



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

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INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

This publication is a monthly analytical survey of developments and policy trends that impact India's interests and define its challenges across the extended Indo-Pacific maritime space, which has become the primary theatre of global geopolitical contestation. It is authored by Cmde. Lalit Kapur (Retd.), DPG Senior Fellow for Maritime Strategy, assisted by Ms. Divya Rai, based on open source reports and publications. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to the author at lalit@dpg.org.in. To subscribe, please [click here](#).

Cover Image:

Aircraft carriers from India and Italy, INS Vikramaditya and ITS Cavour, along with INS Visakhapatnam and ITS Alpino, operate in the Arabian Sea, October 05, 2024. Source: SpokespersonNavy@Indiannavy.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets Japan's Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba in Vientiane, October 10, 2024. Source: Prime Minister's Office of Japan

Ships from the Australian, Indian, Japanese and US navies participate in Exercise Malabar 2024 in the Bay of Bengal on October 17, 2024. Source: PIB

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INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

October 2024

Abstract

In a significant development, the UK and Mauritius agreed to transfer sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago to Mauritius. The agreement announced on October 03 is subject to finalisation of a treaty and supporting legal instruments, which the two countries have committed to complete at the earliest. The UK will be authorised to exercise all rights of Mauritius over Diego Garcia as required to continue operation of the military base on that atoll for the next 99 years.

Shigeru Ishiba was sworn in as Japan's 102nd Prime Minister on October 1. However, the snap elections he called saw the ruling LDP-Komeito coalition, which obtained only 215 seats, falling well short of the 233 required for a majority, likely ushering in a period of political instability. China challenged the new Ishiba administration by expelling a Japanese fishing vessel from the vicinity of the Senkaku Islands.

Prabowo Subianto was sworn in as Indonesia's eighth President on October 20. China moved promptly to test his administration, with three intrusions by its Coast Guard vessels into Indonesia's maritime zones in the Natuna Sea during the ensuing week.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Vientiane, Laos, to attend the 19th East Asia Summit and the 21st ASEAN-India Summit on October 10. He also visited Kazan, Russia, for the 16th BRICS Summit on October 22-24.

Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu visited India from October 6-10 to reset bilateral ties. A new Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership Agreement was signed by the two countries.

External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar visited Colombo on October 04 to establish contacts with the new Dissanayake administration. He also attended the 23rd meeting of the Council of the Heads of Government of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation held in Islamabad on October 15-16.

France became Vietnam's seventh comprehensive strategic partner on October 7, during the visit of Vietnamese President To Lam to France. The Philippines



and South Korea elevated their relationship to a strategic partnership on October 7, during the State Visit of President Yoon Suk-Yeol to the Philippines.

Days after Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te delivered a strong National Day address, China's Eastern Theatre Command launched Exercise Joint Sword 2024B on October 14, effectively the test of a complete blockade of Taiwan, as a warning to "separatist" forces.

Exercise Malabar returned to the Indian Ocean, with India hosting the exercise in the Bay of Bengal from October 08-18. Indian Naval ships also participated in Exercise IBSAMAR-2024 with the South African Navy from October 06-18, Exercise Naseem Al-Bahr with Oman's Navy from October 13-18, and Exercise SIMBEX-2024 with the Singapore Navy from October 23-29.

North Korea carried out an ICBM test on October 31, with the missile estimated to have a range of over 18,000 Km, sufficient to cover all of the continental United States.

India's Cabinet Committee on Security accorded approval for the indigenous construction of two nuclear attack submarines on October 09. The submarines are expected to enter service about a decade hence.

India's Ministry of Defence concluded a contract for the supply of 31 Sea/Sky Guardian UAVs on October 15. Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the C-295 tactical transport aircraft factory at Vadodara on October 28.

Mauritius to Regain Chagos Archipelago

An agreement between the UK and Mauritius on October 03, 2024, moved the latter towards regaining sovereignty over the Chagos Islands, detached by the UK from Mauritius to form the British Indian Ocean Territory in 1965, three years before Mauritius gained independence. A Joint Statement from the two countries said they had reached an agreement on the exercise of sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago including Diego Garcia¹. The Statement acknowledges the full support and assistance of the US and India in reaching the agreement.

The agreement is subject to finalisation of a treaty and supporting legal instruments, which both sides have committed to complete as quickly as

¹ UK and Mauritius Joint Statement, 3 October 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-between-uk-and-mauritius-3-october-2024>



possible². Under the terms of this treaty, the UK will agree that Mauritius is sovereign over the Chagos Archipelago, including Diego Garcia. At the same time, both countries will agree in the treaty that the UK is authorised to exercise the sovereign rights and authorities of Mauritius in Diego Garcia as required to ensure the continued operation of the base for an initial period of 99 years. Mauritius will have the right to resettle all islands except Diego Garcia.

The treaty will also mark a new economic, security and environmental partnership between the two countries. UK will provide a package of financial support to Mauritius. This will include an indexed payment for the duration of the agreement and the establishment of an infrastructure partnership underpinned by UK grant funding, to deliver strategic projects generating meaningful change for ordinary Mauritians and boosting economic development across the country. The two countries will cooperate on environmental protection, maritime security, combating illegal fishing, irregular migration and drug and people trafficking within the Chagos Archipelago, with the shared objective of securing and protecting the marine environments and including the establishment of a Mauritian Marine Protected Area.

The Chagos Archipelago is a group of seven atolls comprising around 60 islands about 500 Km South of the Maldives and 1770 Km East of India's foothold at Agalega. The archipelago was claimed by France in 1715 and became a dependency of the French administration in Mauritius. Mauritius and the Chagos Archipelago were ceded to Britain in 1814, after Napoleon's defeat. In 1965, Britain separated the Chagos Islands from Mauritius to form the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). Diego Garcia was then leased to the US for construction of its sole Indian Ocean base. The region was forcibly depopulated between 1965 and 1973. Residents of the islands have since then been fighting a battle to return. Mauritius has since then been seeking its return through legal battles in British courts, an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice and a vote in the UN General Assembly.

The agreement effectively finds a way to safeguard the interests of both parties. On the one hand, it finally acknowledges the sovereignty of Mauritius over the archipelago, the battle for which has been going on for nearly 15 years. It enables the UK to claim compliance with the opinion of the International Court of Justice in 2018, which said the original inhabitants of the islands had wrongly been forced to leave and they should be returned to Mauritius. It also

² UK-Mauritius deal to protect national security – safeguarding the operation of strategic military base, October 3, 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-mauritius-deal-to-protect-national-security-safeguarding-the-operation-of-strategic-military-base>

enables the UK to claim partial compliance with a UN General Assembly resolution of 2019, which also asked the UK to give up the islands to Mauritius. On the other, it safeguards the continued operation of the Diego Garcia logistics support facility by the US, its only base in the Indian Ocean, well into the next century, fulfilling a major security interest.

US President Joe Biden applauded the agreement³. India also welcomed the agreement, describing the resolution of the long-standing Chagos dispute after two years of negotiations, as a welcome development in compliance with international law⁴. Will the deal enable India's access to Diego Garcia in the years ahead? Such an arrangement would enhance India's logistics arrangements for surveillance over the Central Indian Ocean.

The 21st ASEAN India Summit

India's engagement with ASEAN is driven by three policy goals flowing from its Act East Policy: enhancing connectivity (in all its forms, including physical, digital, business, people-to-people etc.), strengthening ASEAN as an organisation, and expanding practical cooperation in the maritime domain⁵. Reflecting the importance India (and ASEAN) attach to these goals, relations between them were upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) on November 12, 2022⁶. The CSP encompasses a wide range of areas, including cooperation on maritime security and connectivity, terrorism and transnational crime, cyber security, review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA), the digital economy, fintech, transport and connectivity, agriculture, science and technology, healthcare, space, education, tourism and sub-regional frameworks.

³ Statement from President Joe Biden on the Occasion of an Agreement Between the Republic of Mauritius and the United Kingdom on Status of the Chagos Archipelago, October 03, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/10/03/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-the-occasion-of-an-agreement-between-the-republic-of-mauritius-and-the-united-kingdom-on-the-status-of-the-chagos-archipelago/>

⁴ Statement on the Agreement between the United Kingdom and Mauritius Regarding Return of Mauritian Sovereignty Over Chagos Archipelago, October 03, 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38369/Statement_on_Agreement_between_the_United_Kingdom_and_Mauritius_regarding_return_of_Mauritian_sovereignty_over_Chagos_Archipelago

⁵ Overview of India-ASEAN Relations, Indian Mission to ASEAN, <https://www.indmissionasean.gov.in/pages/MjU>,

⁶ Joint Statement on ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, November 12, 2022, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/35876/Joint_Statement_on_ASEANIndia_Comprehensive_Strategic_Partnership

In keeping with the importance attached to the relationship, Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the 21st ASEAN-India Summit at Vientiane, Lao PDR on October 10, 2024. This was his 11th consecutive summit. The event was chaired by Lao Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone. The Prime Minister of Timor Leste was also present as an observer, as was the Secretary-General of ASEAN. A Chairman's Statement was published on the occasion⁷.

The Prime Minister reiterated India's support for ASEAN unity and centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Noting that India-ASEAN ties were critical to guiding Asia's future, he observed that during the last decade, India-ASEAN trade had doubled to over \$ 130 billion, making ASEAN one of India's largest trade and investment partners. Direct flight connectivity had been established between India and seven ASEAN countries. A promising beginning had been made in Fin-tech collaboration, and significant progress had been made in restoration of the shared cultural heritage in five countries. PM Modi underlined the need to complete the review of AITIGA in a time-bound manner. He announced a ten-point plan to enhance connectivity and resilience, including celebrating 2025 as the ASEAN-India year of tourism with India making available \$ 5 million towards joint activities; celebrating a decade of the Act East Policy through numerous people-centric initiatives; organizing an ASEAN-India women scientists' conclave; doubling the number of scholarships offered by India for ASEAN students at Nalanda University and provision of new scholarships at Agricultural Universities in India; review of the AITIGA by 2025; enhancing disaster resilience for which India would make available \$ 5 million; initiating a new Health Ministers' track, initiating a regular ASEAN-India Cyber Policy Dialogue; a workshop on green hydrogen; and inviting ASEAN leaders to join the 'Plant a Tree for Mother' campaign.

Two joint statements were released on the occasion. The first is on strengthening the ASEAN-India CSP⁸, which focuses extensively on measures to enhance the maritime security and defence relationship, as well as strengthening multilateralism and other priority areas or cooperation. The second was on advancing digital transformation⁹.

⁷ Chairman's Statement of the 21st ASEAN-India Summit, Vientiane, Lao PDR, October 10, 2024, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/6.-Final-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-21st-ASEAN-India-Summit.pdf>

⁸ Joint Statement on Strengthening ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace, Stability and Prosperity in the Region in the Context of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) with the support of India's Act East Policy (AEP), October 10, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2063888>

⁹ ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Advancing Digital Transformation, October 10, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2063889>

The leaders expressed their satisfaction at progress on the ASEAN-India Plan of Action (2021-2025) and looked forward to the development of a new Action Plan for the period 2026-2030. They noted India's active participation in ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (Plus) events as well as in countering transnational crime. Welcoming progress in the AITIGA review, they encouraged the review committee to expedite the process so as to conclude it in 2025. They encouraged ASEAN and India to strengthen and deepen collaboration on food security and natural systems. Welcoming India's announcement of the Fund for the Digital Future at the 20th summit, they appreciated India for operationalization of the fund in 2024. They encouraged India to support the establishment of the ASEAN Power Grid.

Of note were the positions taken by the two on the South China Sea (SCS) and Myanmar. On the former, they affirmed the importance of maintaining and promoting peace, security, stability, safety and freedom of navigation in and overflight over the SCS and recognized the benefits of having the SCS as a sea of peace, stability and prosperity. They reaffirmed the need to exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability and avoid actions that may further complicate the situation. They reaffirmed the need to pursue peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS. They committed to maintaining and promoting an environment conducive to the negotiation of an effective and substantive Code of Conduct in the SCS that is in accordance with international law, including UNCLOS.

On Myanmar, the two sides reaffirmed their support for the ASEAN Leaders' Five Point Consensus. They denounced continuing acts of violence against civilians and public facilities and urged all parties to take concrete action to immediately halt indiscriminate violence and bring peace to the region.

The policy goals of enhancing connectivity, expanding maritime cooperation and strengthening ASEAN arise from the need to balance China's expanding influence in the common neighbourhood. While there has been progress in the first two goals above, the third is inherently difficult because of ASEAN's own weaknesses. Progress must, however, be measured against China's connectivity and cooperative activity in Southeast Asia. This overshadows India by far. For example, ASEAN-China trade in 2023 was \$ 696.71 billion, more than five times ASEAN's trade with India¹⁰, making China ASEAN's largest

¹⁰ Chairman's Statement of the 27th ASEAN-China Summit, Vientiane, Lao PDR, October 10, 2024, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/1.-Final-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-27th-ASEAN-China-Summit.pdf>

trading partner for the 15th successive year. FDI inflows from China to ASEAN in 2023 amounted to \$ 17.3 billion. Tourist arrivals from China into ASEAN were 10.6 million, nearly three times the number from India. ASEAN-China Free Trade Area 3.0 Upgrade negotiations have largely been completed, indicating that further growth in trade and investment is in the offing. China ASEAN cooperation in the maritime domain is at least as significant as India ASEAN cooperation. And notwithstanding its differences with individual countries, China continues to support ASEAN centrality and unity.

Nevertheless, India must continue with its efforts. The goodwill that has been built up over the years must be translated into greater influence in the region. ASEAN as an organisation, and Southeast Asia as a region, will remain vital for India.

The 19th East Asia Summit

The 19th East Asia Summit was convened on October 11, 2024 in Vientiane, Lao PDR. It was chaired by Lao Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone and attended by the leaders of ASEAN member states, the Prime Ministers of India, Australia, China, Japan & New Zealand, the President of South Korea, and Foreign Ministers from Russia and the US. The Prime Minister of Timor-Leste was present as an observer, while the President of the European Council and the Secretary General of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation attended as guests of the Chair. The Chairman's Statement of the 19th East Asia Summit was released two days after the event, on October 13, 2024¹¹.

The East Asia Summit (EAS) comprises 18 countries centred on South East and East Asia. The first summit was held in 2005, with 16 countries as participants. Russia and the US were added at the 6th EAS. The group is an ASEAN construct and remains ASEAN led. It is a leader-level forum for dialogue and cooperation on broad strategic, political and economic issues of common interest, intended to promote peace, stability and prosperity in East Asia. It meets after the annual ASEAN summit, and the leaders reaffirm ASEAN's central role in the EAS at each summit. It also provides opportunity for bilateral interaction between member states. ASEAN being the guiding force behind an organisation comprising countries having a combined GDP of about \$ 65 trillion (IMF estimates for 2024), or about 60% of world GDP, despite its combined economy of just over \$ 4 billion (3.7% of world GDP) is a pointer to why the EAS has not delivered its potential.

¹¹ Chairman's Statement of the 19th East Asia summit (EAS), Vientiane, Lao PDR, 11 October 2024, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/9.-Final-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-19th-EAS.pdf>

The Chairman's Statement covers multiple areas of cooperation, including peace and security, sustainable development, poverty alleviation (these three areas have been added since the 18th EAS in Jakarta in 2023), as well as climate, energy and environment cooperation; education, finance, tourism, advancement and empowerment of women and youth participation; global health issues and pandemic diseases; natural disaster management; ASEAN connectivity; food security; economic cooperation and trade; and maritime cooperation. India's contribution towards maritime cooperation by hosting the sixth reiteration of the EAS Conference on Maritime Security and Cooperation at Mumbai in July 2024 was recognised in the Chairman's statement.

Part of the Chairman's Statement contains EAS views on regional and international issues. These encompass the Korean Peninsula, South China Sea, Myanmar, the war in Ukraine, and the war in Gaza. On Korea, the statement records that some countries expressed grave concern over the recent surge in the DPRK's missile testing and launches and called on the DPRK to comply with all relevant UNSC resolutions. Some countries also noted international efforts to bring about the complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner.

Philippines President Ferdinand R. Marcos described the South China Sea issue as a strategic challenge that is difficult to address by the concerned parties¹². He observed that Chinese maritime assets continued harassing the Philippines' Coast Guard within the Philippines EEZ, and PLA Navy missile ships intimidated Philippine civilian fishing vessels and aircraft, showing China's continued disregard for international law and standards, particularly UNCLOS and the 1972 Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea. He suggested inclusion in EAS initiatives South China Sea related issues such as creating greater maritime domain awareness, more projects on marine environmental protection, safety of navigation and communication at sea, and clear rules of engagement for vessels in the South China Sea. The Chairman's statement did not, however, reflect this plea, indicating the divide with ASEAN on this issue. Reports indicate that the draft statement carried clauses saying that UNCLOS sets out the legal framework within which all activities in the oceans and seas must be carried out, and the international environment in the region, including the South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula, Myanmar, Ukraine and the Middle

¹² PBBM renews call to tackle SCS issue, reduce tensions, October 11, 2024, https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/pbbm-renews-call-to-tackle-scs-issue-to-manage-differences-reduce-tensions/

East presents challenges to the region¹³. China's objections carried the day, as the relevant clauses were not included in the final statement.

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi used the opportunity to reiterate India's consistent support for the unity and centrality of ASEAN, including for India's Indo-Pacific vision and Quad cooperation¹⁴. He observed that a free, open, inclusive, prosperous and rules-based Indo-Pacific is crucial for the peace and progress of the entire region, and that maritime activities should be conducted in accordance with UNCLOS, ensuring freedom of navigation and airspace is essential. He also noted that it is essential to respect sovereignty, territorial integrity and international laws, and that to combat terrorism, forces that believe in humanity most come together and work in tandem.

The Maldives India Ties Reset

Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu came to India from October 06-10, seeking to mend fences and reset the bilateral relationship. The rapprochement had begun when he visited India in June 2024 to attend the swearing in of Prime Minister Modi and his Council of Ministers. The agenda for his visit included a call on the President of India, a meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and visits to Mumbai and Bengaluru for business events¹⁵.

The two leaders reviewed the gamut of bilateral relations. India underscored the importance attached by it to its relationship with the Maldives under its 'Neighbourhood First' Policy and the SAGAR Vision and reaffirmed its unwavering commitment to assist the Maldives on its developmental journey and priorities. President Muizzu thanked India for timely emergency financial assistance, including by rolling over T-bills subscribed by SBI amounting to \$ 100 million in May and September 2024 for a further period of one year. He also appreciated India's decision to extend support in the form of \$ 400 million and INR 30 billion as a bilateral currency swap agreement. The leaders agreed that it was time to transform the bilateral relationship to a Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership¹⁶.

¹³ US official accuses Russia and China of blocking Asia leaders' statement, October 13, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-official-accuses-russia-china-blocking-asia-leaders-statement-2024-10-12/>

¹⁴ English Translation of Prime Ministers' Intervention at the 19th East Asia Summit, Vientiane, Lao PDR, October 11, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2064069>

¹⁵ Visit of President of Maldives to India (October 6-10, 2024), <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38373/Visit+of+President+of+Maldives+to+India+October+6+10+2024>

¹⁶ India and Maldives: A vision for Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership, October 07, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2062780>



The two sides agreed to intensify exchanges at the leadership and ministerial levels, as well as to expand them to include exchanges of Parliamentarians and local government representatives. Towards developmental cooperation, India agreed to assist the Maldives in addressing housing challenges and accelerate ongoing social housing projects. India agreed to extend full support for timely completion of the Greater Male Connectivity Project and to undertake a feasibility study to connect the islands of Thilafushi and Giraavaru as an extension. India also agreed to collaborate on the development of a state-of-the-art commercial port at Thilafushi island, to explore collaboration for the development of transshipment and bunkering services project at Ihavandhippolhu and Gadhoo islands. Further, India agreed to work with the Maldives to harness the full potential of Hanimaadhoo and Gan airports, both being developed with Indian assistance, as well as other airports.

On the trade and economic cooperation front, both sides agreed to initiate discussions on a Bilateral Free Trade Agreement for goods and services. They agreed to operationalize settlement of trade transactions in local currencies, take steps for disseminating information related to investment opportunities and to support Maldives in diversification of its economy by strengthening cooperation in agriculture, fisheries, oceanography and the blue economy. They agreed to enhance efforts to boost tourism between the two countries.

The RuPay card was launched in the Maldives, and both sides agreed to work to enhance similar services to Maldivian nationals visiting India. They also agreed to cooperate by launch of India's UPI, Unique Digital Identify, Gati Shakti Scheme and other digital services to enhance e-governance and delivery of services through the digital domain for the people of Maldives.

On the defence and security front, both sides agreed that the ongoing Maldives National Defence Force 'Ekatha' harbour being built with India's assistance will significantly contribute to expanding MNDF capabilities and to extend full support for its timely completion. India agreed to support the Maldives with provision of defence platforms and assets; to support the Maldives in enhancing surveillance and monitoring capability with the provision of radar systems and other equipment; to support the Maldives on Hydrographic matters, to strengthen cooperation in the area of disaster response and risk mitigation; to inaugurate at an early date the state-of-the-art Maldivian MoD building in Male; to increase capacity building and training slots for MNDF, Maldives Police Services and other security organisations under the ITEC programme; and to extend financial assistance to develop and upgrade MNDF infrastructure.

Other cooperation initiatives under energy cooperation, health cooperation, capacity building and training, people-to-people linkages and cooperation at regional and multilateral fora. The leaders agreed to the refit of Maldivian Coast Guard Ship Huravee by India on a gratis basis¹⁷, inaugurated the new runway of Hanimadhoo International Airport, and witnessed the signing of MoUs between India's Rashtriya Raksha University and the Maldives' National College of Policing and Law Enforcement, as well as another between the Central Bureau of Investigation and Maldives' Anti-Corruption Commission on preventing and combating corruption.

What has changed for Muizzu, just over 10 months after coming to power on an 'India-out' platform and nine months after visiting China in January 2024? What is perhaps most evident is that the country he leads is facing a debt default. Its foreign exchange reserves have dropped to just \$ 440 million, barely enough for one and a half months of imports. Default risks have risen, with Fitch Ratings¹⁸ and Moody's¹⁹ both downgrading Maldives credit ratings. Financial assistance from China on acceptable terms has not been forthcoming. Notably, Muizzu told the BBC, "India is fully cognizant of our fiscal situation, and as one of our biggest development partners, will always be ready to ease our burden and find better alternatives and solutions to the challenges we face"²⁰.

The assistance promised by India will help the Maldives weather its financial challenges. The continued development of the Ekatha Harbour as well as development of a new port at Thilafushi will provide India continued leverage in the region.

Exercise Malabar Returns to the Indian Ocean

The last three editions of Exercise Malabar have been held in the Philippine Sea, the East China Sea and the Southern Pacific. Hosting of the 28th edition of the exercise by India off Visakhapatnam in the Bay of Bengal from October 08-18,

¹⁷ List of Outcomes: State visit of H.E. Dr. Mohamed Muizzu, President of the Republic of Maldives to India (October 06-October 10), 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/38385/List_of_Outcomes_State_Visit_of_H_E_Dr_Mohamed_Muizzu_President_of_the_Republic_of_Maldives_to_India_October_06_October_10_2024

¹⁸ Press Release: Credit rating action of the Maldives by Fitch Ratings, August 29, 2024, <https://www.finance.gov.mv/media/press-releases/press-release-credit-rating-action-of-the-maldives-by-fitch-ratings>

¹⁹ Press Release – Credit rating action of the Maldives by Moody's, September 11, 2024, <https://www.finance.gov.mv/media/press-releases/press-release-credit-rating-action-of-the-maldives-by-moodys>

²⁰ Maldives president in Delhi to seek aid and reboot ties, October 6, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c2ek1x3p7rjo>

2024 marks its return to the Indian Ocean after a gap of four years. This is also the fifth edition of the exercise in which all four Quad partners are participants.

Participating ships comprised HMAS Stuart from Australia, JS Ariake from Japan, IN Ships Delhi, Tabar, Kadmatt, Kamorta, Shakti and a submarine from India, and USS Dewey from the US. Special operations forces from all four countries also participated, along with P-8 MR/ASW aircraft from Australia, India and the US²¹. Ships also fielded embarked helicopters from the US MH60R family, with Japan fielding its licence-built version of the Sikorsky Seahawk.

The opening ceremony for the exercise was hosted by V Adm Rajesh Pendharkar, Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Naval Command²². It was attended by Gen. Yoshihide Yoshida, Chief of Staff of Japan's Joint Staff; Adm. Stephen Koehler, Commander US Pacific Fleet, V Adm Katsushi Omachi, C-inC Japan Self Defence Fleet, and R Adm Chris Smith, Commander Australian Fleet. The crew of participating ships and planning staff from all four countries were also present.

The Harbour Phase encompassed discussions on special operations as well as all three dimensions of warfare, along with sporting and familiarisation exchanges, a Distinguished Visitors' Day and a Joint Press Conference²³. The Sea Phase comprised complex and advanced exercises in all three dimensions: surface, air and sub-surface warfare, encompassing weapon firings, anti-aircraft shoots, air defence exercises, anti-submarine warfare exercises, operations of shipborne helicopters, refuelling at sea from the tanker, and maritime interdiction operations²⁴. A hot washup at the end enabled review of the operational aspects of the exercise, sharing of views and learning of lessons.

What purpose does Malabar serve? The first and most obvious one is fostering interoperability between the four navies. The personnel manning the ships and aircraft familiarise themselves with each other and gain insights into each other's way of thinking and operating. They use each other's logistics apparatus, including for fuel, provisions, water and power supply arrangements etc. They exercise with each other under controlled conditions, simulating all operations of warfare in the air, surface and underwater

²¹ India hosts Australia, Japan and US forces in Exercise Malabar 2024, October 09, 2024, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/3931242/india-hosts-australia-japan-and-us-forces-in-exercise-malabar-2024/>

²² Exercise Malabar 2024 – Opening Ceremony, October 09, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2063584>

²³ Harbour Activities of Malabar-2024, October 12, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2064361>

²⁴ Closing Ceremony of Malabar 2024, October 19, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2066287>

dimensions. They explore new ideas to solve tactical problems, discussing potential solutions and then implementing them, finding out their pros and cons.

The other is geopolitical signalling. Irrespective of protestations, China will believe that the exercise is preparation for the four partners acting in unison against China. It was excessive concern about this belief that wrecked the Quad in 2007. Malabar may not formally be part of the Quad's agenda, but China believes it is, and its actions will be shaped by this belief. Malabar thus signals the willingness of the partners to act to preserve a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Other Indo-Pacific Developments

Japan's Elections. Shigeru Ishiba was sworn in as the Prime Minister of Japan on October 01. He called a snap election on October 27, during which voters delivered a setback to Japan's ruling LDP-Komeito coalition, giving it only 215 seats in the 465 seat House of Representatives, short of a majority for the first time since 2009²⁵. A special session of the Diet will be convened in mid-November to elect the Prime Minister of Japan.

Prabowo Subianto Assumes Office as Indonesia's President. Prabowo Subianto was sworn in as Indonesia's eighth President, taking over from Joko Widodo on October 20²⁶. World leaders extended their felicitations.

China Tests Indonesia's New Administration. China is evidently testing Indonesia's new administration under Prabowo Subianto, with three successive intrusions by China Coast Guard vessels into Indonesia's exclusive maritime zones, the first occurring on the day of Prabowo's inauguration²⁷. China's nine-dash line claim overlaps with Indonesia's EEZ in the Natuna Sea. Though Indonesia doesn't recognise there is a dispute, it clearly exists in China's eyes, as CCG vessels claim they were patrolling their own maritime zones.

China's Coast Guard Expels Japanese Fishing Vessel from Senkaku Islands. China's Coast Guard claimed to have expelled the Japanese fishing vessel

²⁵ Japan faces political upheaval after LDP-led coalition loses majority, October 28, 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/10/28/japan/politics/lower-house-election-results/>

²⁶ Prabowo Subianto takes oath as eighth president of Indonesia, October 20, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/rest-of-world/prabowo-subianto-takes-oath-as-eighth-president-of-indonesia/articleshow/114389323.cms>

²⁷ Indonesian Coast Guard drives away a Chinese vessel in disputed waters for the third time in a week, October 26, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/indonesian-coast-guard-drives-chinese-vessel-disputed-waters-115177216>

Tsurumaru from the waters of the Senkaku Islands on October 15&16²⁸, urging Japanese vessels to respect China's claim to the Islands. The action calls into question the credibility of Japan's willingness to enforce its claim to the Senkaku Islands, or the peaceful resolution of disputes.

China's Coercion of Taiwan. Days after Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te delivered Taiwan's National Day address and said "The Republic of China and the People's Republic of China are not subordinate to each other" and "the People's Republic of China has no right to represent Taiwan"²⁹, the PLA's Eastern Theatre Command launched Exercise Joint Sword 2024B in an evident effort to intimidate Taiwan. Four China Coast Guard formations conducted law enforcement patrols around Taiwan³⁰, while the aircraft carrier Liaoning participated in the exercise³¹. The drills included troops from the army, navy, air force and rocket force operating in areas to the north, south and east of Taiwan, approaching the island from different directions³². The exercise was intended as a warning to separatist acts of "Taiwan independence" forces. The Pentagon decried the exercise and noted that deterrence remains strong in the Indo-Pacific³³.

North Korea's ICBM Test. On October 31, North Korea flight tested an ICBM which flew for a record 86 minutes and reached an altitude of 7000 Km, substantially more than the 74 minutes and 6000 Km than the previous record time of flight of its ICBMs³⁴. The range of the weapon on a normal trajectory is estimated at over 18000 Km, sufficient to hit mainland United States. The US, Japan and South Korea issued a joint statement condemning the launch³⁵.

²⁸ China Coast Guard expels Japanese vessel for unlawfully entering waters of Diaoyu Dao, October 17, 2024, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16346101.html

²⁹ President Lai delivers 2024 National Day Address, October 10, 2024, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6816>

³⁰ Four China Coast Guard formations conduct law enforcement patrols around Taiwan Island, October 14, 2024, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16345163.html

³¹ Liaoning aircraft carrier task group participates in "Joint Sword 2024B" drills around Taiwan, October 14, 2024, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16345345.html

³² Chinese PLA Eastern Theatre Command conducts "Joint Sword 2024B" drills, October 14, 2024, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16345116.html

³³ Statement from Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen Pat Ryder on PRC Military Drills Near Taiwan, October 14, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3934707/statement-from-pentagon-press-secretary-maj-gen-pat-ryder-on-prc-military-drill/>

³⁴ North Korea fires off ICBM with longest flight time yet, October 31, 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/10/31/asia-pacific/north-korea-missile-defense-chiefs/>

³⁵ Joint Statement on the DPRK Launch of an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, October 31, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-dprk-launch-of-an-intercontinental-ballistic-missile/>



France Becomes Vietnam's Seventh Comprehensive Strategic Partner. France became Vietnam's seventh comprehensive strategic partner during the visit of Vietnamese President To Lam to France from October 06-07. The Joint Declaration encompasses political, defence and security, economic, developmental and people-to-people cooperation³⁶.

Philippines South Korea Strategic Partnership. The Philippines and South Korea elevated their relationship to a strategic partnership on October 07³⁷. The event occurred during the state visit of South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol to the Philippines. The joint declaration issued on the occasion straddled political relations, defence and security cooperation, economic and development cooperation, people-to-people exchanges and socio-cultural cooperation, and regional and international cooperation. The two countries underscored their support for the complete denuclearisation of DPRK in accordance with relevant UN Security Council resolutions. Both countries reaffirmed the importance of respect for the rule of law, maritime security and safety, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. They also shared concerns about actions in the South China Sea that are inconsistent with the rules-based international order, which undermines peace and prosperity. They opposed militarization of reclaimed features, the dangerous use of coast guard and maritime militia vessels, and coercive activities.

SCO Summit. The 23rd Meeting of the Council of the Heads of Government of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was held in Islamabad from October 15-16, 2024. It was attended by the Prime Ministers of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; the First Vice-President of Iran; the Premier of the State Council of China; the Ministers Cabinet Chairman of Kyrgyzstan, and Dr. S. Jaishankar, India's External Affairs Minister. The Prime Minister of Mongolia attended as an observer, while the Deputy Chairman of Turkmenistan's Cabinet of Ministers attended as an invited guest. Delivering India's National Statement at the Summit, Dr. Jaishankar drew attention to the Charter of the SCO as providing solutions on how the organisation should respond to the challenges of the times³⁸. He called

³⁶ Joint Declaration on the establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between France and Vietnam, October 7, 2024, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2024/10/07/declaration-conjointe-sur-letablissement-dun-partenariat-strategique-global-entre-la-france-et-le-vietnam>

³⁷ Joint Declaration on the Strategic Partnership between the Republic of the Philippines and the Republic of Korea, October 07, 2024, https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/joint-declaration-on-the-strategic-partnership-between-the-republic-of-the-philippines-and-the-republic-of-korea/

³⁸ India's National Statement delivered by External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the 23rd Meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of Government in Islamabad, October 16, 2024, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches->

for sincere commitment to the Charter to fully realise the benefits of cooperation and the integration it envisages. He noted that if activities across borders are characterised by the three evils of terrorism, extremism and separatism, they are hardly likely to encourage trade, energy flows, connectivity and people-to-people exchanges in parallel.

EAM Visit to Colombo. Days after the Dissanayake administration assumed office in Sri Lanka, External Affairs Minister Dr. S Jaishankar visited Colombo on October 04³⁹. He met with President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, Prime Minister Dr. Harini Amarasuriya, Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath, as well as former President Ranil Wickremesinghe and SJB leader Sajith Premadasa. Dr. Jaishankar conveyed India's strong commitment to advance bilateral cooperation based on its 'Neighbourhood First' Policy and SAGAR Outlook. India offered to modernise Kankesanthurai port through grant assistance of \$ 61.5 million and conveyed that payment for Line of Credit projects to the tune of \$ 20 million could be converted into grant assistance. India also offered to gift 22 diesel locomotives to Sri Lanka. On defence and security, the meetings brought out that the interests of the two countries were aligned. President Dissanayake reiterated that Sri Lankan territory would never be allowed to be used in a manner inimical to India's security interests. The EAM conveyed an invitation from Prime Minister Modi to President Dissanayake to visit India at a mutually convenient date.

Marine Rotational Force SE Asia. Even as the US Marine Rotational Force at Darwin completed its overseas deployment, US marines and sailors from I Marine Expeditionary Force arrived in the Philippines as part of the third annual rotational deployment of the Marine Rotational Force SE Asia on October 3⁴⁰. MRF-SEA will remain in the region through March 2025, ensuring a near continuous presence of the USMC in the region.

South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting. Defence Ministers or their representatives from Australia, Chile, Fiji, France, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Tonga gathered in Auckland for the ninth annual South Pacific

[Statements.htm?dtl/38427/Indias_National_Statement_delivered_by_External_Affairs_Minister_Dr_S_Jaishankar_at_the_23rd_Meeting_of_the_SCO_Council_of_Heads_of_Government_in_Isla](#)

³⁹ Visit of External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar to Sri Lanka (October 4, 2024),

https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38375/External_Affairs_Minister_Dr_S_Jaishankar_to_Sri_Lanka_October_4_2024

⁴⁰ Marine Rotational Force – Southeast Asia Begins Third Annual Deployment, October 3, 2024, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3924808/marine-rotational-force-southeast-asia-begins-third-annual-deployment/>

Defence Ministers' Meeting from October 1-3⁴¹. They were joined by observers from Japan, UK and the US. The ministers recommitted to enhancing their ability to jointly respond to climate induced disasters, meet the demand for rapid and effective HADR response, address maritime security threats such as IUU fishing and transnational crime across their EEZs, and to tackle cyber threats, alongside other agencies. They called for the immediate establishment of a Pacific Response Group to enable more effective co-deployments.

US ROK 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue. Defence ministers from the Republic of Korea and the US held their 56th Security Consultative Meeting on October 30, and participated in the 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meeting on October 31⁴². The subjects discussed encompassed enhancing extended deterrence, modernising alliance capabilities and strengthening regional security cooperation. South Korea is concerned that in return for deploying troops to Ukraine, North Korea may get Russia's help in advancing its ballistic missile capability and in developing an SSBN.

VSHORADS. The DRDO successfully conducted three flight tests of the Very Short Range Air Defence System (VSHORADS) at the Pokhran field firing range on October 30⁴³. These tests complete the developmental process of the technology, which has now been handed over partner production agencies for operationalisation.

Nirdeshak Delivered. Nirdeshak, the second of the four large survey vessels being built by GRSE, was delivered to the Indian Navy on October 8⁴⁴. The first ship of the class, Sandhayak, had been commissioned in February 2024.

Sale of Mk 54 Mod 0 Lightweight Torpedoes to India. The US Stated Department notified approval of the possible sale of 53 MK 54 MOD 0 Lightweight Torpedoes to India on October 7 at an estimated cost of about \$ 175 million⁴⁵. The torpedoes are for use by the MH-60R helicopters procured by India from

⁴¹ South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting – Joint Communique, October 3, 2024, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2024-10-03/south-pacific-defence-ministers-meeting-joint-communique>

⁴² US-Republic of Korea Security Consultative Meeting and 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue Fact Sheet, October 30, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3951270/us-republic-of-korea-security-consultative-meeting-and-22-ministerial-dialogue/>

⁴³ DRDO Successfully Tests Fourth Generation Very Short-Range Air Defence System at Pokhran Field Firing Ranges in Rajasthan, October 5, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2062339>

⁴⁴ Delivery of Yard 3026 (Nirdeshak), October 08, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2063279>

⁴⁵ India – MK 54 MOD 0 Lightweight Torpedoes, October 7, 2024, <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/india-mk-54-mod-0-lightweight-torpedoes>

the US and will be used to enhance India's stockpile. Implementation of the sale may require the assignment of an estimated 12 US government and one contractor representative to India per year, for training and technical assistance.

CCS Approves Construction of Two SSNs by India. India's Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) was reported to have cleared the Rs 40,000 crore Project 77 to construct two nuclear attack submarines in India on October 9⁴⁶. The CCS also approved the procurement of 31 MQ-9B Sea/Sky Guardian drones at a cost of Rs 28,000 crores. The first SSN, with a 190 MW reactor and an underwater speed of over 30 knots, is expected to become available in 10-12 years. The building of four more SSNs is expected to be cleared later.

Procurement of MQ-9B Sea / Sky Guardians. India's Ministry of Defence signed the contract for procurement of 15 Sea Guardian drones for the Navy, as well as 16 Sky guardian drones (eight each for the Army and Air Force) on October 15⁴⁷. Another contract was signed with General Atomics Global India Pvt. Ltd. for performance based logistics for these drones through depot level MRO in India.

New VLF Station. Raksha Mantri laid the foundation stone for the new VLF station being built at Vikarabad on October 15⁴⁸. The station, when completed, will provide an alternate VLF facility for communication with India's submarines, which presently depend on the existing facility at INS Kattaboman, in Tirunelveli.

C-295 Aircraft Factory Inaugurated. The C-295 transport aircraft factory was inaugurated in Gujarat on October 28. Speaking on the occasion, Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed confidence that the factory would soon export its aircraft to the world⁴⁹.

Launch of Abhay. Abhay, the seventh ship of the ASW Shallow Water Craft ordered from GRSE, was launched at L&T Shipyard, Kattupalli, on October 25⁵⁰.

⁴⁶ India clears to mega defence projects for 2 indigenous nuclear submarines and 31 Predator drones, October 9, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-clears-two-mega-defence-projects-for-2-indigenous-nuclear-submarines-31-predator-drones/articleshow/114095147.cms>

⁴⁷ Spokesperson MoD, <https://x.com/SpokespersonMoD/status/1846121203846590942>

⁴⁸ Raksha Mantri lays foundation stone for India's Very Low Frequency Station in Vikarabad, Telengana, to bolster Navy's operational readiness, October 15, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2064991>

⁴⁹ English Rendering of Prime Minister's Speech at the Inauguration Ceremony of the C-295 Aircraft Factory, October 28, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2068891>

⁵⁰ Launch of Abhay, Seventh Ship of ASW SWC (GRSE) Project, October 25, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2068207>

Exercise SIMBEX-2024. The 31st edition of the India-Singapore bilateral maritime exercise SIMBEX took place from October 23-29⁵¹.

Navika Sagar Parikrama II. Two women officers of the Indian Navy embarked on a circumnavigation of the globe sailing voyage from Goa on October 02⁵². The officers sailed out on INSV Tarini, and will route via Fremantle (Australia), Lyttleton, New Zealand, Port Stanley, Falklands, and Cape town, South Africa, before returning to Goa.

India's Maritime Interaction with Other Countries

Dates	Participants	Event
01-04 Oct		Visit to Bander Abbas ⁵³ , Iran
05-09 Oct	INS Tir, INS Shardul, ICGS Veera	Visit to Muscat, Sultanate of Oman ⁵⁴
12-15 Oct	INS Tir, ICGS Veera	Visit to Manama, Bahrain ⁵⁵
	INS Shardul	Visit to Port Rashid, Dubai
02 Oct	INSV Tarini	Departs Goa for circumnavigation of the globe ⁵⁶ .
19-21 Oct	INS Kalpeni	Visit to Colombo ⁵⁷ , Sri Lanka
06-18 Oct	INS Talwar	Visit to Simon's Town, South Africa and participation in Ex IBSAMAR VIII ⁵⁸
08-18 Oct	Ships and aircraft from the Indian, Japanese, Australian and US Navies	Ex Malabar 2024 in Bay of Bengal
13-18 Oct	INS Trikand, RNOV Al-Seeb, Dornier	India Oman Exercise Naseem al Bahr ⁵⁹

⁵¹ Singapore India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX) 2024 – 23 to 29 October 2024, October 24, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2067816>

⁵² INSV Tarini Sails Out for Navika Sagar Parikrama II, October 02, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2061255>

⁵³ Indian Navy's First Training Squadron Visits Bander Abbas, Iran, October 01, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2060748>

⁵⁴ First Training Squadron Concludes visit to Muscat, Oman, October 12, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2064412>

⁵⁵ Visit of First Training Squadron to Bahrain and UAE, October 13, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2064549>

⁵⁶ INSV Tarini Sails Out for Navika Sagar Parikrama II, October 02, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2061255>

⁵⁷ INS Kalpeni arrives in Colombo, October 19, 2024, <https://news.navy.lk/eventnews/2024/10/19/202410191600/>

⁵⁸ INS Talwar Arrives South Africa to Participate in IBSAMAR VIII, October 09, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2063543>

⁵⁹ Indian Navy Royal Navy of Oman Maritime Exercise (Naseem Al Bahr), October 20, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2066452>



Dates	Participants	Event
21-24 Oct	Admiral DK Tripathi, CNS	Official visit to UAE ⁶⁰
23-29 Oct	Indian and Singapore Navy Ships	Exercise SIMBEX 2024 ⁶¹
27-30 Oct	INS Talwar	Visit to La Reunion ⁶²

⁶⁰ Admiral Dinesh K Tripathi, Chief of the Naval Staff on an Official Visit to United Arab Emirates, October 21, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2066585>

⁶¹ Singapore India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX) 2024 – 23-29 Oct 2024, October 24, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2067816>

⁶² INS Talwar Arrives La Reunion, France, October 28, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2068869>



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