



# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



## EAST ASIA EXPLORER AUGUST 2024

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## East Asia Explorer

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*The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Delhi Policy Group as an Institution.*

### Cover Image:

*Dr. S. Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister of India, with Foreign Ministers of ASEAN Member States at the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference with India in Vientiane, Lao PDR on July 26, 2024. (Source: [Dr. Jaishankar/Official X Account](#))*

*Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Mr. Pham Minh Chinh at the Joint Press Statements at Hyderabad House, in New Delhi on August 01, 2024. (Source: [PM India/Official Website](#))*

*Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mr. Dato Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim at Hyderabad House, in New Delhi on August 20, 2024. (Source: [PM India/Official Website](#))*

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## ASEAN Foreign Ministerial Meetings 2024

by

Anshita Shukla

The 57<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting and related meetings took place in Vientiane, Laos from July 25 to 27, 2024. This included 15 ministerial meetings with ASEAN's Dialogue Partners – Australia, Canada, China, the E.U., Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, and the U.S. Dr. S Jaishankar, represented India at the 31st ASEAN Regional Forum, 14th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting, and co-chaired the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference with India.

These were the first series of meetings held under the new ASEAN Chair, Laos. A small country with limited economic and political influence within the Southeast Asian region and a close relationship with China, Laos, is charged with navigating the divided group through a complex geopolitical terrain marked by escalating tensions. The theme unveiled by the new chair is "Enhancing Connectivity and Resilience" with a focus on 'intensifying ASEAN cooperation under the three community pillars, promoting infrastructure connectivity, narrowing development gap, promoting greater economic integration and people-to-people exchanges, and further strengthening ASEAN's relations with external partners, while maintaining ASEAN's relevance and ASEAN Centrality in the evolving regional architecture'<sup>1</sup>. The priority areas reflect a clear focus on economic and connectivity issues and the rising geopolitical contestations in the region.

### 57th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM)

The 57<sup>th</sup> AMM was convened on July 25, 2024, and was chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Lao PDR, Saleumxay Kommasith. The meeting witnessed the participation of foreign ministers of member states and Myanmar was represented by Aung Kyaw Moe, the permanent secretary of the junta-controlled Foreign Ministry<sup>2</sup>. A Joint Communiqué<sup>3</sup> was produced two days after the conclusion of the meeting.

<sup>1</sup> ASEAN LAO PDR 2024. 2024. "Theme - ASEAN LAO PDR 2024." July 25, 2024. <https://www.laoschairmanship2024.gov.la/theme/>.

<sup>2</sup> Yee, Tan Hui. 2024. "Myanmar Junta Official 'Hopeful' for Myanmar to Regain Normal Status in Asean." The Straits Times, July 24, 2024. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/myanmar-junta-official-hopeful-for-myanmar-to-regain-normal-status-in-asean>.

<sup>3</sup> ASEAN. 2024. "JOINT COMMUNIQUÉ OF THE 57th ASEAN FOREIGN MINISTERS' MEETING." <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Final-Joint-Communique-of-the-57th-AMM.pdf>.

The key outcomes and developments of the 57<sup>th</sup> AMM, according to the joint communique, are as follows.

1. The Foreign Ministers adopted two papers- (i) Recommendations to enhance the role of the Secretary-General of ASEAN and (ii) Enhancing resource mobilization for ASEAN's work and the ASEAN Secretariat.
2. The leaders approved Timor-Leste's accession to the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) and reaffirmed their commitment to engaging with other Nuclear Weapon States for their early accession to the Protocol to the SEANWFZ Treaty.
3. The joint statement highlighted the anticipated accession of Algeria, Luxembourg, Spain, Mexico, and Finland to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC).
4. The ministers expect the adoption of the Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2025-2029), the ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Joint Statement on Strengthening Humanitarian Mine Action Cooperation, the Joint Statement of ASEAN and Russia Foreign Ministers Commemorating the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Russia's Accession to the TAC, and the ASEAN-UK Joint Ministerial.
5. The meeting welcomed the establishment of the ASEAN-U.S. Centre at Arizona State University to enhance ASEAN-U.S. cooperation and the ongoing consultations on the establishment of the ASEAN-Australia Centre.

The Joint Communique of the meeting addressed various critical regional and international developments-

### **Developments in the South China Sea**

The most critical geopolitical development in the neighbourhood is the rising contestation in the South China Sea. Over the past year, tensions have reached an all-time high between the Philippines and China in the West Philippines Sea. However, this rapidly deteriorating situation is not reflected in the Joint Communique from the foreign ministers meeting. The two paragraphs on the South China Sea remain identical to the section in the 56<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Jakarta from July 11-12, 2023. The latest joint statement reaffirms its commitment to upholding international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS, and the need to maintain and promote peace, security, stability, safety, and freedom of navigation in and overflight above the South China Sea. The only difference between the documents is the reference to the third reading of the Single Draft COC Negotiating Text (SDNT).

The identical sections on the South China Sea over a year, and under different chairmanships, reflect the lack of progress on countering China's actions in the South China Sea without a conclusion of the COC in sight. The statements continue to omit any direct references to China or its unilateral actions in the South China Sea. Thus, claimant states like the Philippines and Vietnam have chosen to engage with other powers to navigate the tense security environment, which seemingly undermines ASEAN centrality.

### Developments in Myanmar

As ethnic rebels gain ground against the junta in Myanmar, ASEAN maintains its commitment to the '5 Point Consensus' as the central means to address the political crisis in Myanmar. The 2024 Foreign Ministers Joint Communiqué noted progress in the fourth point, humanitarian assistance by ASEAN, with a total food and non-food distribution worth USD 1.88 million as of July 10, 2024. The ASEAN ministers condemned violence against civilians and maintained their commitment to engage with all relevant stakeholders in the conflict.

### Situation in Ukraine

A short paragraph is dedicated to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, identical to the statement issued last year. The statement reaffirmed ASEAN's support for sovereignty and territorial integrity and called for an immediate cessation of hostilities, facilitation of humanitarian assistance, and compliance with the UN Charter and international law.

### Developments in the Middle East

The longest section of the joint statement is dedicated to the Israel-Gaza war in the Middle East. The statement expresses grave concern over the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and urges for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages, including 23 ASEAN nationals. It called for sustained humanitarian access and a peaceful resolution to the conflict by urging all parties to accept the ceasefire proposal as outlined in paragraph 2 of UN Security Council Resolution 2735.

In a departure from the 2023 Foreign Ministers Statement, the JC "acknowledges" the Advisory Opinion of the ICJ that UNSC and UNGA should consider 'further action required to bring to an end, as rapidly as possible, to the unlawful presence of the State of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory'. The ASEAN members continue to support a two-state solution, as highlighted in the Joint Communiqué.



The developments in the Middle East have driven another wedge between the member countries on their divided response with countries with Muslim majority populations like Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei expressing unity with Palestine. Singapore and the Philippines voiced strong condemnation of the actions of Hamas, while Thailand maintained a neutral stance. Other countries like Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia expressed concern over the crisis without attributing blame to any party involved<sup>4</sup>.

### Developments on the Korean Peninsula

On the Korean Peninsula, the Ministers expressed concern over the DPRK's intercontinental ballistic missile testing and ballistic missile launches. The statement reaffirmed its commitment towards realising a complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner and the creation of a conducive environment for peaceful dialogue among all concerned parties. They called on DPRK to comply fully with all relevant UNSC Resolutions. The statement on the escalating nuclear programme of North Korea remains identical to the joint statement by the Foreign Ministers in 2023.

### 31<sup>st</sup> ASEAN Regional Forum

The 31st Meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was held on July 27, 2024, and was chaired by Mr. Saleumxay Kommasith, Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The ministers endorsed the adoption of the ARF Work Plan on Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime 2024-2026, the ARF Work Plan on Disaster Relief 2024-2027, and the ARF Statement on Enhancing Regional Cooperation on Ferry Safety<sup>5</sup>. The key areas identified for future cooperation are:

- Terrorism, violent extremism conducive to terrorism (VECT), and transnational organised crime,
- Maritime domain, and shared concern over piracy, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, the degradation of marine ecosystem and biodiversity,
- Disaster management particularly in areas of early warning and preparedness, taking into account the region's vulnerability to natural disasters, climate change and rising sea levels,

<sup>4</sup> "History and Domestic Dynamics: How ASEAN Members See the Hamas-Israeli Conflict." n.d. Lowy Institute. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/history-domestic-dynamics-how-asean-members-see-hamas-israeli-conflict>.

<sup>5</sup> KOMMASITH, Saleumxay. 2024. "Chairman's Statement of the 31st ASEAN Regional Forum." ASEAN Regional Forum. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Final-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-31st-ARF.pdf>.

- Advancing nuclear disarmament.

Dr. S Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister of India, participated in the 31<sup>st</sup> ARF meeting and highlighted India's position on regional and international affairs<sup>6</sup>. The minister characterised the current geopolitical predicament by three C's- 'Covid, Conflict and Climate'. To navigate this environment, he stressed the need to enhance cooperation in economic, political, technological and connectivity spheres. Dr. Jaishankar reaffirmed India's support of ASEAN unity, centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP). According to Dr. S. Jaishankar the ARF has the ability "to make a difference" in combating terrorism, dismantling terror sanctuaries and terrorism financing networks and in tackling cybercrime. He highlighted the synergy between India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative and the AOIP and the complementarity of Quad's agenda with ASEAN's efforts towards regional stability.

In comparison to Dr. Jaishankar's address at the 30<sup>th</sup> ARF in Jakarta on July 14, 2023, there were two distinguishing points in his speech this year<sup>7</sup>. During last year's meeting, the minister had highlighted the Myanmar issue and spoken of advancing the projects of India-ASEAN connectivity. This was absent in his speech this year, along with references to the Global South and diversification of supply chains. However, a new point focusing on the role of Quad in supplementing ASEAN efforts was underscored by the External Affairs minister in his address this year.

### 14th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting

The 14th East Asia Summit (EAS) Foreign Ministers' Meeting was convened on July 27, 2024. The meeting was chaired by Saleumxay Kommasith, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Lao PDR. The ministers discussed the following areas of cooperation- peace and security, sustainable development, climate, environment and energy cooperation, education cooperation, finance, global health issues and pandemic diseases, cooperation on natural disaster management, cooperation on ASEAN connectivity, economic cooperation and trade, poverty alleviation, food security, maritime cooperation, tourism cooperation, advancement and empowerment of women

<sup>6</sup> "Dr. S. Jaishankar On X: 'Participated At the 31st ASEAN Regional Forum #ARF In Vientiane Today. Highlighted That: Covid, Conflict and Climate Highlight Our Predicament Today. Solutions Can Only Emerge Through Cooperation - Economic, Political, Technological and Connectivity. Neither the https://t.co/03WyeIUdTJ' / X." n.d. X (Formerly Twitter). <https://x.com/DrSJaishankar/status/1817142540887609659>.

<sup>7</sup> Jaishankar, S. 2023. "Visit of Dr. S. Jaishankar Hon'ble External Affairs Minister to Jakarta, Indonesia to Participate in ASEAN-INDIA Foreign Ministers' Meeting; 13TH EAS Foreign Ministers' Meeting; and 30TH ASEAN Regional Forum and Other Meetings (12-15 July, 2023)." [https://www.indmissionasean.gov.in/pdf/Visi\\_indonesia\\_18jul.pdf](https://www.indmissionasean.gov.in/pdf/Visi_indonesia_18jul.pdf).



and youth participation, and strengthening EAS institutional capacity. The meeting supported the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Climate Change to enhance regional cooperation on climate action and sustainability<sup>8</sup>.

A decade since the announcement of India's Act East Policy at the 9<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit, Dr. Jaishankar reiterated India's commitment to ASEAN unity and centrality in his remarks at the 14<sup>th</sup> EAS<sup>9</sup>. India's commitment to EAS processes is reflected through the recently concluded Maritime Security Cooperation meeting held in Mumbai, India from July 4-5, 2024, and the establishment of Nalanda University. He urged more members of the EAS to join IPOI, which is in convergence with AOIP. The External Affairs Minister addressed critical regional and international issues in his remarks. He underscored the importance of peace and stability of the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) passing through the South China Sea for the Indo-Pacific Region. The Indian Minister urged for a substantive and effective Code of Conduct consistent with international law. On Myanmar, Dr. Jaishankar vocalised India's stance "on ensuring border security, countering trans-national crime, mitigating violence and advancing connectivity projects", in tandem with ASEAN. He urged for de-escalation and restraint in the ongoing Gaza conflict and highlighted India's efforts to ensure the safety and security of maritime shipping. Lastly, he stressed the importance of dialogue and diplomacy for addressing the conflict in Ukraine.

Dr. Jaishankar's remarks at the 14<sup>th</sup> EAS Foreign Ministers are more comprehensive, addressing a wider range of issues as compared to his remarks at the 13<sup>th</sup> EAS Foreign Ministers on July 14, 2023<sup>10</sup>. In the previous year, his remarks focused on ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific and the convergence between the AOIP and IPOI. On this occasion he stressed Quad's complementary role to the ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms.

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<sup>8</sup> "CHAIRMAN'S STATEMENT OF THE 14TH EAST ASIA SUMMIT (EAS) FOREIGN MINISTERS' MEETING." 2024. EAS Foreign Ministers' Meeting. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-14th-EAS-FMM.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> "Dr. S. Jaishankar On X: 'Spoke At the 14th East Asia Summit #EAS Foreign Ministers Meeting In Vientiane. Conveyed That: EAS Process Completes Two Decades Next Year & India Will Contribute Towards Stronger EAS Process. Act East Policy, Announced At 9th EAS, Completes a Decade. India Will <https://t.co/s0bevHJZoA> / X." n.d. X (Formerly Twitter). <https://x.com/DrSJaishankar/status/1817112542990467264?lang=en>.

<sup>10</sup> "Dr. S. Jaishankar On X: 'Spoke At the 13th EAS Foreign Ministers Meeting In Jakarta. Conveyed That: EAS Must Be Committed To a Free, Open, Inclusive and Rules Based Indo-Pacific, With Respect for Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity. India Firmly Supports the ASEAN Outlook On the Indo-Pacific <https://t.co/HSqMPUmx5s> / X." n.d. X (Formerly Twitter). <https://x.com/DrSJaishankar/status/1679720258675015680>.

## ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference with India

The ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference with India was held on July 26, 2024. The meeting was co-chaired by S. Jaishankar, Minister of External Affairs of India and Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Singapore, and country coordinator for India at ASEAN. According to the official readout of the meeting, the leaders discussed ways to further enhance cooperation and develop a successor document to realise the full potential of India-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership within the next five years<sup>11</sup>.

Dr. S Jaishankar in his remarks, stressed the importance of ASEAN in India's Act East Policy and India's Indo-Pacific Vision. He announced the progress made on the 12-point plan laid out by Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi during his visit to Jakarta in September 2023. India prioritises political, economic, security, and people-to-people cooperation with ASEAN, as stated in his official remarks. He welcomed Timor-Leste as an Observer State in the meeting and signalled the upcoming Embassy in Delhi will be opening shortly, followed by high-level visits. The Philippines will be taking on as the country coordinator for India to ASEAN, which was welcomed by Dr. S. Jaishankar.

The External Affairs Minister's remarks did not differ significantly from his remarks last year at the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference with India in Jakarta on July 13, 2023. He stressed enhancing cooperation in areas of cyber, financial and maritime security domains. These points were incorporated in the 12-point plan to facilitate closer cooperation between India and ASEAN unveiled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the 20th ASEAN-India Summit<sup>12</sup>.

## Conclusion

The Southeast Asian region today is divided over the Israel-Gaza conflict, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China's rising assertions in the South China Sea,, and the Myanmar coup. A fragmented ASEAN has led to fractured consensus building disallowing concrete and pragmatic progress on regional and international developments of consequence.

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<sup>11</sup> Jow\_Han. 2024. "ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference With India Reaffirms Commitment to Enhance Comprehensive Strategic Partnership." ASEAN Main Portal. July 29, 2024. <https://asean.org/asean-post-ministerial-conference-with-india-reaffirms-commitment-to-enhance-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>.

<sup>12</sup> "Prime Minister's Participation in the 20th ASEAN-India Summit and the 18th East Asia Summit." n.d. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dt1%2F37070%2FPrime\\_Ministers\\_participation\\_in\\_the\\_20th\\_ASEANIndia\\_Summit\\_and\\_the\\_18th\\_East\\_Asia\\_Summit](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dt1%2F37070%2FPrime_Ministers_participation_in_the_20th_ASEANIndia_Summit_and_the_18th_East_Asia_Summit).

Bilahari Kausikan's famous characterisation of the goal of ASEAN "to manage relations between states" is soon eroding.

"While the member states are not in conflict with one another, they remain at loggerheads on several critical issues. An institution, best equipped to deal with economic and socio-cultural relations, is now faced with imminent geopolitical realities that challenge ASEAN's legitimacy".

The Joint Statements that have emerged from the multiple Foreign Ministers meetings reflect these exact complexities, showcasing no real progress but sustained and institutionalised dialogue even in the face of adversity.

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## 'Act East Policy' – Dr S. Jaishankar's Interactions with Counterparts in Southeast Asia

by

Jayantika Rao T.V.

India is celebrating a decade of the 'Act East Policy' this year, previously known as the 'Look East Policy'. The policy, redesigned in 2014 holds immense strategic importance as it aims to rejuvenate and accelerate India's eastward engagement. The 'Act East Policy', as articulated by India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) centres on the extended neighbourhood in the Indo-Pacific region, with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) at its core. Its principal aim is to foster economic collaboration, cultural ties and cultivate strategic relationships with countries in the Indo-Pacific region through continuous engagement at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels, thereby facilitating comprehensive connectivity encompassing political, economic, cultural and people to people relations.<sup>13</sup> As the ten-year milestone has reached scrutiny is heightened on India's relationship with the countries encompassed by the 'Act East Policy'. To underscore India's position on this policy, there has, in the recent past been a surge in bilateral and multilateral interactions resulting in pivotal accords. Notably, during the past two months, Dr. S. Jaishankar, the External Affairs Minister, has engaged in discussions with his counterparts in a number of countries, including the Maldives, Singapore, South Korea, and Japan.

India's Act East Policy places significance on its relations with Myanmar in order to enhance its influence in Southeast Asia, particularly among the ASEAN countries. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP) is a crucial initiative that aims to strengthen economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asia by providing an alternative to the Siliguri Corridor. Once completed, the project will establish connectivity between India's Kolkata Port and Myanmar's Sittwe Port in Rakhine or Arakan State, and further extend to Mizoram via road and the Kaladan River in Paletwa.<sup>14</sup> However, the crucial US\$484 million project has been stalled due to significant challenges including land compensation disputes, coordination failure and the complex domestic political terrain in Myanmar. These challenges poses a serious threat to the successful implementation of the policy.

<sup>13</sup> "Question No-1456 India's Act East Policy". Ministry of External Affairs, July 28, 2023. <https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?>

<sup>14</sup> "Question No-1411 Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project". Ministry of External Affairs, July 28, 2023. <https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?>

For India, the deteriorating security situation in Myanmar is a significant concern. Therefore, India attempts to have a balanced relationship with its neighbour by engaging with both the Military Junta and the opposition – the National Unity Government. This sentiment was reiterated during Dr Jaishankar's meeting with Myanmar's Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, U Than Swe on the sidelines of the BIMSTEC Foreign Ministers' Retreat in New Delhi on July 11, 2024.<sup>15</sup> Following his meeting with Minister Swe, Dr Jaishankar stated that he shared India's concerns "on border stability and flow of displaced persons" and also discussed issues like "illegal narcotics, arms trade and activities of insurgent groups."<sup>16</sup> In the same post on X, Dr Jaishankar also reiterated that "India supports the return to democracy in Myanmar and engages all stakeholders in that regard". Dr. Jaishankar also held a trilateral meeting with Thai Foreign Minister Maris Sangiampongsa and Myanmar Foreign Minister Than Swe, revealing that they focussed on connectivity projects, which will play an important role for BIMSTEC and India's relations with Southeast Asia as well.

India's Act East Policy is supported by the active participation of the Minister of External Affairs in bilateral dialogues. This was emphasised on the sidelines of the Foreign Ministers' Meetings under the ASEAN framework and other ASEAN-related meetings in Vientiane, Laos from July 25 to 27, when Dr S Jaishankar engaged in bilateral discussions with several of his counterparts, strategically utilising ASEAN to cultivate robust ties with member and observer states. Some notable meetings were those with Enrique A. Manalo, Secretary of Foreign Affairs of Philippines (July 25)<sup>17</sup>, Bendito Freitas, Timor-Leste, Wang Yi, Foreign Minister of People's Republic of China (July 25)<sup>18</sup>, SOK Chenda Sophea, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cambodia (July

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<sup>15</sup> "External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar met H.E. U Than Swe, Deputy Prime Minister & Foreign Minister of Myanmar on the sidelines of BIMSTEC Foreign Ministers' Retreat in New Delhi". Ministry of External Affairs July 11, 2024.

<https://www.mea.gov.in/newsdetail1.htm?12367/>

<sup>16</sup> Dr S. Jaishankar (@DrSJaishankar). "Met with DPM and FM U Than Swe of Myanmar on the sidelines of BIMSTEC Foreign Ministers' Retreat". X, July 11, 2024.

<https://twitter.com/DrSJaishankar/status/1811395025953247293>

<sup>17</sup> "External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar met H.E. Mr. Enrique A. Manalo, Secretary for Foreign Affairs of the Philippines in Vientiane". Ministry of External Affairs, July 25, 2024.

<https://www.mea.gov.in/newsdetail1.htm?12404/>

<sup>18</sup> "External Affairs Minister's meeting with Member of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Political Bureau and Foreign Minister, H.E. Mr. Wang Yi on the sidelines of ASEAN-related Foreign Ministers' Meetings". Ministry of External Affairs, July 25, 2024.

<https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/>

25)<sup>19</sup>, Sanya Praseuth, Chairman of Foreign Affairs Committee (26 July)<sup>20</sup> and Mohamad Hasan, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia (July 26)<sup>21</sup>.

While the official statements pertaining to the discussions with the Southeast Asian counterparts were not comprehensive, they essentially reaffirmed their bilateral relationships and deliberated upon the geopolitical landscape in the Indo-Pacific. For instance, during the meeting with Minister Manalo, both the Ministers explored opportunities for enhanced collaboration between their nations and reinforced their partnership in the Indo-Pacific region. They emphasised the importance of upholding the rule of law and maintaining ASEAN centrality. Minister Jaishankar expressed his satisfaction at meeting with Foreign Minister Manalo, highlighting the mutual interests and shared values uniting India and the Philippines. In essence, Dr. Jaishankar's purposeful engagements on the sidelines of the ASEAN-related meetings served to reaffirm and bolster the multifaceted cooperation between India and its partners in Southeast and East Asia, which had already undergone a comprehensive review in the preceding months through Dr. Jaishankar's numerous interactions with regional counterparts.

After completing his meetings in Laos, Dr Jaishankar travelled to Tokyo to participate in the Quad's Foreign Ministers' Meeting on July 29. On the sidelines, Dr Jaishankar held a meeting with Kamikawa Yoko, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan. During the meeting, Ms Kamikawa stated that, as the world is at a turning point in history, Japan seeks to further work with India, an important partner in "co-creating" new solutions through dialogue and collaboration, and to further strengthen cooperation between the two countries. In response, Minister Jaishankar stated that, the Japan-India Special Strategic Global Partnership marks its 10th anniversary, and that he would like to further deepen cooperation in a wide range of areas, including economic, security and people-to-people exchanges. The two Ministers concurred to

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<sup>19</sup> "H.E. Deputy Prime Minister SOK Chenda Sophea holds bilateral discussion with H.E. DR. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar". Kingdom of Cambodia – Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. July 25, 2024. <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2024-07-25-News-H-E--Deputy-Prime-Minister-SOK-Chenda-Sopheaholds-bilateral-discussion-with-H-E--DR--Subrahmanyam-J-22-06-45>

<sup>20</sup> Dr S. Jaishankar (@DrSJaishankar). "Pleased to meet Lao PDR Minister of Home Affairs Vilayvong Bouddakham, Minister of Industry and Commerce Malaithong Kommasith, Chairman of Foreign Affairs Committee Sanya Praseuth and Special Envoy Alounkeo Kittikhoun." X, July 26, 2024. <https://x.com/DrSJaishankar/status/1816729438136221908>

<sup>21</sup> "External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar met H.E. Mohamad Haji Hasan, Foreign Minister of Malaysia on the sidelines of ASEAN meetings in Vientiane". Ministry of External Affairs, July 26, 2024. <https://www.mea.gov.in/newsdetail1.htm?12417/>



continue to strengthen a wide range of efforts on bilateral cooperation including the steady progress on the high-speed rail project.<sup>22</sup>

Later during the month of August, Jaishankar paid an official visit to Singapore to participate in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round of the India-Singapore Ministerial Roundtable (ISMR) on August 26, 2024.<sup>23</sup> The inaugural meeting of ISMR convened in New Delhi, on September 17, 2022.<sup>24</sup> The Roundtable was established to strengthen the strategic partnership between India and Singapore, and to foster stronger diplomatic and economic ties. The roundtable is geared towards enhancing trade relations amplifying the exchange of goods and services between the two countries and creating opportunities to attract more foreign direct investments (FDI).

The Indian delegation led by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman deliberated upon the six pillars of ISMR, particularly Sustainability, Digitalisation, Skills Development, and Healthcare & Medicine, identified during the 1<sup>st</sup> meeting of ISMR.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, discussions encompassed the expansion of bilateral cooperation and the addition of two new pillars – Advanced Manufacturing, encompassing semiconductors, and Connectivity- to fortify bilateral cooperation. The outcomes of the 2<sup>nd</sup> round of ISMR, especially the addition of semiconductors, demonstrate the progress made and the strengthening of the strategic partnership between India and Singapore.

The high-level meeting between the senior ministers from both sides, which included different ministries, was important as it served as an effective avenue for bilateral cooperation, allowing the relationship to deepen at a strategic level and not just remain at the surface. Additionally, Dr Balakrishnan called the ministers-only meeting “productive” and said it also sets the stage for an official visit to Singapore by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which will “occur shortly”.<sup>26</sup> The ISMR is considered significantly impactful, as it has

<sup>22</sup> “Japan-India Foreign Ministers’ Meeting”. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, July 29, 2024. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite\\_000001\\_00460.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_00460.html)

<sup>23</sup> “Visit of Indian Ministers to Singapore for the Second India-Singapore Ministerial Roundtable (ISMR), 26 August 2024”. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, August 25, 2024. <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2024/08/20240825-2ndismr>

<sup>24</sup> “India- Singapore Relations”. High Commission of India, August 2024. <https://www.hcisingapore.gov.in/pages?>

<sup>25</sup> “Transcript of Minister’s Doorstop Interview Following the 2nd India-Singapore Ministerial Roundtable at Shangri-La Singapore”. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore August 26, 2024” <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2024/08/20240826-Doorstop-India-Singapore-Ministerial-Roundtable>

<sup>26</sup> “Singapore and India add semiconductors, air connectivity to high-level ministerial discussions”. The Strait Times. August 27, 2024. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/s-pore-and-india-add-semiconductors-air-connectivity-to-high-level-ministerial-discussions>

already yielded substantial results, such as the integration between Singapore's PayNow and India's Unified Payment Interface (digitisation pillar), enabling real-time fund transfers between financial institutions of both countries. Consequently, the ongoing discussions and refinement of initiatives and new pillars of the relationship are expected to pave the way for enhanced cooperation.

In light of the shift in strategic competition towards the Indo-Pacific region, India's 'Act East Policy', facilitating both multilateral and bilateral approaches, has assumed heightened significance. In its present form, India's outreach and engagement through this policy have yielded positive outcomes with various Southeast and East Asian nations. Dr. S. Jaishankar's dialogues with his counterparts from these diverse countries have paved the way for India's aspirations for more profound involvement with Southeast Asia. India's vigorous use of the Act East Policy underscores the region's significance for the country.

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## China: the Elephant in the Room as Pacific Leaders Meet in Tonga

by  
Pradeep Taneja

It is very common these days for China to be front of mind for political leaders when discussing regional or global issues at international gatherings. This was the case at the recently (26-30 August 2024) concluded 53<sup>rd</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' meeting in Nuku'alofa, Tonga. China has been a dialogue partner of the PIF since 1990 and its representatives never miss the forum's meetings.

Although not a dialogue partner or enjoying the observer status with the PIF, Taiwan's representatives have also actively participated in the annual meetings and other events as a 'development partner' since 1993. As in previous years, the PIF Secretariat organised the Taiwan/Republic of China-Forum Countries Dialogue on the sidelines of the annual leaders' meeting, which was attended by Taiwan's deputy minister of foreign affairs, Tien Chung-kwang, according to Taiwanese media.

However, Taiwan's participation in these meetings clearly irks China and it has attempted to block its participation in PIF events. This year, with the help of Solomon Islands, which switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 2019, China attempted to strip Taiwan of its status as a 'development partner'. The Foreign Minister of Solomon Islands, Peter Shanel, explained his country's position by saying that Taiwan is 'not a sovereign country' and the PIF should follow international law, according to Australia's public [broadcaster](#), the ABC.

But the push to deny Taiwan the right to attend the PIF meetings was rejected by the leaders, thanks to the efforts of the three remaining forum members who still recognise Taiwan – Marshall Islands, Palau and Tuvalu – as well as Australia and New Zealand.

The communique issued after the leaders' meeting initially specifically mentioned support for Taiwan, inviting fierce opposition from China's Ambassador to the Pacific Islands, Qian Bo. He said China had received wide understanding and support from the majority of forum members and the reference to Taiwan "must be a mistake". Qian was described as "visibly angry" by the [Guardian](#) newspaper. In the end, China got its way. The original

communiqué was withdrawn and the new communiqué that was issued did not mention Taiwan.

Taiwan, however, condemned China's "irrational behaviour" and said the removal of reference to Taiwan from the communiqué will not affect Taiwan's status in PIF, that it will continue to support the Pacific Island states and remain an active participant in future PIF meetings.

Indeed, Taiwan has been a significant development partner of the PIF in multiple sectors ranging from education and public health to infrastructure and clean energy. Last month, it signed a new agreement with the PIF secretariat to continue its support for the organisation through to 2027. Neither the Taiwanese government nor the PIF Secretariat disclosed the financial commitment made by Taiwan for the next three years under the pact, but Taiwan [said](#) it was a 'concrete demonstration of Taiwan's commitment and support' to the Pacific islands.

Despite bravado from Taiwan, the reality is that over the years China has succeeded in shrinking the diplomatic space for Taiwan among the Pacific island states and globally. As a result, only 11 United Nations members, mainly small states in the Pacific and the Caribbean, now maintain full diplomatic relations with Taiwan. But Beijing has so far not succeeded in its campaign to get the PIF to formally adopt the 'One China policy', which has been resisted on the grounds that not all PIF members recognise the People's Republic of China.

But Taiwan was not the only issue that annoyed China at this year's PIF leaders' meeting. The PIF leaders also endorsed an Australian-funded policing plan for the region. Called the Pacific Policing Initiative (PPI), the plan will establish a Pacific police-training centre in Brisbane, Australia, and four skills development centres across the region. It will also have a highly-trained rotational police force that can be deployed at short notice to areas affected by civil strife or other major events.

While the PIF leaders unanimously adopted the policing plan, many of the details are yet to be worked out through consultations among the member states. The police chiefs from across the region will now engage in consultations to develop an implementation plan. Australia, which will provide 400 million Australian dollars in funding over five years to make the PPI a reality, has been alarmed by China's growing security relationships with the Pacific nations. The Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said the policing plan reflects the desire of the regional states to 'stand with each other'.

Australia, New Zealand and the United States were unhappy with a secretive security and policing agreement signed by the Solomon Islands with China in 2022. In opposition at the time, Albanese's Labor Party had then [described](#) this agreement as 'the worst Australian foreign policy blunder in the Pacific in decades'. The massive \$400 million commitment is aimed at correcting that blunder.

Despite unanimously endorsing the PPI, if a PIF member state does not want to accept help from the PPI, it cannot be forced to deploy the rotational force or accept other forms of assistance offered by the plan. In fact, some of the Pacific island states have expressed concerns that the new policing initiative was designed to exclude China. Responding to such criticism, Mr Albanese said the plan was not about any other country; it was about the Pacific looking after our security 'ourselves'.

While this may be a temporary setback for China, Beijing is not likely to cut its fledgling security ties with the Pacific nations. Its reaction to the policing plan has so far been muted but it will continue to influence and cajole Pacific island states to increase their individual security cooperation with China. Some states in the region would be more receptive to Beijing's overtures than others to strike a balance between their traditional reliance on countries like Australia on the one hand and China on the other. China has emerged as a significant alternative provider of aid and investment to the Pacific islands in the past few decades. They are unlikely to antagonise China and risk losing Chinese assistance.

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## Same Holding Pattern in Thailand: Srettha Thavisin Ousted and another Shinawatra is Back

by  
Jayantika Rao T.V.

Another Prime Minister of Thailand has been ousted, and a new Prime Minister has assumed control of the office, which now seems like old news in Thai politics. Srettha Thavisin's ousting aligns with a recurrent trend of systematic subversion of democratic institutions in favour of autocratic preferences disregarding peoples' choices. Srettha's dismissal on August 14 was based on 'ethics violations', occurring just a week after the main opposition party - Move Forward Party, was disbanded by the court.<sup>27</sup> The Constitutional Court made the judgement after 40 senators accused Srettha of breaching cabinet ministerial ethics by appointing Pichit Chuenban as a 'Minister attached to the Office of the Prime Minister'.<sup>28</sup> The complaint submitted in May cited Pichit's prior conviction of contempt of court charges after he allegedly tried to bribe a Judge with 2 million baht (US\$ 55,000) in cash in a case involving former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2008, (a charge never been proven). In their judgement, the Constitutional Court stated that that Srettha "grossly breached ethical standards"<sup>29</sup> by appointing a convicted felon, directly violating Section 160, which stipulated the requirement of 'integrity', as it had been proven that Pichit had no morals and integrity. Srettha had assumed office only on September 5, 2023, after a protracted period of political negotiation and horse-trading following the general election on May 14. As such, Srettha was removed before completing a year as the Prime Minister of Thailand.

With the sudden removal of Srettha, the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), which secured the second position in last year's election, promptly nominated Paetongtarn Shinawatra, the youngest daughter of Thailand's long-standing influential figure, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, to assume leadership. Ironically, Paetongtarn Shinawatra secured the support of Pheu Thai's parliamentary coalition, encompassing a wider alliance with military and

<sup>27</sup> "Thailand's Reformist Move Forward Party, Dissolved By Court Order, Regroups As People's Party". The Hindu, August 10, 2024.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/thailands-reformist-move-forward-party-regroups-as-peoples-party/article68505928.ece>

<sup>28</sup> "Senators ask charter court to impeach PM, new minister Pichit". Bangkok Post, May 17, 2024. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/2794790/senators-ask-charter-court-to-impeach-pm-new-minister-pichit>

<sup>29</sup> "Thailand's Pheu Thai party to choose successor after prime minister removed by court." The Guardian, August 15, 2024.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/15/thailand-pheu-thai-party-leader-srettha-thavisin-replacement>



conservative senators historically in contention with the Shinawatra clan. She received 319 votes in the House of Representatives, surpassing the 247 she needed.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, with the royal letter of endorsement, a mere formality, Paetongtarn Shinawatra was sworn in as the 31<sup>st</sup> Prime Minister of Thailand, marking the second instance of a female assuming the leadership of the nation on August 18.<sup>31</sup> The previous female leader was her aunt, Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's youngest sister, who held the position of Prime Minister in 2011 before being deposed in a coup in 2014. Despite facing coups and other endeavours to displace them from authority, the Shinawatra family, especially Thaksin has played an important role in the Thai political landscape for the past two decades.

Thaksin's influence in Thai politics is unmistakably visible now, with his daughter, Paetongtarn, taking the helm. A widely circulated picture captured the Prime Minister and her father, both in their civil servant uniform, a sight typically reserved for officials during royal and state ceremonies. The image spoke volumes about what many Thai observers have warned about Thaksin's increasing influence in the country. While the new Prime Minister said she has no plans to appoint her father Thaksin to any official government position, she was also very unequivocal that Thaksin will play an important role as she will seek his advice, an influence that cannot be overlooked. During her discussion with reporters after her ceremony, she said "His vision has contributed to the development of the country for over 10 years... Therefore, it's unavoidable that I would need to ask for his advice as well"<sup>32</sup>.

While many critics have claimed that Thaksin's popularity and influence has dwindled, the reality is far different. Furthermore, some critics claim that Thaksin's power is controllable, emphasising his opponents' use of the lese majeste. However, the chances of Thaksin overcoming the charge is more than likely. Despite being charged with an eight-year sentence for corruption and abuse of power conviction upon his return from exile, King Vajiralongkorn granted him clemency reducing his sentence to only 1 year. Thaksin's relationship with the monarchy that has granted him preferential treatment

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<sup>30</sup> "Thailand Has a New Prime Minister, but the Same Old Power Brokers". The New York Times, August 16, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/16/world/asia/paetongtarn-shinawatra-thailand-prime-minister.html>

<sup>31</sup> "Paetongtarn Shinawatra Becomes Thailand Prime Minister After Royal Signoff". The Hindu. August 18, 2024. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/paetongtarn-shinawatra-becomes-thai-prime-minister-after-royal-signoff/article68539038.ece>

<sup>32</sup> "New Thai PM Paetongtarn Shinawatra committed to improving livelihoods, will seek advice from father". The Strait Times, August 18, 2024. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/new-thai-pm-paetongtarn-shinawatra-committed-to-improving-livelihoods-will-see-advice-from-father>

has not gone unnoticed. Many have pointed out that despite his reduced sentence, Thaksin still did not even spend one day in prison owing to health reasons which is widely believed to have been feigned.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, a day after the parliament approved Paetongtarn as the new Prime Minister, Thaksin received a royal pardon wherein his parole ended two weeks earlier.<sup>34</sup>

That said, Paetongtarn's position as Prime Minister allows Thaksin to come out of the shadows. This was most evident when, a week after Paetongtarn's appointment, Thaksin held an event known as "Vision for Thailand 2024", which was attended by Thailand's most prominent businessmen, politicians and diplomats. The event drew nearly 1500 guests with the organisers stating that they had to decline numerous requests to attend the event.<sup>35</sup> Central to Thaksin's agenda for reshaping Thailand were initiatives such as tax restructuring, bolstering tourism potential, and addressing household debt, all of which formed part of Srettha's policies and has been hypothesised to be continued by Paetongtarn. This potential continuity of policies under a new leadership instils a sense of continuity and stability in the political landscape. Thaksin asserted that he presented a vision for Thailand as a concerned citizen rather than using his daughter's position to influence the country. However, many analysts who dissected his speech have interpreted his speech as a blueprint for PM Paetongtarn and her cabinet's upcoming policies. Additionally, Thaksin also touched upon his family's history with military coups, saying he was confident there would not be one against Paetongtarn's administration, as he will be helping her clean up any "rubbish" he spots.<sup>36</sup>

The event held significance for two reasons. Primarily, it gave Thaksin an avenue to boldly assert his presence and step out of the shadows without angering the elites who want to prevent him from holding any official positions. Secondly, his speech sought to allay concerns about Paetongtarn's leadership as she is a novice, particularly among Thai business leaders who believe in his policies. This perspective has been reinforced by several Thai

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<sup>33</sup> Johnson, Jason. "Why Thaksin Could Help Hasten a Middle-Class Revolution in Thailand". The Diplomat, August 21, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/08/why-thaksin-could-help-hasten-a-middle-class-revolution-in-thailand/>

<sup>34</sup> "Thailand Ex-PM Thaksin Shinawatra Gets Royal Pardon". The Hindu. August 17, 2024. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/thailand-ex-pm-thaksin-shinawatra-gets-royal-pardon/article68536266.ece>

<sup>35</sup> "Thaksin's Dinner Talk Signals His Clout In New Thai Government". Strait Times. August 28, 2024. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/thaksin-s-dinner-talk-signals-his-clout-in-new-thai-government>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

political analysts like Mr Olarn Thinbangtiao, deputy dean of Burapha University's Faculty of Political Science and Law.

## Conclusion

The fact is that Paetongtarn is relatively new to the realm of Thai politics, having officially entered in 2021. Within a mere two years, she ascended to the leadership of PTP and now shoulders the responsibility of governing a nation challenged by economic issues, including substantial household debt and sluggish growth. Her victory without the support of the public and instead with the parliamentary backing means that she will prioritise maintaining good relations with the establishment that placed her in power. Paetongtarn finds herself in a delicate position, as the same establishment, historically known for utilising institutions such as the Constitutional Court to curtail administrations, has installed her and is expected to exert its influence to oversee her and her father.

While Paetongtarn has pledged to uphold the economic stimulus measures introduced by her predecessor, Srettha, she does have the opportunity to revise unfeasible policies like the unpopular digital wallet scheme. With her father's support, who oversaw economic prosperity during his tenure, she could make positive changes to Thailand's economy, as it is evident that he will play a crucial role in her decision-making. Nevertheless, attaining the sought-after political stability may appear overly optimistic considering the country's political trajectory and, more specifically, her family's legacy.

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## Visit of Vietnam's Prime Minister to India

by  
Anshita Shukla

The Prime Minister of Vietnam, Pham Minh Chinh, made his first official visit to New Delhi, India from July 30- August 1, 2024<sup>37</sup>. During his visit, the Prime Minister called on the President of India, Droupadi Murmu, Vice-President, Jagdeep Dhankar, and held bilateral talks with Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, and External Affairs Minister of India, Dr. S. Jaishankar. On the last day of his visit, Prime Minister Chinh delivered a lecture on "Enhancing Viet Nam - India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace, Cooperation and Development in the Indo-Pacific Region and the World" at the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.

Two critical documents emerged from the meetings - a 'Joint Statement on the Strengthening of the 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership'<sup>38</sup> and a 'Plan of Action for the implementation of the 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' during the 2024-2028' between India and Vietnam.

The visit of the Prime Minister of Vietnam resulted in the signing of a number of agreements to enhance cooperation<sup>39</sup>. An agreement on extending Two Lines of Credit was signed between Vietnam's Ministry of Finance and the Export-Import Bank of India, amounting to US\$300 million, one for Coast Guard ships and the other for fast border patrol boats. Vietnam announced its decision to join the Coalition on the Disaster Resilient Infrastructure and early completion of procedures to join the International Solar Alliance Framework Agreement. India has also agreed to provide technical assistance worth \$2.25 million for conservation. The two sides also signed a Letter of Intent for the

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<sup>37</sup> "State Visit of H.E. Pham Minh Chinh, Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to India." n.d. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38048/State\\_Visit\\_of\\_HE\\_Pham\\_Minch\\_Chinh\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_of\\_the\\_Socialist\\_Republic\\_of\\_Vietnam\\_to\\_India](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38048/State_Visit_of_HE_Pham_Minch_Chinh_Prime_Minister_of_the_Socialist_Republic_of_Vietnam_to_India).

<sup>38</sup> "Joint Statement on Strengthening of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Between the Republic of India and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam." n.d. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/38069/Joint\\_Statement\\_on\\_Strengthening\\_of\\_the\\_Comprehensive\\_Strategic\\_Partnership\\_Between\\_the\\_Republic\\_of\\_India\\_and\\_the\\_Socialist\\_Republic\\_of\\_Viet\\_Nam](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/38069/Joint_Statement_on_Strengthening_of_the_Comprehensive_Strategic_Partnership_Between_the_Republic_of_India_and_the_Socialist_Republic_of_Viet_Nam).

<sup>39</sup> "List of Outcomes: State Visit of H.E. Pham Minh Chinh, Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to India." n.d. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/38068/List\\_of\\_outcomes\\_State\\_visit\\_of\\_HE\\_Pham\\_Minch\\_Chinh\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_of\\_the\\_Socialist\\_Republic\\_of\\_Vietnam\\_to\\_India](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/38068/List_of_outcomes_State_visit_of_HE_Pham_Minch_Chinh_Prime_Minister_of_the_Socialist_Republic_of_Vietnam_to_India).

conservation of F Block in My Son and an MoU for the development of the National Maritime Heritage Complex at Lothal. Various other agreements were signed to enhance cooperation between the two countries including:

1. MoU for cooperation in Customs Capacity Building between the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs of India and the General Department of Viet Nam Customs, Viet Nam.
2. MoU between Central Agricultural University, Imphal, Manipur and Viet Nam Academy of Agricultural Sciences, Hanoi, Viet Nam for cooperation in Agricultural Research and Education.
3. MoU between the Ministry of Justice of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam and the Ministry of Law and Justice of the Republic of India on cooperation in the legal field.
4. MoU between Prasar Bharati, New Delhi, India and the Voice of Viet Nam (VoV), Hanoi, Viet Nam for cooperation on Radio and Television.
5. MoU between the Traditional Medicine Administration Ministry of Health of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam and the National Medicinal Plants Board, Ministry of Ayush of Government of the Republic of India on cooperation in the Field of Medicinal Plants.
6. MoU between the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam and the Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways of the Republic of India on Cooperation and Development of the National Maritime Heritage Complex (NMHC) at Lothal, Gujarat.
7. Virtual Inauguration of Army Software Park at Telecommunications University Nha Trang, Viet Nam.

On regional and international issues, the Joint Statement dedicated an entire paragraph on the South China Sea (SCS). The leaders reiterated the importance of upholding peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the SCS, in accordance with international law. The statement expressed the importance of “non-militarisation and self-restraint” in the activities of claimant states and all others and avoiding actions that could further complicate the situation or escalate disputes. A full and effective implementation of the ‘Declaration on the Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea’ was called for by both leaders.

Vietnam’s outlook on the complex contemporary global situation and relations with India was further expounded by the Vietnamese Prime Minister in his remarks at the 49<sup>th</sup> Sapru House Lecture at ICWA<sup>40</sup>. The uncertainty of the

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<sup>40</sup> Vietnam+. 2024. “PM Delivers Policy Speech at Indian Council of World Affairs.” Vietnam+ (VietnamPlus), August 1, 2024. <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/pm-delivers-policy-speech-at-indian-council-of-world-affairs-post291210.vnp>.

global situation, according to PM Chinh, is characterised by four aspects—increasing complexity in local conflicts and enhanced militarisation; risks faced by the global economy; challenges to multilateralism; and significant threat to the Indian Ocean-Asia-Pacific region emanating from hotspots, local conflicts, and competition among powers. He underscored the importance of cooperation between India and Vietnam for promoting peace and stability in the Indian Ocean-Asia-Pacific region. To that end, PM Chinh remarked that the Joint Statement, signed during his visit, is aimed at building higher ‘political-strategic trust, deeper national defence-security cooperation, more substantive and effective economic, trade, and investment ties; broader joint work in sci-tech and innovation, and closer cultural and people-to-people exchanges’.

This visit by the Prime Minister to India comes at a time of great domestic political turmoil. Vietnam, often touted for its political stability, has faced rapid changes in its top leadership following an intensifying anti-corruption campaign. The most shocking was the abrupt resignation of President Vo Van Thuong, who was widely expected to succeed General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, over charges of “violation of party regulations and failure to set an exemplary standard as a top leader”<sup>41</sup>. Several others followed suit, including National Assembly Chairman Vuong Dinh Hue, a Politburo Member of the Communist Party of Vietnam Central Committee, Truong Thi Mai, and former President Nguyen Xuan Phuc<sup>42</sup>. Amidst these leadership changes, other ministers were dismissed like Pham Binh Minh, former Deputy Prime Minister, for his failure to prevent a corruption case<sup>43</sup>, and Cabinet Secretary Mai Tien Dung was arrested on corruption charges<sup>44</sup>. This growing domestic instability, further exacerbated by the death of Party chief Nguyen Phu Trong, has led to changes in the top leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam, raising concerns regarding foreign policy shifts that might follow. However, the visit

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<sup>41</sup> Reuters. 2024. “Vietnam President Resigns After One Year on the Job; Government Says ‘Shortcomings Impacted Public Opinion.’” *The Hindu*. March 20, 2024. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/vietnam-president-resigns-after-one-year-on-the-job-government-says-shortcomings-impacted-public-opinion/article67971933.ece>.

<sup>42</sup> Tomiyama, Atsushi. 2024. “Vietnam Rocked by Political Upheaval: 5 Things to Know.” *Nikkei Asia*, May 22, 2024. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Vietnam-rocked-by-political-upheaval-5-things-to-know>.

<sup>43</sup> Vu, Khanh. 2023. “Vietnam Removes Two Deputy PMs Amid Anti-corruption Drive.” *Reuters*, January 5, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/vietnam-removes-two-deputy-pms-amid-anti-corruption-drive-2023-01-05/>.

<sup>44</sup> Reuters. 2024. “Vietnam Police Arrest Former Head of Government Office Amid Anti-graft Crackdown.” *The Indian Express*, May 4, 2024. <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/vietnam-police-arrest-former-head-of-government-anti-graft-crackdown-9307851/>.



to India by PM Chinh can be construed to signal a continuation in the foreign policy direction towards India and project domestic stability.

The multi-directional foreign policy of Vietnam continues to astutely navigate great power relations. In the past six months, leaders of three major powers have been hosted by Hanoi – US President Joe Biden (September 2023)<sup>45</sup>, President Xi Jinping of China (December 2023)<sup>46</sup>, and President Vladimir Putin of Russia (June 2024)<sup>47</sup>. Despite this, Vietnam has not befallen the same fate as its neighbour and a partner claimant state, the Philippines, of inviting China's wrath on developing closer ties with the United States. Through its deft balancing act, Vietnam continues to maintain positive relations with all major powers while remaining untethered to a single power allowing it the room to pursue national interests. This foreign policy approach of Vietnam has parallels in Indian foreign policy.

A central pillar of India's Act East Policy, Vietnam shares a "strong friendship"<sup>48</sup> with India and possesses the potential for enhanced cooperation. There is a growing developmental convergence of visions between India and Vietnam with the two countries having adopted 'Viksit Bharat 2047'<sup>49</sup> and the 'Vietnam 2045'<sup>50</sup> visions respectively. The two countries are also front runners in benefiting from the opportunities presented by shifting supply chains triggered by the US-China trade war. India and Vietnam both face the growing assertiveness of Chinese assertions, one on its land border and the other on maritime borders, and share the importance of upholding a 'rules-based order'

<sup>45</sup> House, White. 2023. "JOINT LEADERS' STATEMENT: ELEVATING UNITED STATES-VIETNAM RELATIONS TO a COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP." The White House. September 11, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/11/joint-leaders-statement-elevating-united-states-vietnam-relations-to-a-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>.

<sup>46</sup> Guarascio, Francesco, Khanh Vu, and Minh Nguyen. 2023. "China, Vietnam Hail Upgrade of Ties; Agree to Boost Security Efforts." Reuters, December 13, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/chinas-xi-meets-vietnam-leaders-second-day-state-visit-hanoi-2023-12-13/>.

<sup>47</sup> Regan, Helen. 2024. "Putin Arrives in Vietnam as Russia Seeks Support in Face of Western Isolation." CNN. June 21, 2024. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/06/19/asia/vietnam-russia-putin-visit-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>48</sup> "India Cherishes Strong Friendship With Vietnam"; PM Modi." n.d. NDTV.Com. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-cherishes-strong-friendship-with-vietnam-pm-modi-6243330>.

<sup>49</sup> DH Web Desk, and DH Web Desk. 2024. "Explained | What Is 'Viksit Bharat 2047' and What Does It Aim to Achieve?" Deccan Herald. March 4, 2024. <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/explained-what-is-viksit-bharat-2047-and-what-does-it-aim-to-achieve-2920441>.

<sup>50</sup> Vietnam+. 2024. "New 'Vietnam 2045' Report Aligns With the Country's Extended Vision." Vietnam+ (VietnamPlus), May 23, 2024. <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/new-vietnam-2045-report-aligns-with-the-countrys-extended-vision-post287425.vnp>.

in the Indo-Pacific. The visit of Vietnam's Prime Minister reflects these shared interests and reciprocity in the priority accorded by Vietnam to the bilateral relations with India.

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## State Visit of Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim to India

by  
Biren Nanda

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim arrived in New Delhi on August 20, 2024, on a three-day State Visit to India. This was his first visit to India as Prime Minister. The Malaysian PM was accompanied by a high-level delegation which included the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dato' Seri Utama Haji Mohamad Bin Haji Hasan; Minister of Investment, Trade and Industry, Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Abdul Aziz; Minister of Tourism, Art & Culture, Datuk Seri Tiong King Sing; Minister of Digital, Gobind Singh Deo and Minister of Human Resources, Mr. Steven Sim.

The following are some of the important understandings and agreements reached during the visit as reflected in the 'Joint Statement'<sup>51</sup> released during the visit. During the Malaysian Prime Minister's visit, the two Prime Ministers took stock of the enhanced strategic ties between the two countries. Both Prime Ministers recognized that the 'Enhanced Strategic Partnership' between India and Malaysia established in 2015 has helped in advancing bilateral ties into a multidimensional relationship. Recognizing that the relations between India and Malaysia have evolved and matured across a broad spectrum of areas and that this deepening of engagement has significantly widened and intensified the relations, the Prime Ministers determined that the timing was propitious for relations to be further consolidated into a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership'. The bilateral talks covered a range of topics including political, defense and security cooperation, economic cooperation and trade, digital technologies, start-ups, fintech, energy including renewables, healthcare, higher education, culture, tourism and people-to-people relations.

The Prime Ministers of India and Malaysia also witnessed the signing of MOUs in the fields of Recruitment, Employment and Repatriation of Workers; cooperation in Ayurveda and other Traditional Systems of Medicines; Digital Technologies; Culture, Arts and Heritage; Tourism; Public Administration and Governance Reforms; Youth and Sports; and Financial Services between Labuan Financial Services Authority (LFSA) and International Financial Services Centre Authority, India (IFSCA).

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<sup>51</sup> Joint Statement on India – Malaysia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. PIB Government of India <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2047076>

Both Prime Ministers welcomed the fact that bilateral trade has reached a record high of US\$19.5 billion. They encouraged industry on both sides to further enhance bilateral trade in a sustainable manner for the mutual benefit of the two countries. In this regard, they expressed appreciation for the high-level CEOs Forum and commended the convening of the ninth (9th) meeting in New Delhi on 19 August 2024.

The situation in the South China Sea, came up for discussion in the context of the importance of free and open sea lines of communication, free navigation, commercial shipping, and over-flights which are necessary for energy security, food security, and industrial development.

The two leaders reiterated their commitment to respecting freedom of navigation and over-flights, and unimpeded lawful commerce, based on the principles of international law, as reflected notably in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1982. The two leaders urged all parties to resolve disputes through peaceful means in accordance with the universally recognized principles of international law including UNCLOS 1982.

Reaffirming the importance of India's 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' with ASEAN, Malaysia appreciated India's full support for ASEAN centrality and Malaysia's upcoming ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025. Malaysia welcomed more engagements between ASEAN and India through ASEAN-led mechanisms towards further consolidating the existing 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership'. Prime Minister Modi said, "Malaysia is an important partner of India in the ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific Region".

Both Prime Ministers agreed to strengthen cooperation and coordination at the UN, including at the UNSC, UNHRC, and other multilateral fora. The two leaders upheld that adherence to a rules-based international system is imperative for ensuring peace and development. They pledged to work together to enhance multilateralism, reflective of contemporary realities so as to make international organizations, including the UN Security Council, more representative. The strengthening of Council membership with a focus on increasing representation from developing countries, including through the expansion of UNSC in both the permanent and non-permanent categories will render it more effective in addressing current global challenges. India deeply appreciated Malaysia's support for India's permanent membership in a reformed United Nations Security Council.

As economies of the global south are finding themselves in the crosshairs of global conflicts, countries like Malaysia are exploring multipolar platforms as

part of hedging strategies. The Malaysian Prime Minister sought India's support for joining the BRICS grouping.

Speaking at the Indian Council for World Affairs, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim praised India's "unique multi-aligned approach [and] astute and adept compartmentalization of priorities and challenges" that Malaysia should learn from in dealing with global conflicts. The Malaysian Prime Minister expressed the hope that Malaysia, India and regional countries would cooperate to create a stable, resilient backbone for the global economy. Anwar proposed military collaboration and "joint operations to safeguard our borders" as new areas of cooperation between India and Malaysia.

The visit of the Malaysian PM has the potential to boost bilateral investment ties, expand cooperation, strengthen India's Act East Policy and boost bilateral cooperation on global and regional issues. The two countries had been mulling a "mobility pact" advancing the welfare of Indian professionals working in Malaysia and increasing the number of Indian skilled workers working in Malaysia. The Indian government also agreed to a one-time "special allocation" of 200,000 MT of white Rice for Malaysia.

This was the first meeting between the Prime Ministers of the two countries since 2015<sup>52</sup>; relations between the two countries soured when in 2019 Anwar's predecessor Mahathir Muhammad criticized India's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), India's – policy on Jammu and Kashmir - India had abrogated Article 370 of the Indian Constitution and the reorganized the State of Jammu and Kashmir - and India's demand for the extradition of the controversial preacher Zakir Naik. The State visit of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim helped reset India's relations with Malaysia. During the visit, the two Prime Ministers identified new areas of bilateral cooperation and helped chart the course to manifest the potential of the 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' between the two countries.

Malaysia remains an important partner as reflected in the diverse and important outcomes of the visit – and not in the least due to the presence of the Indian diaspora in Malaysia, which is the third largest in the world, numbering about 2.9 million. It is also home to many skilled and unskilled workers and IT professionals from India who participate in the Malaysian economy and contribute to its growth and development.

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<sup>52</sup> Joseph Sipalan Malaysia's Anwar Ibrahim visits India to reset ties, boost BRICS membership bid. South China Morning Post



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