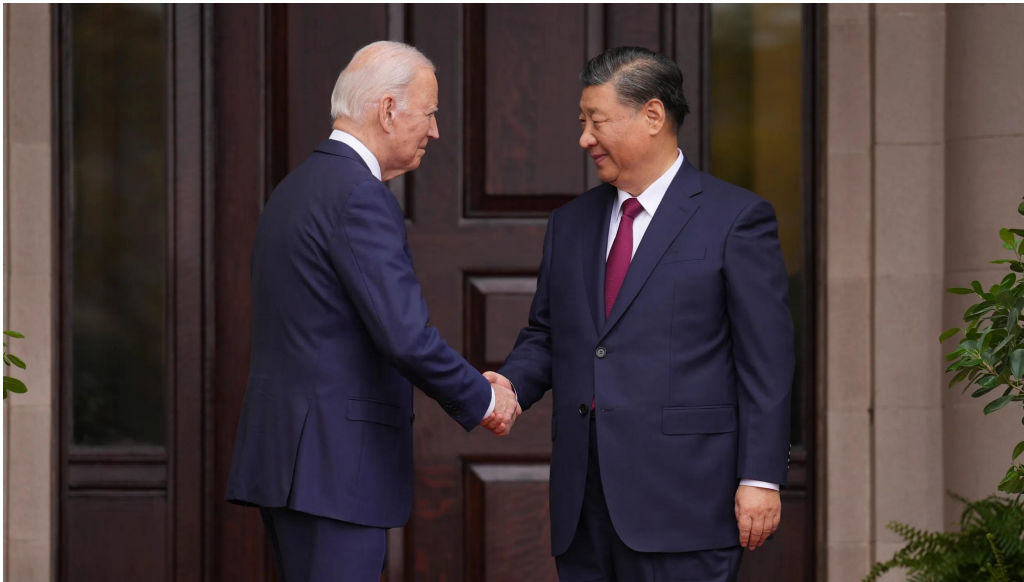
Source: India Today

Biden Hails 'Real Progress' After Four Hours Of Talks With China's Xi

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/15/joe-biden-meets-with-chinas-xi-jinping-on-sidelines-of-apec-summit>

Leaders of US and China agree to resumption of military-to-military communication amid efforts to stabilise ties.

COMMENTS



Source: Fox 59

Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden had a face-to-face meeting on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Partnership (APEC) summit on November 15, 2023. This marked Xi's first visit to the US in six years and his second meeting with Biden since the latter assumed the presidency in 2020. Meeting took place in the backdrop of the spy balloon row in February that had impacted ties that were already strained by China's claims over Taiwan and the South China Sea (SCS); and the US export embargo on advanced technology to various Chinese firms. Prior to the visit, the outcomes for the meeting were kept at minimum from both sides. Infact, more spotlight was on the APEC meeting.

At the commencement of the summit, the US President said, "We have to ensure that competition does not veer into conflict, critical global challenges we face, from climate change to counternarcotics to artificial intelligence, demand our joint efforts." Of late, especially since the beginning of this year there has been a perceptible toning down of wolf warrior- coercive diplomacy from the Chinese side. China has been displaying willingness to resume high level dialogue with the US. Demonstrating that China is willing to stabilize ties with the US, may also be due to internal dissensions and the present state of economic slowdown and unemployment in the country. For the US it also signifies the US message to its allies in the Indo Pacific that it is making concerted efforts to manage tensions in the region.

On social media site X (formerly Twitter), Biden said, "I think it's paramount that we understand each other clearly, leader to leader. There are critical global challenges that demand our joint leadership. And today, we made real progress."

In his public remarks to Biden, Xi suggested China sought peaceful coexistence with the US, and he told business leaders China was ready to be a 'partner and friend' to the US, words partially aimed at a business community alarmed by China's crackdown on various industries and the use of exit bans and detentions against some company executives.

The most important achievement of the meeting seems to be the agreement for reinstatement of military-to-military communication, which was suspended by China after Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022.

Resumption of military communication agreements would mean that US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin would be able to meet his Chinese counterpart as and when appointed (Chinese Defence Minister Li Shangfu, was fired last month and had disappeared from public view since two months earlier). This will also open doors for contacts at more junior levels, including allowing the commander of US Pacific Command to engage with counterpart theatre commanders. The talks also led to an agreement to cooperate on tackling the source of fentanyl, a highly addictive synthetic opioid, a leading cause of drug overdoses in the US. China has agreed to go directly after specific companies that produce the chemicals used to make the drug.

Biden also called on Xi to use his influence with Iran to make it clear that Tehran and its proxies should avoid provocative action that could spread the Israel-Hamas conflict across the Middle East. Foreign Minister Wang Yi has assured the US that the Chinese have communicated concerns to Iran on the matter. Artificial Intelligence as a subject of requiring enhanced mutual understanding in development of capabilities was also discussed. White House readout said "the leaders affirmed the need to address the risks of advanced AI systems and improve AI safety through US-China government talks."

Biden valued the conversation he had had with Xi and the Chinese official state owned media (Xinhua) regarded the summit as a victory. "Planet Earth is big enough for the two countries to succeed," Xi told Biden.

It is opined that just one summit may not drastically reshape the US China dynamics. Fundamental differences between the two on issues of SCS, Taiwan strait and freedom of navigation are long outstanding issues. Notwithstanding the same, the summit was important to manage the relationship in the present geopolitical scenario. Overall, resumption of military dialogue will help in ruling out any kind of chances in avoiding miscalculation on part of any side.

China Launches Fifth Military Force – ‘Near-Space Command’

<https://www.thedefensepost.com/2023/11/23/china-near-space-command/>

China has created a new military force to develop capabilities for a contested zone deemed crucial for determining the outcome of future battles. Dubbed the “Near-Space Command,” the service will serve as the fifth force of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) alongside the army, navy, air force, and rocket force. According to researchers at the National University of Defence Technology in Hunan province, the new force will be responsible for defending the country against attacks that utilize the lower boundary of space. It will be tasked with developing and deploying solar-powered drones and spy balloons for high latitude surveillance and intelligence gathering. The Chinese researchers clarified that the near-space combat force is still in development and that relevant units are not yet mature.

COMMENTS

The near-space fighting force is developing at a breakneck pace. The standardisation of combat operations and the development of pertinent units are still in their infancy. There is still more to learn about near-space combat leadership. The command would be able to launch “merciless” strikes on vital targets and use unmanned drones and spy balloons to conduct high-altitude monitoring across the entire plane. The near-space force is engaged in unique combat. Political or diplomatic responses may be sparked by activities taken in sensitive areas or on foreign soil. Due to this, it was necessary to “shift the decision-making power upwards,” all the way down to the stratospheric airships, long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicles, and other platforms used by the near-space force for its everyday combat preparedness missions.

To prevent creating a diplomatic and political headache, the highest military command has the authority to approve the scope, areas of operation, and mode of usage. The Chinese had come to understand that hypersonic weapons were a two-edged sword: while they could strike any location on Earth with unstoppable speed and manoeuvrability, they also presented difficulties for international relations and politics.

The near-space force of China is expected to use solar-powered drones, spy balloons, and other supporting equipment in addition to hypersonic weaponry. While operating at slow rates, these automated platforms were able to remain at high altitudes for weeks or even months, delivering vital functions like communication relay and observation. However, assisting China in winning a conflict will probably be the force's most significant task. If the near-space force was assigned to execute a strategic strike on vital enemy targets, for instance, it would also be required to assume complete command of hypersonic weapons in other branches of the PLA. However, it is believed that the success of the near-space force would to a large extent rely on “innovative strategies and combat tactics based on an in-depth analysis of the enemy's weakness”. And this would be critical for the success of the near space command.

Google Warns China Is Ramping Up Cyberattacks In opposition to Taiwan

<https://ordonews.com/google-warns-china-is-ramping-up-cyberattacks-in-opposition-to-taiwan/>

China is waging a rising different of cyberattacks on neighboring Taiwan, per cybersecurity consultants at Alphabet's Google. From a report: Google has noticed a "huge expand" in Chinese language cyberattacks on Taiwan within the last six months or so, acknowledged Kate Morgan, a senior engineering supervisor in Google's risk diagnosis division, which monitors authorities-backed hacking campaigns. Morgan warned that Chinese language hackers are employing tactics that form their work stressful to track, equivalent to breaking into shrimp home and space of job internet routers and repurposing them to wage assaults while masking their moral origin.

COMMENTS

There are many distinct groups in China that engage in hacking and attempt to gain access to cloud potentialities or technology corporations. Together with the island's deepest alternative, the authorities, defence sector, and hackers, they are aiming for the whole thing. The IT giant's threat analysis branch reported a "massive increase" in Chinese-sponsored hacking campaigns over the previous six months, with hackers using sophisticated techniques to hide their origins. Google's results coincide with growing concerns about the possibility of war in Taiwan.



Source: First Post

The relation between the US - Taiwan's top militia backer — and China has deteriorated over the past recent years and the reasons for this difference is over a huge different of considerations in conjunction with Taiwan, human rights and a flee to dominate advanced technologies equivalent to chips, quantum computing and synthetic intelligence. Global apprehension has grown regarding the possibility of hostilities in Taiwan, which has been intensified by the tense relations between the United States and China. Despite not having formal recognition as a nation, the US has pledged to support Taiwan in defending itself against China, which it views as becoming more and more hostile. Taiwan is seen as a part of China's territory. Google's discoveries are a part of its larger observations about risks to global cybersecurity. Google reports that while North Korea and Iran remain major hacker targets, Russia has mostly focused its cyber efforts on Ukraine since its invasion in February 2022.

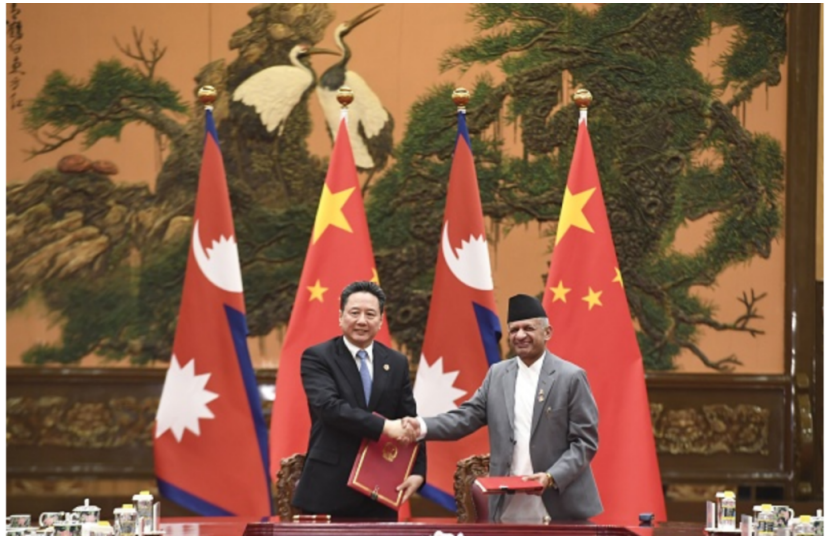
Nepal's Approach to China's BRI

<https://www.vifindia.org/2023/november/23/Nepal-s-Approach-to-China-s-BRI>

China seeks to increase its presence in Nepal and in this background, China pushed for implementing BRI projects in Nepal. Though BRI was proposed in 2013, Nepal signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2017, just before the First BRI Forum meeting and since then Nepal has participated in the BRI forums though in different capacities. The outcome document of the 2nd BRI Forum added the Nepal-China Trans-Himalayan Multi-dimensional Connectivity Network, which includes Nepal-China cross-border railway. Later during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Nepal in 2019, he pledged to transform Nepal 'land-linked' from 'land-locked'. During Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's visit to China in September 2023, a 40-point press document released by Nepal did not mention the BRI projects and out of the 12 MoUs signed, none were under the framework of the BRI. However, the joint statement issued by the Nepali Ministry of Foreign Affairs just once mentioned about the BRI Implementation Plan and expressed the commitment of both sides. The outcome document of the third BRI Forum held in October 2023, mentioned two mini projects; the Panda Pack project and Amity Living Water Project. However, both these projects are already in operation. While the outcome document did not have anything substantial for Nepal, the White Paper released on 10 October indicated that Nepal was in favour of BRI projects as well as the Air Silk Road. Chinese enterprises are active participants in civil aviation infrastructure cooperation with Nepal, helping them develop the local civil aviation industry. In this backdrop, Pokhara International Airport was built on a Chinese loan. China wanted Pokhara International Airport to be kept under the BRI framework, but Nepal rejected it. A day before the inauguration of Pokhara Airport, China unilaterally and falsely claimed Pokhara International Airport as the BRI's flagship project in Nepal. Later, Nepali Foreign Minister NP Saud clarified that not a single project in Nepal under the BRI has been executed. Further, the New York Times investigative report raised multiple malpractices by a Chinese firm during the construction of the airport. It has been six years since Nepal signed the MoU in 2017. However, Nepal is not being included in the BRI project and neither side has signed the implementation plan. One of the major criticisms that BRI projects face across the region is regarding the underlying debt trap. In Nepal as well, these concerns have been raised. Even the 2017 MoU does not provide for funding modalities. Nepal has repeatedly requested for grants from China instead of soft loans. Nepal already has a huge trade deficit with China, which legitimately raises concerns over further loans under the BRI projects. China is also pushing for the China-Nepal free trade agreement (FTA) under the framework of BRI. While the Chinese economic analysis concluded that Nepal would benefit from an FTA, Nepal's Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies recommended that Nepal should not move forward with the deal, as it would further increase the trade deficit. China has also raised its reservations with Nepal, especially after Nepal signed and ratified the US-funded Millennium Challenge Corporation project in 2022. Subsequently many issues were raised bilaterally. Most shocking was the publication of China's new "standard map" which effectively dismissed Nepal's new political map released in 2020. The relations between China and Nepal further dipped when two out of the nine projects proposed under the BRI framework were awarded to Indian companies - the Tamor Hydroelectricity Project and the Phukot Karnali Hydroelectric Project - during PM Dahal's visit to India in June 2023. Most importantly, in the past year, Nepal also managed to keep out of China's Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) and Global Security Initiative (GSI); though it did become part of the Global Development Initiative (GDI).

COMMENTS

The BRI projects are unlikely to become a reality in Nepal, however, these projects have allowed China to make major inroads in Nepal. China has been keen on increasing its investments in Nepal, as it intends to control the 1,414 km China - Nepal border. These Chinese activities have serious ramifications for India as it has a shared history and close relations with Nepal. Repeated Chinese attempts for economic and political interventions in Nepal are likely to create emerging strategic challenges for India, which India needs to be cautious of.



Source: South Asian Voices

Myanmar Pro-military Groups Stage Protest Against China

https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20231122_41/

Pro-military groups in Myanmar have staged a demonstration against China. They claim that Beijing has been supporting anti-junta forces. This comes as fighting between the junta's troops and ethnic minority militants continues to escalate. Local media outlets in Myanmar say dozens of people gathered in front of the Chinese Embassy in Yangon on Sunday. The protesters also accused China of interfering in Myanmar's internal affairs. Unauthorized demonstrations have been banned since 2021, when the junta seized power in a coup. China is one of the few nations that has maintained good relations with the military. The junta has been struggling in battles with militants across the country. Three ethnic minority groups have been jointly ramping up their attacks in the Eastern state of Shan since late October. They have captured several towns and military facilities. Pro-democracy forces have supported those moves by expanding their offensives around the nation. Hundreds of the military's soldiers and their family members have reportedly surrendered to the armed groups.

COMMENTS

China has a long relationship with myriad ethnic resistance groups, including the MNDA, a mainly ethnic Chinese group that was part of the now defunct Communist Party of Burma. The protest march in front of the Chinese Embassy over the past weekend, accusing China of backing 'Three Brotherhood Alliance' (comprising three rebel groups in Myanmar) and supplying them with arms is a very rare incident, since even routine public criticism of China in Myanmar is not heard. This development may be due to earlier reports of PLA units having assumed control of border crossings in the areas to handle clashes between MNDA and the local militia and some possible interference in internal affairs of Myanmar.

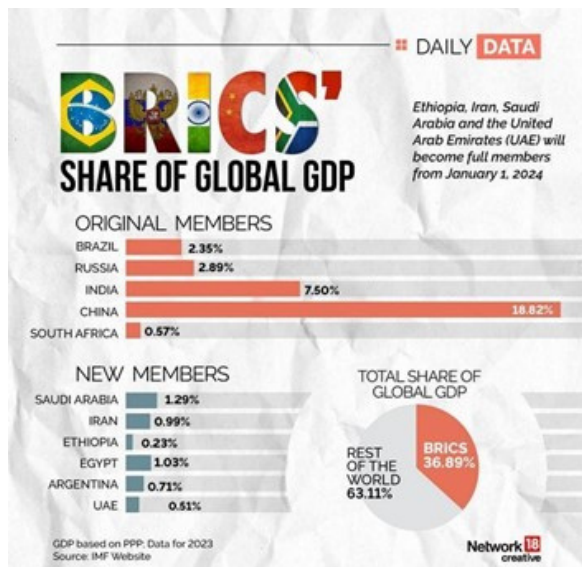
Pakistan Officially Applies For BRICS Membership

<https://ddnews.gov.in/international/pakistan-officially-applies-brics-membership#:~:text=The%20announcement%20was%20made%20during,important%20grouping%20of%20developing%20countries.%22>

Pakistan has formally submitted its application for membership in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) grouping, a move coinciding with the bloc's ambitious expansion plans in 2024 under Moscow's rotating presidency.

COMMENTS

Mumtaz Zahra Baloch, Pakistan's foreign office spokesperson, announced that Pakistan has formally applied for joining BRICS emphasising that it has friendly relations with most of the member countries of the grouping and that its request to join BRICS would provide Pakistan with opportunity "to play an important role in furthering international cooperation and revitalising inclusive multilateralism". [1] The BRICS grouping, presently, consists of five member nations, viz., Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa which are five of the largest developing countries and together account for almost 37% of global GDP as per IMF data. The BRICS 2023 summit in South Africa saw six more countries – Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – being admitted to the grouping and would be formally joining during the 2024 summit planned to be held in Russia.



It is being said that Pakistan is banking upon Russia's help to join the grouping. It is also obvious that China is going to support the proposal of admitting Pakistan into BRICS, however, India is not likely to be too enthusiastic about the same. If Pakistan is successful in gaining membership status of BRICS, it is definitely going to have some significant implications. It will help Pakistan in forging some economic partnerships that would help the country in the ongoing economic crisis, but at the same time it is likely to have some impressions on the economic scene of the region by pulling Pakistan and Russia closer.

This would also cause some geopolitical effects and may further complicate the India-Russia-China relationship by adding the Pakistan factor to the mix. The membership, nevertheless, would provide Pakistan access to diverse trade avenues, new markets for its goods and more efficient logistics amongst other opportunities with some likely serious ramifications for India on these issues which would need careful consideration and, therefore, a calibrated response to Pakistan's request to join BRICS.

[1] Hussain, Abid. "Pakistan seeks BRICS membership, despite India roadblock". Aljazeera, November 24, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/24/pakistan-seeks-brics-membership-despite-india-roadblock>

Sri Lanka Approves Sinopec's \$4.5 Billion Refinery Proposal

[https://www.thehindu.com/newhttps://www.reuters.com/business/energy/sri-lanka-approves-sinopecs-45-billion-refinery-proposal-2023-11-27/#:~:text=COLOMBO%2C%20Nov%2027%20\(Reuters\),crippling%20economic%20crisis%20last%20year./international/un-chief-guterres-meets-nepal-pm-prachanda-dpm-khadka/article67473949.ece](https://www.thehindu.com/newhttps://www.reuters.com/business/energy/sri-lanka-approves-sinopecs-45-billion-refinery-proposal-2023-11-27/#:~:text=COLOMBO%2C%20Nov%2027%20(Reuters),crippling%20economic%20crisis%20last%20year./international/un-chief-guterres-meets-nepal-pm-prachanda-dpm-khadka/article67473949.ece)

Sri Lanka on Monday (November 27, 2023) approved a proposal by China's Sinopec to build a \$4.5 billion refinery, its energy minister said, making it the largest single investment in the island nation since a crippling economic crisis last year.

COMMENTS

The Sri Lankan cabinet has approved the USD 4.5 billion investment proposal of the Chinese giant Sinopec to construct a petroleum refinery at Hambantota port. The project also includes establishment of an associated products training centre. Sinopec also has its share in the Sri Lankan fuel retail business in the form of 150 petrol pumps being operated by it.

There is continuous infusion of Chinese money into the Sri Lankan economy. Where the west sees the Chinese investments as 'debt diplomacy', nations like Sri Lanka and Pakistan don't seem to agree with this perspective much and tend to eagerly accept the investments. Despite being forced to sign off on a 70% stake of the strategically important Hambantota port on a 99-year lease to China Merchants Port Holdings Company Limited for USD 1.1 billion in 2017[1] Chinese investments and loans continue to flow into Sri Lanka. In fact, China is Sri Lanka's biggest bilateral lender. Sri Lanka is also a part of China's BRI with highways, seaports and airports having been constructed by Chinese companies. The Sri Lankan President attended the 3rd Belt and Road Forum this year in China and recently said that the country was ready for the second phase of the initiative and also expressed desire for cooperation in the fields of agriculture, tourism and sports. China has expressed its intention to extend the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) to Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has not been in a position to refuse visits of Chinese vessels to its ports despite security concerns being raised by India and has once again received a request for yet another Chinese vessel, Xiang Yang Hong 3, to enter Sri Lankan waters for research purposes. On the other hand, overtures by India do not seem to elicit a similar response by Sri Lanka. Despite India being the first country to assist Sri Lanka with aid worth USD 3.9 billion in the face of the severe economic and financial crisis and the fruitful visit of the Sri Lankan President to Delhi with promises of actions for betterment of Sri Lankan Tamils, President Wickremesinghe was found criticising the Indian Government over the issue. Probably the state of the economies of countries like Sri Lanka and Pakistan and the consequent difficulties in governance and the impact on national politics of discontentment of the hard-pressed population being faced by the governments does not leave them with much choice in the matter. The growing intimacy between Sri Lanka and China is a cause of concern for India and the Indian Government needs to find more ways (maybe more investments and other economic arrangements) to engage Sri Lanka.

[2] "Sri Lanka formally hands over Hambantota port on 99-year lease to China". The Hindu. December 09, 2017. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lanka-formally-hands-over-hambantota-port-on-99-year-lease-to-china/article61847422.ece>

India's 'Dragon Squad' Jaguar Fighter Jets Practice Maritime Strike Mission Near China Chokepoint

<https://www.republicworld.com/defence/indian-armed-forces/iaf-s-dragons-strike-jets-take-center-stage-in-island-defense-amid-exercise-dweepshakti-23.news>

The Andaman Nicobar Command recently conducted 'Exercise Dweepshakti-23' wherein Indian Army, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard participated to validate operating procedures and assess the command's operational capabilities. IAF assets including the Phalcon AWACS and the frontline Su-30MKIs participated. Jaguar aircraft operated from Car Nicobar base to carry out maritime strike missions. Air Marshal Saju Balakrishnan, CINCAN flew a maritime strike mission on Su-30MKI leading from the front. [1] The exercise involved amphibious landings, air-landed operations, heliborne and Special Forces operations, ISR and coastal security operations. [2]

COMMENTS

The exercise is a major step towards enhancing operational readiness, promote interoperability amongst various services, rehearse mechanisms and strengthen strategic capabilities in the region.

The Indian government is developing the islands' military assets as part of a 10-year infrastructure development. The Campbell Bay (INS Baaz) runway in the south will be extended to 10,000 feet to support operations by larger aircraft. Another 10,000-foot runway is planned at Kamorta. The infrastructural development is with a view to permanently deploy assets viz Submarines, P8Is and SU-30MKIs in the islands.

Besides military assets, India is also developing civilian infrastructure in the islands. A trans-shipment hub planned in Campbell Bay will be close to the Malacca Strait and the East-West shipping route connecting Europe and Africa with Asia.

Conclusion

Andaman and Nicobar are one of the world's most strategically located island chains dominating the Malacca Straits and the confluence of South China & Indian Ocean. They are central to India's Maritime Strategy and international collaboration to challenge China's growing presence, submarines and influence in the region. Exercise Dweepshakti-23 signifies India's commitment to asserting its influence and safeguarding its national interests in this strategically vital maritime domain.

[1] <https://www.republicworld.com/defence/indian-armed-forces/iaf-s-dragons-strike-jets-take-center-stage-in-island-defense-amid-exercise-dweepshakti-23.news>

[2] <https://idrw.org/dweepshakti-2023-a-multi-domain-exercise-concludes/>

Indian Armed Forces' Contingent Leaves For Australia To Take Part In Joint Military Exercise 'Austrahind-23'

<https://www.deccanherald.com/india/iaf-contingent-leaves-for-australia-to-take-part-in-joint-military-exercise-austrahind-23-2781501>

Indian contingent comprising 60 personnel from the Army, an officer of the Indian Navy and 20 personnel from the IAF participated in the second edition of AustraHind-23, a two-week-long– a joint military exercise with Australian armed forces at Perth between 22 Nov and 06 Dec 2023. The Australian contingent had a similar participation apart from 20 personnel from the Royal Australian Navy. The training schedule focussed on promoting inter-operability during multi-domain tactical operations at the company/ battalion level in urban and semi-urban terrain following the United Nations peacekeeping operations protocol.

COMMENTS

Background

The exercise was instituted in 2022 and the first edition was conducted in Mahajan Field Firing Ranges, Rajasthan last year. At the recent 2+2 meeting, New Delhi and Canberra underscored bilateral military relations as a “core pillar” in their comprehensive strategic partnership. A likely agreement for air-to-air refuelling of military aircraft and cooperation in hydrography, anti-submarine and anti-drone warfare were also discussed. [3]

The joint military exercise was aimed at fostering collaborative partnership and share best practices between the two nations. It has been instrumental towards exchange of ideas and jointly rehearse tactics, technique and procedures for tactical operations.

Implications for India

Recently China and Pakistan conducted a Joint Naval Exercise in the Arabian Sea, reflective of Chinese growing interests and desire for dominance in the IOR.



Source: Deccan Herald

Such joint exercises by India with various nations of the IOR will not only counter balance increased Chinese forays in the Indian Ocean as also develop common procedures and response mechanisms for security of SLOCs to guard India’s maritime interests. Australia and India support free and secure movement for all in the IOR. The exercise will promote understanding between the two militaries, give a significant boost to the QUAD initiatives as also will further strengthen the defence cooperation between the two friendly nations. [4]

[3]<https://www.deccanherald.com/india/iaf-contingent-leaves-for-australia-to-take-part-in-joint-military-exercise-austrahind-23-2781501>

[4]<https://theprint.in/world/indian-australian-armed-forces-undergo-tactical-exercises-during-austrahind-2023/1864410/>

Niger Government Asks Court To Force ECOWAS To Lift Coup Sanctions

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/22/niger-asks-west-africas-court-to-compel-neighbors-to-lift-coup-sanctions-citing-hardship>

Niger's military government on Tuesday asked West Africa's regional court to order the lifting of sanctions imposed on the country by its neighbours following a July coup that deposed elected president Mohamed Bazoum. Millions in Niger face hardship due to economic sanctions after the July 30 coup that toppled President Bazoum. "There is no sector of the Nigerien society that has not been affected by these sanctions" which have caused in one of the world's poorest countries After a group of soldiers calling itself the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP) toppled Bazoum, a raft of economic sanctions were imposed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Other countries, including the United States, that had provided aid for health, security and infrastructure needs, also suspended their support. Until the coup, aid accounted for almost half of Niger's annual budget.

Niger's neighbours also closed their borders to the country, and more than 70 percent of its electricity, supplied by Nigeria, was cut off. Financial transactions with West African countries were suspended. Niger's assets in external banks were frozen, and hundreds of millions of dollars in aid were withheld. The sanctions were the most stringent yet imposed by the regional bloc in an effort to stem the tide of coups in the Sahel. But they have had little or no impact on the ambition of the government, which has consolidated its hold on power while millions in Niger face growing hardship. The government asked the court to relax the sanctions pending the final judgment. But ECOWAS protested against their request.

COMMENTS

Political Stability in the Region. It may contribute to political stability in the region as the removal of sanctions could potentially ease tensions and stability in the region could offer opportunities for increased diplomatic engagement and trade partnerships with India.

Economic Cooperation. Lifting sanctions could lead to improved economic conditions in Niger and neighboring countries, fostering a more conducive environment for trade and investment. Indian MNCs must take the advantage of the improved economic climate and enhance economic engagement.

Diplomatic and Security Cooperation. The court's decision and ECOWAS' response will shape diplomatic relations in the region, affecting how nations interact with each other. Enhanced security cooperation may provide opportunities for India to collaborate on counter-terrorism efforts and peacekeeping initiatives and focus on South-South cooperation.

Democratic Republic Of Congo And UN Sign Peacekeeper Withdrawal Plan

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/rest-of-world/democratic-republic-of-congo-and-un-sign-peacekeeper-withdrawal-plan/articleshow/105423451.cms?from=mdr>

KINSHASA: The UN peacekeeping mission in DR Congo said on Wednesday that it had signed a withdrawal plan for its troops in the central African nation, without offering details about a timeline. In a statement, the peacekeeping mission, known as Monusco, said that it had "co-signed a note on the accelerated, gradual, orderly and responsible withdrawal" from the country. The note contains a plan and timeline for the withdrawal, from the country. Peacekeepers have been present in the Democratic Republic of Congo since 1999 but militia violence has continued to plague the east of the country. Monusco's current 14,000-strong peacekeeping force is deeply unpopular due to perceptions that it has done little to stop violence.



Source: Reuters

COMMENTS

Regional Stability: The withdrawal plan suggests a perceived improvement in the security situation within the DRC. India might explore opportunities for enhanced diplomatic engagement and economic cooperation in the region, contributing to regional stability.

Diplomatic Relations: India, as a member of the UN and an advocate for peacekeeping efforts, may find opportunities to strengthen its diplomatic relations with both the DRC and the broader African region.

Security Sector Reform: India, with experience in security sector reform and training, may provide assistance and expertise to help build and modernize the DRC's security institutions. India, being a significant contributor to UN peacekeeping missions, may continue to play a role in supporting the UN's efforts in conflict resolution and peacekeeping in other regions along with exploring the possibility of establishing the training team in the country.

Boakai Declared Winner of Liberia Presidential Election: Electoral Commission

<https://www.africanews.com/2023/11/20/boakai-declared-winner-of-liberia-presidential-election-electoral-commission/>

Political veteran Joseph Boakai was on Monday declared winner of Liberia's presidential election, beating incumbent George Weah, the National Electoral Commission (NEC) said after completing the ballot count. Boakai won with 50.64 percent of the vote, against 49.36 percent of the vote for former international football star Weah, Davidetta Browne Lansanah, president of the commission, told reporters. Boakai won with only a 20,567-vote margin. Weah, however, already conceded defeat on Friday evening, based on the results of more than 99.98 percent of the polling stations.

COMMENTS

Diplomatic, Trade and Economic Opportunities: India may have the opportunity to strengthen diplomatic relations with Liberia, potentially fostering collaborations in trade, development, and other bilateral initiatives. With a stable government, India may explore trade opportunities, such as import-export agreements and investment in key sectors like infrastructure, energy, and technology.

Development Cooperation: India, with its experience in development cooperation, could engage with Liberia in areas like healthcare, education, and infrastructure development.

Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges: India may promote cultural diplomacy, fostering exchanges in arts, education, and tourism, contributing to a deeper understanding between the two nations.

Multilateral Engagement: India, as an active participant in multilateral organizations, may find opportunities to collaborate with Liberia on common global challenges and shared interests.



Source: The Hindu

UK Aircraft Carrier Operates Under NATO Command For First Time

<https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/11/uk-aircraft-carrier-operates-under-nato-command-for-first-time/>

A UK Royal Navy (RN) Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carrier has operated under NATO command for the first time. HMS Queen Elizabeth was placed under NATO operational control (OPCON) while participating in the alliance's latest 'Neptune Strike' exercise ('NEST 23-3'), which ran from 30 October to 10 November across the Mediterranean, Baltic, and North seas.

COMMENTS

Background

Military exercises are an important tool to test and validate concepts, procedures, systems and tactics of alliances. They enable the military and civil organisations to practise working together for a crisis. Since NATO consists of 31 member nations it is imperative to ensure that their working together is practiced from time to time. Accordingly, NATO has been conducting military exercises every year since 1951 which are published in advance in the spirit of the Vienna Document to ensure military transparency. NATO adheres to providing a notification of at least 42 days if the exercise exceeds 9,000 personnel while allowing observers if it exceeds 13,000 personnel.[1] Post 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea, the number of NATO exercises increased. Since then, NATO Leaders have agreed on a strengthened deterrence and defence posture. In March 2022, one month after the Russia-Ukraine war began, NATO Leaders further emphasised on the importance of this principle.

The military exercises are executed in three forms. A Live Exercise (LIVEX), in which actual forces participate; a Command Post Exercise (CPX), where commanders and their staffs at the headquarters level are exercised for improved communications; and an Exercise Study in which a map exercise, a war game, a series of lectures, a discussion group, or an operational analysis is conducted. In 2023 alone, NATO has so far conducted Air Defender 23 (12-23 June), Saber Junction 23 (6-16 September), Northern Coasts 23 (11-24 September), Steadfast Noon 23 (16-26 October), the Neptune Strike 23 which was conducted in three iterations NEST 23-1 (19-28 February 23), NEST 23-2 (10-14 July 23) and NEST 23-3 (30 October to 10 November 23) and the Dynamic Mariner 23 (23 October to 06 November 23).

Project Neptune

The Project Neptune series established in 2021, aims to improve carrier strike group (CSG) integration to increase deterrence and defence presence across the alliance's area of responsibility (AOR), covering the Arctic to the Mediterranean. It encompasses 'Neptune Strike', 'Neptune Shield', and 'Neptune Challenge' exercises. Of these, the 'Neptune Challenge' is a table-top exercise to integrate the U.S. Sixth Fleet (SIXTHFLT) headquarters in Naples, Italy, and the

[1] NATO, (2023, Jul 27), NATO exercises, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49285.htm **GEOSTRATEGIC SCAN** | 21

Accordingly, in Neptune Strike, NEST 23-1, 31 ships, 135 aircraft, and 8,386 Sailors and Marines from 21 countries participated, while in NEST 23-2, 23 ships, over 100 aircraft and more than 7,000 service members from 15 NATO Allied and partner nations demonstrated deterrence and assurance through execution of a broad spectrum of sea, air, and land activities with each iteration increasing in complexity. The NEST 23-1 centred on the US, Italian and Spanish carriers, all operating in the Mediterranean Sea. The NEST 23-2 had the US and the Italian carriers while for NEST 23-3, UK, Italian, and Spanish carriers provided the CSG presence.

What was however, interesting was that the NEST 23-3 had an entire CSG of European nation with the UK carrier, HMS Queen Elizabeth, being placed under the direct command of NATO for the first time. In 2022, though HMS Prince of Wales was part of the NEST 22, it was the NATO Response Force – Maritime (NRF-M) flagship, but had not operated under NATO OPCON. During the exercise, Queen Elizabeth entered the Arctic Circle for the first time and operated in the North Sea. The Italian Navy carrier ITS Cavour and Spanish Navy's ESPS Juan Carlos operated in the Mediterranean. More than 20 ships and 20 aircraft were present, from 19 alliance member states and one partner country.



Source: Naval News

Relevance of UK working under the NATO OPCON

The UK carriers being under the direct command of NATO provides additional strength to the otherwise cash strapped European allies of NATO. By establishing a CSG that is truly European is a major leap to the Alliance as it would allow the US to reposition forces and would give UK and the European allies truly global reach. Forming a European CSG deployed globally, is a major way to advance collective action within NATO, demonstrate solidarity towards Washington, and to utilize resources effectively. In a world where there is growing competition between the US and China, the European allies cannot simply depend on the US for ensuring global security.

The Europeans too need to contribute actively to global security and the participation of HMS Queen Elizabeth is a positive step in that direction.[2] In addition, by means of this effort, UK plans to position itself to be an anchor of NATO's new defence and deterrence posture.[3] Such an involvement of UK is also an effort to reassure Allies that despite Brexit, UK is not 'leaving Europe' and that their commitment to Euro-Atlantic security will not wane.[4]

[2] Michael John Williams, (2020, April 07), New British carriers can transform Europe's NATO naval capabilities, Atlantic Council, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/new-british-carriers-can-transform-europes-nato-naval-capabilities/>

[3] News, (2023, February 13), The United Kingdom is Positioning Itself to be an Anchor of NATO's New Defence and Deterrence Posture, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, <https://www.nato-pa.int/news/uk-positioning-itself-be-anchor-natos-new-defence-and-deterrence-posture>

[4] Alice Billon-Galland, (2021, December 30), What matters to the UK in the context of the new Strategic Concept discussion, Real Instituto ELCANO, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/what-matters-to-the-uk-in-the-context-of-the-new-strategic-concept-discussion/>

Vietnam, Japan Issue Joint Statement On Elevation Of Relations To Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

<https://en-vietnamplus-vn.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/en.vietnamplus.vn/vietnam-japan-issue-joint-statement-on-elevation-of-relations-to-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/271923.amp>

Vietnam and Japan on November 27 issued a joint statement on the elevation of their relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership for peace and prosperity in Asia and the world on the occasion of an official visit to Japan by President Vo Van Thuong and his spouse. During the visit, Their Majesties the Emperor and Empress meet with and host a court luncheon in honour of President Thuong and Madam. H.E. Mr. KISHIDA Fumio, Prime Minister of Japan, and President Thuong attended the ceremony by Guard of Honor, held the summit meeting, attended the joint press conference, and witnessed the signing ceremony of cooperation documents. President Thuong also delivered his policy speech at the National Diet of Japan and visited Fukuoka Prefecture. The two leaders emphasised fundamental principles guiding the Japan-Vietnam relationship, including respect for the United Nations Charter, adherence to international law, and mutual respect for each country's political systems, independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.

COMMENTS

Vietnam and Japan's joint strategic partnership announcement may impact geopolitics and regional dynamics. Strengthening maritime cooperation between the two nations could improve Indo-Pacific security, as both countries are concerned about maritime security and South China Sea disputes. This collaboration could help maintain a rules-based international order, aligning with India's goals in a free and open Indo-Pacific. Additionally, India could benefit from improved economic cooperation between Vietnam and Japan, as it seeks economic partnerships and diversifies trade links. However, India must carefully consider potential concerns, as increased security cooperation could change the regional power dynamics. India could also collaborate with Vietnam and Japan on infrastructure, connectivity, and counterterrorism challenges, thereby increasing regional influence. India should take a proactive and pragmatic approach to protect its strategic interests in the changing Indo-Pacific geopolitical landscape.



Source: TTXVN VNA

China Navy Ships Arrive in Myanmar for Joint Drills Amid Ongoing Border Conflict

<https://www.news18.com/world/china-navy-ships-arrive-in-myanmar-for-joint-drills-amid-ongoing-border-conflict-8679347.html>

Three Chinese navy ships have arrived in Myanmar for joint drills with its navy, the country's junta said, as a border conflict strains ties between the Southeast Asian nation and its most important ally. A destroyer, frigate and a supply vessel carrying hundreds of sailors arrived at Thilawa port on Monday ahead of "naval security exercises between Myanmar and China", the junta's information team said. It did not give details about the drills or when they would begin but state media reported the Chinese "naval task force" was 700 sailors strong.

Beijing is a major ally and arms supplier of Myanmar's junta and has refused to label its 2021 power grab a coup. Relations have been tested recently as the junta battles an alliance of ethnic minority groups across a swathe of territory near the China border. The junta has said the groups are using drones made in China in their offensive that has seized trade hubs and dozens of military outposts in northern Shan state.

COMMENTS



Source: News18

The arrival of Chinese naval ships in Myanmar for joint training amid ongoing tensions has significant strategic, geopolitical, and security implications for the region. The coordinated naval operations between China and Myanmar may indicate China's expanding regional influence, whereas India's defence collaboration with Myanmar is longstanding. The military relations between China and Myanmar may change regional power dynamics.

India's "Act East" policy relies on Myanmar, and increased Chinese influence could affect its economic interests in Myanmar, where it has invested in infrastructure. The development underscores India's need to build Indo-Pacific strategic partnerships and enhanced engagements with ASEAN countries. Balancing economic concerns, security measures, and regional partnerships is essential for India's response to the regional security dynamics.

What is APEC and the APEC Economic Leaders' Week (AELW)?

<https://www.apec2023sf.org/what-is-apec>

Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) is a regional economic forum established in 1989 to leverage the growing interdependence of the Asia-Pacific. APEC is the premier platform for the U.S. to advance economic policies in the Asia-Pacific region to promote free, fair, and open trade and investment and advance sustainable and inclusive economic growth. In 2023, the United States is chairing APEC. San Francisco will be the Host City for the AELW in November. APEC meetings throughout this year have focused on regional economic issues, including sustainability, digitalization, women's economic empowerment, trade facilitation, energy security, food security, and health. In concluding APEC 2023, the AELW will bring 21 APEC Economic Leaders, ministers, the private sector, and other stakeholders together to engage on global challenges. U.S. APEC 2023 will be the most significant event with world leaders in San Francisco in recent history.

COMMENTS

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) is a forum to promote trade, investment and economic development among nations around the Pacific Ocean. In 1989, the group was established with 12 members but has since grown to 21 including China, Russia, Japan, the U.S. and Australia. It has been estimated that half of the global trade and 40 percent of the world population is accounted by these member nations. The APEC 2023 summit held in San Francisco was attended by Heads of state and other prominent diplomatic and economic figures. "Creating a Resilient and Sustainable Future for All" remained the main theme for APEC 2023 summit. APEC affirmed its commitment to promote "free, fair and open trade and investment" along with equitable and sustainable growth in the region. The end of the summit was marked by "The Golden Gate Declaration" which mostly emphasised on building a robust and sustainable future for each and every member economy.

Apart from this, climate emergency and guaranteeing energy security remained salient aspects under the "APEC Action Agenda on Climate Change and Energy Security". The agenda initiated a number of specific initiatives and goals to improve collaboration and coordination in tackling the growing climate change challenges. On the side-lines of the summit a special meeting was held between Xi Jinping and Joe Biden. The meeting had both positives and negatives discussed. Considering the current geo-political turmoil, Xi's presence in the summit itself is of great significance. It has been observed that the Chinese side exhibited more enthusiasm in attending the summit and not just the US. Slow economic growth remains a significant challenge for China in the current times which is followed by other internal challenges. Meanwhile, US has strengthened its relationship with Indo-Pacific and European allies especially in terms of investing infrastructure and advance technologies. In addition, terms like "de-risking" and "de-coupling" are used several times by US in most of its documents and statements. In terms of technology especially in manufacturing semiconductors, countries like Japan and Denmark, apart from US, are exhibiting great interest.

APEC SUMMIT 2023

China is undoubtedly concerned about these, which is why it has expressed a strong desire to attend the APEC 2023 conference. On the negatives, the Xi-Biden meeting didn't highlight the core issues such as resolving the tension in the Taiwan Strait. However, Morris Chang, the founder of Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, represented Taiwan at APEC for the eighth time. Other than attending the leader's meeting lunch and plenary sessions, he did not interact with Biden. However, he had a longer discussion with Lael Brainard, the director of the White House's National Economic Council, and Vice President Kamala Harris to talk about economic growth. During the summit, Japan also took the opportunity to initiate talks with the Chinese leader. Beijing and Tokyo committed to lessen their animosity in order to "coexist peacefully" and pursue "mutually beneficial relationships". Kishida stated:

"We agreed on where we are heading. That is to build constructive and stable relations."

Meanwhile Xi affirmed: *"Bilateral ties have generally maintained a momentum of development, despite ups and downs over the past 45 years. At a time when the international situation is marked by changes and challenges ... China-Japan relations are at a critical period of carrying forward the past and ushering in the future."* [1]



Source: Reuters

While interacting with the Japanese television network, Kishida pointed out few things discussed in the meeting with Xi. He emphasised the significance of maintaining stability and tranquillity in the Taiwan Strait. The second important thing Kishida demanded removal of the ban on import of Japanese seafood since Japan has released the water from the Fukushima plant, demanding a calm response based on scientific evidence.

However, analysts have opined that since China and Japan are opposed strategically and ideologically, such meetings are unlikely to usher breakthroughs. [2] India is not a part of such as regional trade agreement despite being one of the largest economies of the Indo-Pacific region. This is something which India may reconsider. APEC as an economic framework refers to its members as economies rather than nations. This has made the participation easier for big economies like Hong Kong and Taiwan. The APEC focuses on sustainability, inclusivity, resilience and innovation which mostly align with India's objectives. A peaceful relationship between China and the US is essential to achieving this. If APEC becomes successful in achieving its objectives, it can take the driver's seat in terms of shared benefits and sustainable growth. India is in the same region and needs to encourage engagements with APEC so that its economic goals can be accomplished. India can grab this opportunity to become a better alternative for FDI in the region.

[1] Shi Jiangtao, (2023), "Apec 2023: China, Japan leaders pledge to 'coexist peacefully', manage differences in first meeting in a year", [Online: web], Accessed: 29 November 2023

[2] Ibid

North Korea Claims Spy Satellite Has Photographed White House And Pentagon

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/28/north-korea-claims-spy-satellite-has-photographed-white-house-and-pentagon>

North Korea has claimed its recently launched satellite has sent back “detailed” images of the White House, the Pentagon and US nuclear aircraft carriers that have been viewed by the regime leader, Kim Jong-un. On Tuesday, the state-run KCNA news agency said Kim, who viewed the launch then hosted a banquet for scientists and space programme workers, had viewed photos of the two US government sites, which were taken late on Monday night.

COMMENTS

Malligyong-1, the reconnaissance satellite that is claimed to successfully launch itself into the orbit has raised security concerns for the US and its allies in the region. Although the claims made by Pyongyang are yet to be ascertained and verified, the launch itself has revealed North Korea’s technological capabilities after many failed attempts spanning over a decade. Additionally, North Korean scientists have repeatedly been testing missiles, particularly ICMBs that have a similar technological algorithm akin to the satellite launched.

The claimed success of the launch can be partly attributed to Russia. President Vladimir Putin previously in his visit had promised to share space technology with North Korea, and some momentum to it has already been provided with the launch of *Malligyong*. Despite the celebrations at Pyongyang, the operationality of the satellite is yet to be determined, especially the imagery it has claimed to receive. The satellite launch can be perceived as Kim’s dedication to uphold the Songun,[1]the military doctrine of North Korea. The Songun underpins the military to work in a direction that legitimizes and sustains the North Korean leadership. This also explains why North Korea continues to increase its military capabilities despite a staggering economy. The US, NATO and the G7 members immediately condemned the launch as it violates many of the UNSC resolutions. South Korea, which largely enjoys the benefit of the US security umbrella in the region has taken a call to dilute the ‘Comprehensive Military Agreement’ (CMA) of 2018 by resuming reconnaissance and surveillance activities near the demilitarized zone. The CMA was considered as a watershed victory of the meeting between Kim Jong Un and erstwhile South Korean President Moon Jae-In in 2018. The agreement established buffer zones, no fly zones and limited military activities near the border. The partial suspension of the CMA implies incumbent policies of the present government led by Yoon Seok Yeol towards North Korea.

The region is driving towards instability marred by policies to contain North Korea. The Washington Declaration[2] In April the US and South Korea had announced complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula by engaging in dialogue and diplomacy with North Korea. However, the limitation to the declaration remains in concretizing and defining a denuclearization model that best fits the Korean Peninsula. The North Korea dilemma continues to pose challenges for US architecture in the region and its failure to implement contingency measures and upholding international mandates against the same.

South Korea, China, Japan Top Diplomats Seek To Boost Trilateral Cooperation

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/rest-of-world/south-korea-china-japan-top-diplomats-seek-to-boost-trilateral-cooperation/articleshow/105507777.cms?from=mdr>

China, Japan and South Korea agreed on Sunday to restart cooperation and pave the way for a summit in the latest move to ease tensions between the Asian neighbours. Even as China and the United States seek to mend frayed ties, including a summit this month between Presidents Xi Jinping and Joe Biden, Beijing is concerned that Washington and its key regional allies are strengthening their three-way partnership.

COMMENTS

The meeting between the Foreign Ministers of South Korea, China and Japan opens a new hope for boosting regional cooperation amidst persisting competition between China and the US. South Korea's Park Jin, China's Wang Yi and Japan's Yoko Kamikawa met at Busan for the 10th trilateral Foreign Ministerial meeting for the first time after 2019. The meeting was aimed at easing relations between the three countries and further announced cooperation in 6 major areas, particularly security, economy and technology.



Source: Reuters

The summit between the three foreign ministers also underscored that a summit between the leaders of the three countries is underway and may formalize next year. This statement is a victory for championing regional cooperation and stability. South Korean and Japanese economies are highly enmeshed with their Chinese counterparts, especially for semiconductors. South Korean companies in China had demanded for relaxations on the ban imposed by the US and further pressurized the Yoon Seok Yeol administration. China's Wang Yi during the summit, reiterated to move beyond "ideological demarcations" over economic concerns. China, currently is posed with staggering economic challenges. China recorded the first quarterly FDI deficit [3] and thus further demanded a Free Trade Agreement with South Korea and Japan at the earliest. The trilateral trade dynamic needs to be reconfigured. The economic headwinds are the reason why China is suddenly engaging in dialogue with countries in its neighbourhood and also far away, the US and Australia.

Apart from economy, a cooperation between these three countries may provide stability and additionally shape security policies in the region. China remains a huge factor for both South Korea and Japan to effectively contain and counter North Korea from further adventurism in the region. The summit between the foreign ministers is also expected to shape future bilateral dialogues that can further induce a new economic and security paradigm in East Asia.

Korea, UK To Adopt Downing Street Accord To Elevate Ties: Presidential Office

<https://m.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20231121000214>

South Korea and the United Kingdom are poised to adopt a new bilateral framework called the Downing Street Accord, during the upcoming summit between President Yoon Suk Yeol and UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, Yoon's office said Tuesday. The two countries will jointly address geopolitical risks as they mark their 140th anniversary of diplomatic relations this year.

COMMENTS

The meeting between UK and South Korean leaders took place at a pivotal time, the former expanding ties with like minded countries for its Indo-Pacific outreach and the latter lobbying to create chokepoints for North Korea. The visit has been considered an immense success for both the UK and South Korea as a series of accords and documents were signed upgrading the status between the two countries as 'global strategic partners'. The vital outcome of the meeting was the Downing Street Accord [4] signed between UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and South Korean President Yoon Seok Yeol that enables the two countries to bolster economic, security and technological ties. The Accord is an attempt to reshape the existing bilateral relations and further work towards an "open and international order". The accord also establishes a 2+2 ministerial dialogue format and further enforces the sanctions placed on North Korea. [5] The Accord also addressed maritime domain awareness between the two countries.



Source: The Korean Herald

Additionally, the UK and South Korea also signed the Korea-UK Strategic Cyber Partnership to address the creation of resilient cyber ecosystems and detect and deter malicious cyber threats. [6]. The cyber partnership also aims to bring together multiple stakeholders from both the countries to work jointly and further countries from the Indo-Pacific region to deter any cyber threats. State sponsored North Korean cyberattacks are alarmingly posing a threat to the US and countries in the Indo-Pacific.

In recent times, the 'hermit kingdom' has also improved its cyber capabilities and has also introduced a separate cyberwarfare program in North Korea's national universities. [7] Therefore, this partnership on cyber security is timely between the two countries. The UK and South Korea also agreed to work on economic ties by diversifying supply chains, semiconductors, AI and a new Space cooperation to further bolster ties. The trade relations between the two countries have remained steady, however this new 'upgrade' can push for better trade solely with the UK. Talks on Free Trade Agreement, Clean Energy and Offshore Wind Energy are soon to take shape to boost trade between the UK and South Korea. Security ties between the two countries have also been shaped by common and aligned ideals. The UK has expressed its voice to expand AUKUS in what is commonly known as the AUKUS plus format to include South Korea and Japan. [8] The Indo-Pacific is persisting to be a region driven by less cooperation and more competition and therefore partnerships between like minded countries can provide a momentum to bring about peace and stability in the region through coalition building and address the long term challenges in the region.

India, Australia Hold 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue To Step Up Strategic Ties

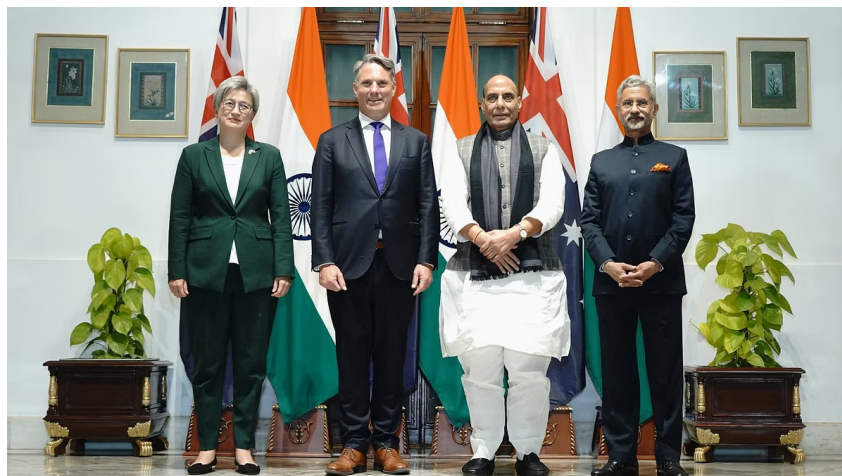
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-australia-hold-22-ministerial-dialogue-to-step-up-strategic-ties/article67555708.ece>

India and Australia on Monday held a 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue to step up defence cooperation and deepen the strategic relationship in sectors such as critical minerals and trade and investment. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar met Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles and Foreign Minister Penny Wong here as part of the second India-Australia 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue.

COMMENTS

The 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue between India and Australia is a show of commitment by both countries to bolster bilateral ties and work towards the fulfilment of common strategic ties. India and Australia continue to work in groupings like QUAD and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative to address multiple challenges engulfing the Indo-Pacific region. This year's 2+2 dialogue centred around deepening strategic ties and enhancing military capabilities. The two sides concluded to work on areas of hydrography, artificial intelligence, anti-submarine and anti-drone warfare and addressing challenges emerging from cyber domains. [9] In addition to these developments, a commitment to provide air to air refuelling and logistics support in terms of ship building and ship repair emerged as "potential areas of cooperation".

Australia and India elevated to Comprehensive Strategic Partners in 2020 as a show of aligned interest and mutual cooperation. Although India chose to not join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, it continues to have an FTA similar model; the Australia India Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA) with Australia. [10][11] Both countries have strived to work towards diversifying supply chains in the post pandemic order and continue to address challenges posed by China in the region. India and Australia continue to have a shared commitment towards a free open and inclusive Indo-Pacific based on UNCLOS as underscored by Indian EAM S. Jaishankar.



Source: Deccan Herald

The 2+2 dialogue between Australia and India took place just weeks after Australian PM Anthony Albanese met his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in Beijing. Although it is early to comment whether ties between Canberra and Beijing will improve or not, it is imperative for India to continue partnering with like minded countries on emerging areas of economic and security cooperations.

The improvements in Australia-India bilateral ties have demonstrated that both nations' strategic interests are now significantly aligned, as the ambivalence of the past is beginning to fade and they both seem prepared to actively participate in reshaping the regional power dynamics to create a stable multipolar and rebalanced order with space for plurilateralism. There is great potential for both nations; the defence and security cooperation are moving forward. With a common vision for the Indo-Pacific region, expanding trade, closer security and defence cooperation, and engagement with other like-minded regional players, India and Australia will be crucial in determining the regional balance of power, which will be supported by mutual prosperity and stability, amidst the dynamic geopolitical scenarios.

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[5] Ibid

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[11] Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade "Australia-India ECTA Official Text" GOV.AU, December 29, 2023, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/trade/agreements/in-force/australia-india-ecta/australia-india-ecta-official-text>