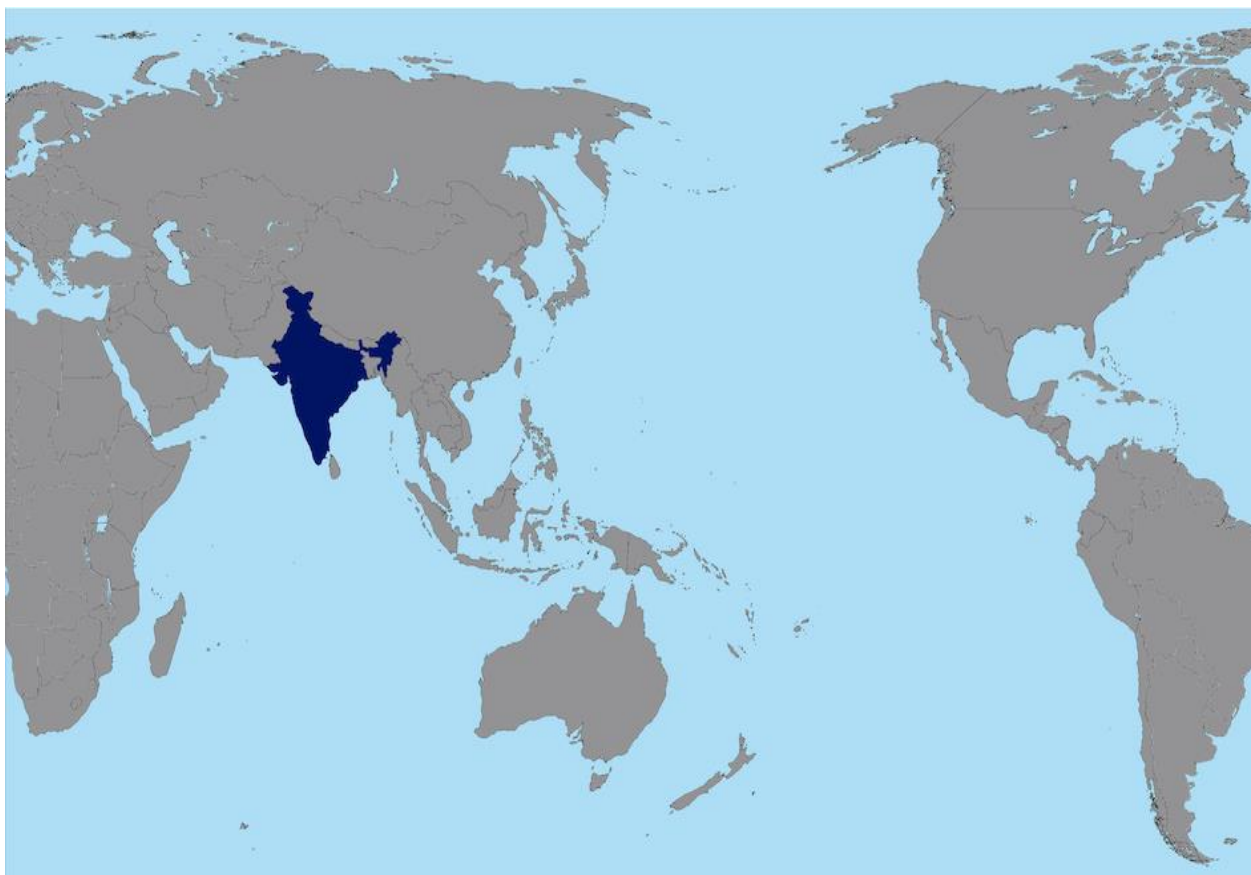




Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

DPG INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR SEPTEMBER 2020



Volume I, Issue 9 | September 2020

Delhi Policy Group

Core 5A, 1st Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003

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ABOUT US

Founded in 1994, the Delhi Policy Group (DPG) is among India's oldest think tanks with its primary focus on strategic and international issues of critical national interest. DPG is a non-partisan institution and is independently funded by a non-profit Trust. Over past decades, DPG has established itself in both domestic and international circles and is widely recognised today among the top security think tanks of India and of Asia's major powers.

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DPG 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, with the assistance of a team of DPG Research Associates comprising Anushka Nair, Angana Guha Roy, Antara Ghosal Singh and Libni Garg, based on open source reports and publications. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to Anushka Nair at anushka@dpg.org.in. To subscribe, please [click here](#).

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DPG INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

SEPTEMBER 2020

Overview

Travel constraints imposed by the pandemic impacted the annual session of the UN General Assembly, with many global leaders addressing the UN virtually. The 193 UN members adopted a Declaration on the Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations, containing 12 commitments to reanimate global resolve. Speeches from numerous Asian leaders on the occasion highlighted the need for UN reform, and the Indian PM among others questioned the efficacy of an unreformed UN's ability to combat current global challenges, from the pandemic to terrorism.

By month end, COVID-19 had caused over 33 million infections and a million deaths worldwide, with the US, India and Brazil accounting for over half of global infections and over 40% of global deaths. The pandemic's impact forced important events such as the meeting of the UN General Assembly and the G-20 Foreign Minister's Meeting being conducted on virtual platforms. September alone saw over 7 million infections and 160,000 deaths. A spike in cases was reported in most of the Western world. A Chinese virologist who fled Hong Kong for the US published a paper claiming that COVID-19 was created in a government controlled laboratory in Wuhan. As the race for production of vaccines moved into high gear, Chinese biotech companies reported injecting hundreds of thousands of people with experimental vaccines under emergency use conditions approved by the Chinese government.

Geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific brought in new participants in September, with France, Germany and the UK joining hands in saying that China's "claims with regard to the exercise of 'historic rights' over the South China Sea waters do not comply with international law and UNCLOS provisions". Germany became the second European nation (after France) to formally adopt a strategy towards the Indo-Pacific. The US blocked import of some products made in Xinjiang citing use of forced labour and indicted five Chinese and two Malaysian nationals for "computer intrusion" cyber offences. Beijing imposed restrictions on the movements of US diplomats in China. Russia began deploying troops in its far east after reports in the Chinese media laid claims to Vladivostok. India and the US continued their thrust towards

digital security by banning Chinese apps. Australia, India and Japan began discussions on a Supply Chain Resilience Initiative. An Australia-France-India trilateral dialogue on enhancing cooperation in the Indo-Pacific got underway. Consultations between senior officials of the Quad countries took place on September 25, 2020. Reports also emerged regarding a trilateral meeting of Defence and Foreign Ministers from Australia, India and Indonesia taking place shortly. [India's Ministry of External Affairs announced](#) that Minister Dr S Jaishankar would visit Tokyo from October 06-07, 2020, for bilateral consultations and to participate in the second India-Australia-Japan-USA Ministerial Meeting to be held on October 06, 2020. The visit would also enable bilateral consultations with his counterparts from Australia and the US.

The Abraham Accords between Israel and the UAE and Israel and Bahrain were signed at the White House on September 15, 2020. The accords open up opportunities for Gulf capital to flow into Israeli companies, potentially displacing Chinese investment in Israel. The Arab League rejected the Palestinian request to condemn the accords, burying the concept that an Israeli-Palestinian peace is a precondition for Arab-Israeli relations. The UAE and Israel began action to establish an Israeli intelligence outpost on Socotra Island that would enable monitoring of all movement through the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb. Meanwhile, Iran claimed to have identified the saboteurs responsible for the July explosions at the Natanz nuclear facility, but declined to provide further information in view of the ongoing investigation. Yemen's Houthi rebels claimed to have struck Riyadh using a Dull-Faqqar ballistic missile and three Samad-3 drones on September 10, 2020.

Negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan Government began at Doha. The outlook is assessed as 'not positive' as the Taliban can wait till the US leaves Afghanistan next year and then seize power. Highlighting the dim prospects, a roadside bomb attack targeted Vice President Amrullah Saleh, injuring him and killing at least 10 civilians.

The standoff in Eastern Ladakh intensified, with both sides digging in for a prolonged confrontation despite meetings at the level of defence and foreign ministers. Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Mahinda Rajapaksa reviewed bilateral ties and exchanged views on regional and international issues of mutual concern at the first ever India-Sri Lanka virtual summit. Reflecting the importance India now assigns to the Indo-Pacific, India's External Affairs Ministry brought together its ASEAN and Indo-Pacific policies under a new Oceania Division headed by an Additional Secretary. The 17th meeting of the US – India Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism was held virtually. India and Japan signed a Mutual Logistics Support Agreement, while reports

indicated that a similar India-Russia agreement would be signed at their annual summit in October. The Indian Navy exercised with the Russian Navy (INDRA 2020), with the Japanese Navy (JIMEX 2020) and with the Australian Navy during the month. The Maldives and the US signed a framework agreement for their bilateral defence and security relationship.

A series of ASEAN-centric activities including the 10th EAS Foreign Ministers' Meeting, the 27th meeting of the ARF and the 53rd meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers were held virtually between September 09 – 12, 2020. Plans of action to implement the strategic partnerships between ASEAN and partners, including India, covering the 2021-2025 period, were approved. Meanwhile, reports indicated that Chinese companies were investing heavily in Singapore so as to separate their domestic and international operations. President Duterte described the 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Award as a part of international law, beyond the ability of passing governments to dilute, diminish or abandon. Following a standoff with the Chinese Coast Guard, Indonesia decided to increase maritime security operations off the Natuna Islands to counter illegal fishing activity. Thailand delayed its plans to buy two additional submarines from China, to add to the three it had ordered in 2015. A report indicated that BRI projects in South East Asian countries including Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia were running into road blocks due to issues with interest rates, land acquisition, environmental damage and corruption.

Taiwan was in the news with the visit of US Under Secretary of State Keith Krach as well as for the approval of US defence sales. China signalled its displeasure, including by exercises of military aircraft over the Taiwan Straits. Reports indicated that North Korea and Iran had resumed long range missile cooperation and North Korea may conduct an SLBM test in October. Kim Jong-Un issued a rare apology for his Navy killing a South Korean official found in North Korean waters.

Yoshihide Suga took over from Shinzo Abe as Japan's Prime Minister. Japan is expected to seek a record defence budget of 5.4 trillion Yen (over \$ 51 billion) for fiscal 2021. Japan and the UK agreed in principle to a comprehensive bilateral economic partnership.

China's foreign policy establishment continued its global propaganda and obfuscation offensive, with its Foreign Minister describing China as "peace-loving, never having occupied an inch of other's land, never having sought expansion" at an event hosted by IFRI in Paris, and in UN debates. China also described the US as being the source of problems in the South China Sea.

Meanwhile, its Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui presided over a meeting of ASEAN envoys in Beijing and appeared to lay down the law to them regarding the South China Sea. A report, however, indicated that Code of Conduct discussions are stalled at the stage of how to restart negotiations, with a long and bumpy road lying ahead. China began simultaneous military exercises in Bohai Sea, Yellow Sea, East China Sea and South China Sea on September 28, 2020, once again flaunting its ability to conduct operations in widely separated maritime areas. China was also reported to have extended the coercive actions it uses against Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang to Tibet, sending Tibetan workers to military style vocational training camps to receive ideological instruction and become factory labour.

Australia-China relations continued to sour, with Australian journalists choosing to flee Hong Kong and an Australian Judge on Hong Kong's Court of Final Appeal resigning prematurely. China suspended barley imports from Australia's largest cooperative and top grain exporter over disputed claims of pests in the product. China's Global Times warned that Australia's decoupling from China will not send China back into poverty, but risks Australia becoming the "poor white trash of Asia". Meanwhile, the Republic of Palau invited the US to build ports, bases and airfields in the island nation. The Solomon Island province of Malaita said it would conduct an independence referendum after rejecting the nation's decision to cut its ties with Taiwan and establish formal relations with China.

The US ambassador to China, Terry Brandstad, announced his resignation effective early October. The action came after the US State Department had formally called out the hypocrisy of China's People's Daily in refusing to publish an Op Ed authored by the ambassador. The US Department of Defense published its annual China Military Power Report, while the US Air Force Chief of Staff published a vision document on how to deal with the threats posed by China and Russia. A hard-hitting speech by Secretary Michael Pompeo at the Wisconsin State Legislature focused on the CCP's influence and espionage operations at the state, city and municipal levels in the US. China's spokesperson described the contents of the speech as "shameless lies", while unilaterally determining that sub-national cooperation is the shared wish of both peoples and serves the interest of both sides. David Stilwell, the US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and provided an overview of the US policy on China. The Indo-Pacific Command conducted exercises Valiant Shield and Pacific Vanguard, both centred on Guam.

An elaboration of these and other Indo-Pacific developments in September 2020, with relevant links, is contained in the succeeding paragraphs.

The Global Scene

The 193 members of the United Nations adopted the [Declaration on the Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations](#) on September 21, 2020. The declaration draws attention to the Charter of the United Nations as the cornerstone of International law and its declaration of the principle of sovereign equality of states, affirms the principle of resolution of disputes by peaceful means and in conformity with international law, and determines that states shall refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. The declaration complimented the United Nations and its personnel for many achievements and laid out [12 succinct commitments to reanimate global resolve](#): leave no one behind, protect the planet, promote peace, abide by international law, place women and girls at the centre, build trust, improve digital cooperation, upgrade the United Nations, ensure sustainable financing, boost partnerships, work with youth, and, finally, be prepared.

Speeches from world leaders on the occasion highlighted different aspects. President Xi Jinping called for all countries to embrace his vision of "[a community with a shared future in which everyone is bound together](#)". [Japan's Foreign Minister](#) said that the system designed 75 years ago did not fully deliver on the purposes of the Charter and said that UN Security Council reform could no longer wait. [Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga](#) said challenges to the rule of law in these times of increasing uncertainty should not be allowed. [President Joko Widodo](#) said that the principles of the UN Charter and international law, including respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, were often neglected. He too identified the need to reform the UN and prove that multilateralism delivers. Singapore's [Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong](#) spoke of the shortcomings of multilateral institutions including the UN and called for their reform to keep them open, inclusive, reflect economic and political realities and respond effectively to shared challenges of our times. [Prime Minister Modi's message](#) to the UN was, "We cannot fight today's challenges with outdated structures. Without comprehensive reforms, the UN faces a crisis of confidence. For today's inter-connected world, we need a reformed multilateralism: That reflects today's realities; gives voice to the all stakeholders; addresses contemporary challenges; and focuses on human welfare". [President Trump](#) spoke of the ongoing battle against the China Virus and the need to hold China accountable. He also said, "If the United Nations is to be an effective organization, it must focus on the real problems of the world. This

includes terrorism, the oppression of women, forced labour, drug trafficking, human and sex trafficking, religious persecution, and the ethnic cleansing of religious minorities”.

Brazil, Germany, India and Japan [joined hands in reaffirming](#) their “common resolve to “finally take decisive steps towards the early and comprehensive reform of the Security Council that was envisaged by Heads of State and Government in the 2005 World Summit”. They “expressed disappointment at attempts to derail this process and committed to addressing the issue in a meaningful way and with increased urgency at this 75th anniversary of the UN”.

The pandemic expanded its footprint worldwide. By month end, COVID-19 had caused over 33.5 million infections and a million deaths worldwide, with the US, India and Brazil accounting for over half of global infections and over 40% of global deaths. The pandemic’s impact forced important events such as the meeting of the UN General Assembly and the G-20 Foreign Minister’s Meeting being conducted on virtual platforms. September alone saw over 7 million infections and 160,000 deaths. [Traditions for paying tribute](#) at memorials for 9/11 across the US were impacted, with restrictions on the presence of even the families of victims at memorial sites in some places. A spike in cases was reported in most of the Western world.



Hong Kong Virologist Dr Li Meng-Yan, who says that COVID – 19 originated in a Chinese Lab and the Wuhan Wet Market is a Smokescreen. Source: The Print

Dr Li-Meng Yan, a Chinese virologist who fled Hong Kong for the US, is [reported to have claimed](#) that COVID-19 was created in a government controlled

laboratory in Wuhan. Her [paper of September 14, 2020](#) examines genomic, structural, medical and literature evidence to refute the natural origin theory. [Criticism of her paper](#) focused on the opinion that much of what she described as having occurred inside a laboratory could also have occurred through natural mutation.

The G-20 Foreign Ministers [held an extraordinary virtual meeting](#) on September 03, 2020, to share knowledge and experience gained through responding to COVID-19 and discuss ways of resuming cross-border travel. [The EAM](#), representing India, commended the chair (Saudi Arabia) for this initiative and briefed the meeting on India's Vande Bharat missions as well as the travel bubbles. He also called on governments across the world to protect the interests of foreign students and facilitate movement of stranded seafarers back to their countries.

China's National Biotech Group Company [reportedly injected hundreds of thousands of its people](#) with experimental COVID-19 vaccines under emergency use conditions approved by the Chinese government, according to a report. Separately, another company, Sinovac Biotech Ltd also said it had injected about 3000 of its employees and their family members with an experimental vaccine.

Indo-Pacific Geopolitical Competition

Following a ministerial video-conference on September 01, 2020, Australia's Minister for Trade, Tourism and Investment; India's Minister of Commerce and Industry and Japan's Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry recognised the need for regional cooperation on [supply chain resilience](#) in the Indo-Pacific and instructed their officials to work out the details towards the launch of a new initiative in this regard later this year.

Germany became the second Western European nation after France to formally [adopt a strategy towards the Indo-Pacific](#), reflecting a wider European turn against China. An English translation of the strategy is not yet available, according to media reports. Releasing the strategy, [Germany's Foreign Minister said](#) the Indo-Pacific is "where the shape of the international order of tomorrow will be decided. We want to help shape that order – so that it is based on rules and international cooperation, not on the law of the strong". The strategy aims to "strengthen relations with this important region and to expand our cooperation in the areas of multilateralism, climate change mitigation, human rights, rules-based free trade, connectivity, the digital transformation and, in particular, the security policy".

France, Germany and the UK, as state parties to UNCLOS, [responded to Chinese notes](#) regarding Malaysia's December 2019 submissions to the Commission on the limits of the Continental Shelf and said "claims with regard to the exercise of 'historic rights' over the South China Sea waters do not comply with international law and UNCLOS provisions". They also recalled that the arbitral award of 12 July 2016 in the Philippines vs China case clearly confirms this point. The willingness of China's three biggest European partners to speak out notwithstanding China's known penchant for punitive action reflected their dissatisfaction against China's recent behaviour. The fact that this was not a broader EU statement also showed divisions within the EU.

Russia reportedly began deploying troops and military equipment in its Far East, according to a [media report attributed to Reuters](#). Russia's defence minister attributed the deployment to increase of tensions in the "eastern strategic direction", but did not elaborate on the nature of the threats or the location for additional deployment.

The first India France Australia trilateral dialogue focused on enhancing cooperation in the Indo-Pacific was held virtually on September 09, 2020. According to a [press release](#) from India's Ministry of External Affairs, the three sides discussed economic and geostrategic challenges and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, including in the marine global commons and through regional organisations such as ASEAN, IORA and the IOC. The three sides agreed to hold the dialogue on an annual basis.

The [US Department of Justice announced](#) that a federal grand jury indicted five residents of China and two of Malaysia with computer intrusions offences affecting over 100 victim companies, organisations including universities, think tanks, software developers, social media providers and individuals around the world, including in Australia, Brazil, Chile, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam. It also charged three of them with racketeering conspiracy and compromising government computer networks in India and Vietnam. The two Malaysian residents have been arrested. China's residents, however, are being protected by the state.

India [banned an additional 118 Chinese mobile apps](#) for acting against India's interests, including stealing and surreptitiously transmitting users' data in an unauthorised manner to servers located outside India. "The compilation of this data, its mining and profiling by elements hostile to national security and defence of India, which ultimately impinges upon the sovereignty and integrity

of India, is a matter of very deep and immediate concern which requires emergency measures."

The US administration [blocked the import](#) of computer parts, cotton apparel and hair care products from companies and suppliers that allegedly rely on forced labour camps in Xinjiang. The orders reportedly followed two years of investigation.

Beijing said it [had imposed restrictions on American diplomats](#) in China to retaliate against Washington's requiring Chinese diplomats to obtain prior approval for visits to university campuses, interaction with local government officials and hosting large cultural events outside their facilities. It was not clear what actual impact the retaliatory restrictions would have on US diplomats, who already face considerable impediments in their activity in China.

[Videoconference consultations](#) between senior officials from Australia, India, Japan and the US took place on September 25, 2020. Discussions focused on managing the health impact of COVID-19, deepening cooperation in areas including maritime security, quality infrastructure investment, cyber, counter-terrorism and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to promote a stable and resilient Indo-Pacific. The four countries reaffirmed their strong support for ASEAN centrality, ASEAN-led architecture and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Reports indicate that a [ministerial level meeting of the Quad](#) will be held in Tokyo on October 06, 2020.

Foreign and Defence ministers from Australia, India and Indonesia were scheduled to [meet virtually](#) shortly to work on an agenda for a trilateral within the larger Indo-Pacific region. The Foreign Ministers would focus on strengthening regional institutions such as the EAS and IORA, while Defence Ministers were to discuss maritime security cooperation, [according to reports](#). Senior ministry officials from the trilateral had [met at New Delhi](#) in November 2019.

East Africa

South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa said that his country would open borders with most countries and [ease international travel](#) beginning October 01, 2020. Meanwhile, Sudan moved towards peace with [reports indicating](#) that a final deal between the Sudanese government and key rebel groups would be signed in Juba early next month. Heads of states in the region were expected to witness the final signing ceremony.

West Asia

[Bahrain followed the UAE](#) in normalising its diplomatic, security, commercial and other relations with Israel in a US brokered deal announced by President Trump, who also said that he believed other countries would follow suit. Palestinian leaders predictably described the announcement as “another treacherous stab to the Palestinian cause” and recalled its ambassador to Manama “for consultations”.



The Abraham Accords Signing Ceremony at the White House, September 15, 2020.

Source: US State Department

The [Abraham Accords](#) between [Israel and UAE](#), and Israel and Bahrain, were signed at the White House on September 15, 2020. [Speaking on the occasion](#), President Trump described it as a major stride towards a future in which people of all faiths and backgrounds live together in peace and prosperity and a foundation for comprehensive peace across the region. Prime Minister Netanyahu described the day as a pivot of history, heralding a new era of peace. UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed described the day as one of a change of heart in the Middle East, one that would send hope around the world. Bahrain's Foreign Minister Abdullatif al Zayani described the signing of the accord as a first step, and said that a just, comprehensive and enduring two-state solution to the Palestinian Israeli conflict would be the foundation of such peace. Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq al Said [reportedly supported the](#)

[accord](#). Evidently, resentment of Zionism and sympathy for the Palestinians will no longer impede what may Arab rulers see as a vital relationship. The accords open up [opportunities for Gulf capital to flow into Israeli companies](#), potentially displacing Chinese investment in Israel. They bury the concept that an Israeli – Palestinian peace is a precondition for Arab – Israeli relations, in fact [the Arab League rejected](#) the move to condemn the accord, leading to Palestinian foreign minister Riyad al-Maliki resigning as its current chairman. The accords enable the Arab world to prepare for a future where their security is not underwritten by the US, which is shifting focus to China. Palestinians, meanwhile, felt [betrayed, insulted and abandoned, as per a poll](#) in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. [India welcomed the Abraham accords](#), while reiterating its traditional support for the Palestinian cause and hope for early resumption of direct negotiations for an acceptable two-state solution.

Following the Abraham Accord, UAE and Israel have begun steps to establish an [Israeli outpost on Socotra Island](#), controlled by the UAE, about 350 Km South East of Yemen. The outpost is intended to collect intelligence from the Bab-el-Mandeb and Horn of Africa regions, particularly relating to Iranian activity.

The Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI) [claimed to have identified](#) the saboteurs responsible for the July 2, 2020 explosion at the Natanz nuclear facility, but declined further details in view of the ongoing investigation.

Yemen's Houthi rebels [claimed to have struck Riyadh](#) using a [Dull-Faqqar ballistic missile and three Samad – 3 drones](#) on September 10, 2020. The war, going on since the Saudi-led coalition intervened in Yemen in March 2015, has reportedly killed over 100,000 people and pushed Yemen on the verge of famine.

South Asia and the Indian Ocean

An [informal meeting of the SAARC Council of Ministers](#), chaired by Nepal, took place on September 24, 2020, signalling that the organisation was still alive. Dr Jaishankar, India's External Affairs Minister, "called upon SAARC member states to collectively resolve to defeat the scourge of terrorism, including the forces that nurture, support and encourage an environment of terror and conflict, which impede the objective of SAARC to realize its full potential for collective collaboration and prosperity across South Asia".



External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar Participates in the SAARC Foreign Ministers' Informal Meeting, September 24, 2020. Source: MEA/Flickr

Taliban prisoners released by the Afghan Government as part of the February 2020 peace deal [were reported returning to the battlefield](#) as commanders and fighters, in direct contravention of pledges made by Taliban leaders, even as the withdrawal of US troops proceeded ahead of schedule. A majority of prisoners profiled for research that led to the report have already re-integrated into the Taliban and resumed active roles in the conflict.

Taliban leaders and a delegation representing the Afghan Government and civil society began initial negotiations in Qatar over the future of Afghanistan. The [UN Security Council welcomed](#) the start of the negotiations and reaffirmed its strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national unity of Afghanistan. [India's external affairs minister participated](#) in the inaugural session of the intra-Afghan negotiations by video conference. An official Indian delegation also attended the inaugural session in Doha. With US forces expected to depart next year irrespective of who wins the elections, the [Taliban can afford to wait](#) and seize power once they are gone.

A [bomb targeted](#) Afghan's Vice President Amrullah Saleh and killed at least 10 people. Mr Saleh escaped with slight burns on his face and hand. The Taliban disclaimed responsibility for the attack.

Pakistan's Minister for Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit Baltistan, Ali Amin Gandapur said that the [Gilgit Baltistan region would be as the fifth province of Pakistan](#) with all constitutional rights, including representation in the upper and lower houses of parliament.

The 45th session of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) witnessed an [intervention by Ms Veronica Ekelund](#) of the European Foundation of South Asian Studies, who said that terrorism inherently undermines the promotion and protection of human rights and asked why Pakistan, a self-confessed sanctuary for terrorists, was still a member of the UNHRC.

A [Pakistani contingent](#) participated in Russia's multi-national military exercise KAVKAZ – 2020 from September 21 – 26, 2020. Troops from Azerbaijan, Belarus and China also participated. India had said it would not take part, as reported by this monitor last month.

The standoff in Eastern Ladakh continued, with no indication that China was willing to accommodate India's legitimate concerns despite numerous rounds of talks at military and diplomatic levels. China appeared insistent on retaining the disputed territory it had seized through military action and trying to grab more. India, meanwhile, [occupied the heights](#) on its own side of the LAC at Magar Hill, Gurung Hill, Rechen La, Rezang La, Mokhpari and overlooking Finger Four, pre-empting possible Chinese occupation and giving it the ability to dominate Chinese positions. It also made it clear that its soldiers [would open fire to defend themselves](#). With no signs of disengagement, it seems clear that both sides, which have already deployed around 50,000 troops to the region, will remain dug in.

Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Mahinda Rajapaksa reviewed bilateral ties and exchanged views on regional and international issues of mutual concern at the first ever [India-Sri Lanka virtual summit](#) on September 26, 2020. The leaders shared a positive assessment of ongoing development cooperation including construction of 10,000 houses in the plantation sector; discussed coordination on trade and investment to foster an enabling environment for economic enterprises on both sides and deepening integration of supply chains; expressed satisfaction at the robust state of security and defence cooperation and agreed to strengthen personnel exchanges and training, maritime security cooperation and India's support to Sri Lanka in the field of defence and security; acknowledged progress made in information sharing and counter-terror cooperation; agreed to strengthen cooperation in agriculture, animal husbandry, science and technology, healthcare and skill development;

and discussed cultural cooperation, including grant assistance of \$ 15 million to strengthen Buddhist ties between the two countries.



Foreign Ministers S Jaishankar, Sergey Lavrov and Wang Yi at the Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Moscow, September 10, 2020.

Source: Russian Foreign Ministry Press Service

Reflecting the importance India now assigns to the Indo-Pacific, India will [reportedly bring together](#) its ASEAN and Indo-Pacific policies under an upgraded Oceania Division, to be headed by an Assistant Secretary. Ms Reenat Sandhu, formerly India's Ambassador in Italy, [is reported](#) to have been selected as the first head of this Division.

Addressing the combined meeting of Defence Ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Defence Minister [Rajnath Singh emphasised](#) that a "peaceful, stable and secure region of SCO member states – which is home to over 40% of the global population, demands a climate of trust and cooperation, respect for international rules and norms, sensitivity towards each other's interest and peaceful resolution of differences". He reaffirmed India's commitment to the evolution of a global security architecture which will be open, transparent, inclusive, rules-based and anchored in international law.

The Defence Minister Shri Rajnath Singh met his Chinese counterpart at the latter's request on the sidelines of the SCO meeting. [He emphasised](#) that the actions of Chinese troops, including amassing of large numbers, their

aggressive behaviour and attempts to unilaterally alter the status quo were in violation of bilateral agreements and understandings reached between special representatives of both sides.

Foreign Ministers from India and China met on the sidelines of the SCO Foreign Ministers' Meeting on September 10, 2020. [They jointly agreed](#) to take guidance from the consensus of leaders in not allowing differences to become disputes; that border troops on both sides should continue dialogue with a view to disengage, maintain proper distance and ease tensions; that both sides shall abide with all existing agreements and protocols on boundary affairs; to continue dialogue through the special representative mechanisms and Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India – China border affairs; and to expedite work to conclude new confidence building mechanisms once the current situation eases.

The 17th meeting of the US-India Counter-Terrorism JWG was held virtually on September 9-10, 2020. The [joint statement](#) on conclusion of the JWG condemned cross-border terror in all its forms, emphasised the need for concerted action against all terrorist groups; underlined the need for Pakistan to take immediate, sustained and irreversible action to ensure its territory was not used for terror attacks and expeditiously bring to justice perpetrators of such attacks, and committed to information-sharing and other steps to disrupt the ability of international terrorists to travel, as well as addressing other challenges such as the financing and operations of terrorist organisations, countering radicalisation and terrorist use of the internet and cross-border movements of terrorists. Mutual legal and extradition assistance and bilateral law enforcement and training cooperation was also discussed.

Senior officials from Australia, India, Japan and the US [held a video conference](#) on September 25, 2020, to discuss regional and global issues of common interest. They "reaffirmed their commitment towards a free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region based on shared values and principles and respect for international law, and reiterated their firm support for ASEAN-Centrality and ASEAN-led mechanisms, particularly the leaders-led East Asia Summit, in the regional architecture for the Indo-Pacific".

India and Japan [signed the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement](#) on reciprocal provision of supplies and services on September 10, 2020. The agreement on [reciprocal provision of supplies and services](#) establishes the enabling framework for closer cooperation between the armed forces of the two countries in reciprocal provision of supplies and services. India has signed similar agreements with the US, South Korea, France, Singapore and Australia.

Reports indicate that India expects to sign a [military logistics sharing agreement with Russia](#) during the India-Russia Annual Summit next month, and is also negotiating similar agreements with the UK and Vietnam.



HMAS Hobart with IN Ships Sahyadri and Karmuk in the Eastern Indian Ocean, September 23, 2020. Source: Australian Navy Daily

The Indian Navy, represented by IN ships Sahyadri and Karmuk, and the Royal Australian Navy, represented by HMAS Hobart, [conducted passage exercises](#) in the Eastern Indian Ocean from September 23 – 24, 2020. A P-8I aircraft and integral helicopters from both sides also participated.

The 11th edition of the [biennial India Russia Exercise INDRA Navy](#) was held in the Bay of Bengal on September 04 & 05, 2020. IN ships Ranvijay, Sahyadri and Shakti, with their integral helicopters, represented the Indian Navy, while the Russian Navy was represented by two destroyers and a fleet tanker.

The biennial Japan – India maritime bilateral exercise, JIMEX, [was conducted in the Northern Arabian Sea](#) from September 26 – 28, 2020. India was represented by IN ships Chennai, Tarkash and Deepak, while Japan fielded JMSDF ships Kaga and Ikazuchi. P-8I aircraft, integral helicopters and fighter aircraft also took part in the multi-faceted tactical exercise which included anti-ship, anti-submarine and air warfare operations.

The Greek-owned tanker MT New Diamond, chartered by Indian Oil Corporation to carry 270,000 tons of crude from Kuwait to Paradip [caught fire](#) off the South East coast of Sri Lanka in early September 2020, raising the spectre of a massive oil spill. The Sri Lankan Navy sought India's assistance, resulting in ships from the Sri Lankan Navy, Indian Navy and Indian Coast Guard carrying out a joint operation to combat the fire. [Sri Lanka lodged a claim](#) for \$ 1.8 million with the ship's owners for expenses involved in fighting the fire. Reports indicate that the ship's owners have agreed to pay this amount to settle the claim.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and South East Asia Reed Werner and Maldivian Minister of Defense Mariya Didi signed the Framework for the [US-Maldives Defense and Security Relationship](#) on September 10, 2020. The framework sets forth the intent of both countries to deepen engagement and cooperation in support of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean. [Reports indicated](#) that this included a Status of Forces Agreement that would allow US troops to carry personal weapons on Maldives territory and exempt them local laws and court appearances.

India has provided the [Maldives with a \\$ 250 million grant](#) to help it mitigate the pandemic's devastating effect on the nation's tourist based economy.

South East Asia

The 10th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers Meeting was held virtually on September 09, 2020. Press releases from [India](#), [the US](#) and [Indonesia](#) indicate that countries reiterated their well-known positions, without much headway towards solutions to regional and global issues. China's Wang Yi used the opportunity to [accuse the US of interference](#) in the territorial and maritime disputes of the region and disrupting the efforts of China and ASEAN to resolve these disputes, making it the most dangerous factor jeopardising peace in the South China Sea. He also said that the EAS is [not a forum to interfere in other countries' internal affairs](#), including Hong Kong.

The 27th meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum was held virtually on September 12, 2020. The [Chairman's statement](#) records that the meeting adopted the Hanoi Plan of Action II (2021 – 2025) encompassing seven areas of cooperation, including disaster relief; counter-terrorism and transnational crime; maritime security; non-proliferation and disarmament; information and communication technology security; defence cooperation; and peacekeeping operations. The Foreign Ministers reaffirmed the importance of maintaining and promoting peace, security, stability, safety and freedom of overflight and

navigation in and above the South China Sea and expressed encouragement at progress on negotiations for an effective and substantive code of conduct consistent with international law and UNCLOS. The statement records concerns expressed by some ministers on land reclamations, activities and serious incidents in the area which have eroded trust and confidence, increased tensions and may undermine peace, security and stability in the region.



10th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting, September 09, 2020

Source: ASEAN

The 53rd ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting was held through video conference on September 09, 2020. The [Joint Communiqué](#) following the meeting reaffirmed the objectives and principles of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific as a guide to ASEAN's engagement with the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Regions. It also reaffirmed the importance of promoting peace, security, stability, safety and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, underscored the importance of full and effective implementation of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, and expressed encouragement at progress in negotiations towards the early conclusion of an effective and substantive Code of Conduct consistent with international law including UNCLOS (negotiations for the Code of Conduct have been stalled due to the pandemic. Teodoro Locsin, the Foreign Secretary of the Philippines, was quoted as saying they would [resume no later than November](#)). It also talked of concerns expressed by some ministers on land reclamation, activities and serious incidents in the area which had eroded trust and confidence, increased tensions and could undermine peace, security and stability in the region. The communiqué was conspicuously silent on Hong Kong.

The [Plan of Action to implement the ASEAN – India Strategic Partnership](#) (2021 – 2025) outlined an agenda encompassing numerous areas of political and security cooperation; economic cooperation; socio-cultural cooperation; and cross-pillar cooperation. It committed ASEAN and India to work towards ASEAN community building and integration, addressing common and emerging challenges and enhanced coordination in international fora, with the ASEAN Outlook in the Indo-Pacific serving as a guiding principle in promoting cooperation in the four key areas outlined in the AOIP.

Plans of action to implement the [ASEAN – US strategic Partnership](#) and the [ASEAN – New Zealand Strategic Partnership](#) similarly outlined ambitious agendas to strengthen cooperation while maintaining ASEAN centrality and promote the AOIP.

Foreign Ministers of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam joined the US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo in releasing a [joint statement](#) launching the Mekong-US partnership on September 11, 2020. Shared interests in the Mekong region it talks about include building on the \$ 1 billion that the US International Development Finance Corporation has already invested in Mekong infrastructure, coordinating an expanded Disaster Relief Exercise and Engagement, committing \$ 55 million in new funding with Australia to help the Mekong countries fight transnational crime, \$ 1.8 million to support the Mekong River Commission and organising a policy dialogue series on evolving opportunities and challenges in the Mekong region to engage policy makers, business communities and other stakeholders.

[A report](#) indicated that BRI projects in South East Asian countries including Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia were running into numerous road blocks, due to issues with interest rates, land acquisition, environmental damage and corruption. Another report advised South East Asian countries, facing droughts along the Mekong Basin, to [raise their concerns through ASEAN](#), rather than dealing individually with Beijing.

Citing credible reports that the [coastal development project at Dara Sakor](#) could be used by PRC military assets in violation of Cambodia's constitution and thus threaten Indo-Pacific stability, the United States sanctioned China's Union Development Group (UDG) for its role in corrupt activities in Cambodia. The [press statement](#) observed that UDG was founded as a wholly owned PRC corporation, became Cambodian in order to receive a lease for nearly 90,000 acres of land including part of Botum Sakor National Park, and then went back to being a PRC owned company after acquisition of the land. It accused the

Cambodian military of having forcibly cleared the land using violent tactics and Cambodian Armed Forces Chief of Staff Kun Kim of having reaped significant financial benefit from his relations with UDG.

Justice James Spigelman [resigned as a non-permanent judge](#) from other common law jurisdictions in Hong Kong's Court of Final Appeal, citing reasons related to the content of the national security legislation. The resignation came a day after Hong Kong's Chief Executive Carrie Lam told reporters that the city did not have any meaningful separation of powers between the Executive, the legislature and the judiciary, and that Beijing retained ultimate authority over Hong Kong.



Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's pre-recorded address at the United Nations General Assembly on September 22, 2020

Source: Philippines' Department of Foreign Affairs Twitter/@DFAPHL

Indonesia's Foreign Minister [was reported to have cautioned](#) the US and China not to entangle her country in their regional struggle for influence. Indonesia also said it would [increase maritime security operations](#) off the Natuna Islands after a Chinese Coast Guard vessel was sighted in the region. A standoff had earlier occurred in December 2019 / January 2020 when China's Coast Guard had escorted its fishing vessels operating in the area.

In a wide-ranging [speech at the UN General Assembly](#) which will be a surprise for China, President Rodrigo Duterte asked all countries to "remain mindful of our obligations and commitment to the Charter of the UN and as amplified by the 1982 Manila Declaration on the Peaceful Settlement of International

Disputes". He reaffirmed that commitment in the South China Sea in accordance with UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Award, which he described now being "part of international law, beyond compromise and beyond the reach of passing governments to dilute, diminish or abandon". He firmly rejected attempts to undermine the award and welcomed the increasing number of states that have come out in its support.

China's companies including Tencent, Alibaba and ByteDance are [reported to be](#) investing billions of dollars in Singapore, so as to separate domestic and international operations. This would also help the companies to avoid the appearance of Chinese investment.

[Thailand has delayed](#) by at least one year its plans to buy [two additional submarines from China](#) following a public outcry about the purchase at a time the country faced its biggest economic slump in decades. A parliamentary committee had earlier approved the purchase at a cost of \$ 723.5 million, stirring public anger. Thailand had in 2015 purchased three Yuan class boats. Meanwhile, a Thai parliamentary panel [has claimed that](#) it is talking with China, India, Australia and the US to build the proposed Kra Canal that could connect the Gulf of Thailand directly with the Andaman Sea and change the shipping landscape in the region. The feasibility study for the project is almost complete and will be submitted to parliament for debate shortly.

The 11th [US – Vietnam Political, Security and Defence Dialogue](#) was held virtually on September 23, 2020. Topics discussed included security cooperation and defense trade; maritime security; peacekeeping; promoting international Women, Peace, and Security efforts; and humanitarian issues, including POW/MIA recovery and clearance of legacy unexploded munitions.

Delivering the [keynote address](#) at a [Track 1.5 virtual symposium](#) on the South China Sea co-hosted by the Chinese Foreign Ministry and the National Institute for South China Sea Studies, China's Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui said that "China's position on the South China Sea remained unchanged". This essentially implies that 17 years after China acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), 18 years after it signed the Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and four years after the award by the Permanent Court of Arbitration, China remains determined to impose its viewpoint on South East Asian nations while maintaining a façade of managing differences through dialogue and cooperation and being committed to the rule of international law including UNCLOS. He also accused the US of trying to contain China and establishing the Quad.

Australia and Singapore conducted the 25th edition of [Exercise Singaroo](#) in the South China Sea from September 26 – 28, 2020. The exercises encompassed gunnery firing, manoeuvres, underway replenishment, air defence, communication and encounter at sea.

East Asia

Speaking at the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi painted China as a peaceful nation that has "[never sought expansion](#)" and believes in the "paramount importance of peace". He said, "Over the last seven decades, China has never provoked a war or conflict and has never occupied an inch of others' land", disregarding the examples of the occupation of Xinjiang and Tibet and the wars of 1962 (India) and 1979 (Vietnam). [The over 3000 word speech](#) merits reading if only to understand China's use of obfuscation and propaganda.

Speaking on [Common vision and common interests shared by Asian countries](#) at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, "We all believe in diversity and equality of civilisations" and "The interwoven traditional and non-traditional security threats means no country can stay safe all by itself. We should value amity and cooperation, and pursue good-neighbourliness and partnership with our neighbours. We all stand against the wilful use of force, power politics and interference". The contrast between his words and China's deeds is striking.

State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi called on all countries to join China in supporting its [Global Initiative in Data Security](#) and creating universally accepted global data security rules so as to forge a peaceful, safe, open and cooperative cyberspace, healthy development of the digital economy and progress of human society. The initiative seeks to set standards and [counter US efforts](#) to persuade countries to ring fence their networks from Chinese technology. It contains eight key principles covering how data should be stored and used which will find resonance with other countries.

Speaking at the UNSC Summit Debate on Maintenance of International Peace and Security, [China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi proposed](#) a five point formula to deal with myriad threats and challenges confronting the world. These include the principle of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits; joint action to tackle non-traditional security threats; enhanced coordination and cooperation among major countries; upholding of international law and rules; and bringing the role of the UN to bear. The proof of his sincerity will, however, be seen in China's response to the growing global

assertion that China has violated international law in disregarding the South China Sea Arbitral Award and its use of force to seize disputed islands.

China's Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui presided over a [meeting of ASEAN envoys in Beijing](#) on September 04, 2020. Briefing the envoys on the current status of China's economic situation as well as China – US and China – India relations, the Vice Minister said China and ASEAN should make joint efforts to highlight their unity and cooperation so as to safeguard regional peace and stability and promote free trade and multilateralism. He said ASEAN and China should further strengthen their cooperation in the fight against COVID-19, make all out efforts to revive the economy, make a good start on the for next year, which would mark the 30th anniversary of establishment of China – ASEAN relations, and properly manage their differences. Among the differences he cited were effectively implementing the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), continue to advance consultations on the Code of Conduct, and jointly safeguard peace and stability in the South China Sea. He said that the US had deliberately stirred up the situation by advancing the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" and introduced a new policy on the South China Sea to deter China, destabilise the region and force ASEAN countries to take sides between China and the US. This was against the will of regional countries to maintain peace and stability. However, [according to one report](#), discussions on the Code of Conduct are still at the stage of how to restart negotiations and not on the negotiations themselves. A long and bumpy road lies ahead.



Perimeter Fence of a Vocational Skills Training Centre in Xinjiang

Source: Reuters

China was reported to have extended the coercive actions it uses against Xinjiang's Uighur Muslims to Tibet, sending rural Tibetan workers into military style vocational training centres to receive ideological instruction and become factory labour. Reuters was reported to have [independently corroborated](#) the contents of the [original report](#). China referred questioners to its [white paper](#) on "Employment and Labour Rights in Xinjiang" and described the forced labour issue as "[slander](#)".

China began [simultaneous military exercises](#) in Bohai Sea, Yellow Sea, East China Sea and South China Sea on September 28, once again flaunting its ability to conduct operations in widely separated maritime areas. A similar set of exercises had been conducted last month.



Yoshihide Suga becomes Japan's Prime Minister, September 16, 2020

Source: The Universal News Network

[Yoshihide Suga](#), Japan's longest serving Chief Cabinet Secretary, a close ally and the right hand man of former Premier Shinzo Abe, took over as the Prime Minister on September 16, 2020, after the latter had resigned due to ill health. Two days earlier, Mr Suga had become the first LDP leader not belonging to a faction or political dynasty. His priority in ensuring Japan's ability to ensure national security became evident with emergence of [reports attributed to 'government sources'](#) that Japan will seek a record defense budget of over 5.4 trillion Yen (over \$ 51 billion) for fiscal 2021. Japan's Indo-Pacific vision is [expected to endure](#).

[Japan](#) and the [UK](#) released statements indicating approval in principle to a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement on September 11, 2020. Following Brexit, the Japan – EU Economic Partnership Agreement would no longer have applied to the UK. The new agreement provides additional benefits to both sides.

Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy and Environment Keith Krach became the highest ranking [US State Department official to visit Taiwan](#) since Washington cuts its ties with Taipei four decades ago. The visit was to attend a memorial service for former Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui. President [Tsai Ing-wen expressed hope](#) that the two countries would be able to expand bilateral cooperation and enhance their relationship as trusted partners. China [signalled its displeasure](#) by sending 18 aircraft including fighters to exercise over the Taiwan Straits. Its [spokesperson described the exercise](#) as a “justifiable and necessary action taken in response to the current situation across the Taiwan Strait and to safeguard China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity”.

The Trump administration is [reported](#) to be considering another major weapons sale worth \$ 7 billion to Taiwan, including MQ-9B Reaper drones, mines and anti-ship missiles. This would be in addition to sales worth \$ 15 billion already approved, as also purchase of 66 F-16s over a 10-year period for \$ 62 billion. The arms sales, together with an increase in diplomatic interaction, signal that [US strategic ambiguity](#) about Taiwan is being reconsidered by the administration.

General Won In-Choul, Chief of Staff of the South Korean Air Force and nominated as the next Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, is [reported to have said](#) that North Korea may conduct an underwater launched ballistic missile test next year. The DPRK’s Pukguksong-1 (KN-11) SLBM was last tested to a range of 500 Km from an underwater barge in August 2016. Analysts then [estimated](#) that its range may be as much as 1200 Km. In parallel, North Korea and Iran have resumed long-range missile cooperation including transfer of critical parts, [according to a report](#) published in South Korea.

North Korea’s Kim Jong-Un issued a [rare letter of apology](#) for the killing of a South Korean official from the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, who was found floating in North Korean waters. The official was reportedly shot and his body burnt by the North Korean Navy. The killing had drawn condemnation from Seoul and Washington, and the apology may help in reducing tension.

South Western Pacific

Data released by the [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) indicated that Australian GDP contracted by 7.0% in the quarter ending June 30th, the largest decline in quarterly GDP since data collection began in 1959.

[Relations between Australia and China continued to sour](#) following the decision of two Australian journalists to flee China rather than face being taken hostage. China claimed that its decision to question Bill Birtles (ABC) and Mike Smith (Australian Financial Review) was due to their involvement with Australian-TV anchor Cheng Lei, who is being held under National Security Laws in Beijing. China pointed to Australia's questioning of four Chinese journalists working in Australia on the grounds of the anti-foreign interference law and accused the Australian government of harassing Chinese personnel.

China [suspended barley imports](#) from [Cooperative Bulk Handling \(CBH\)](#), Australia's top grain exporter and its largest cooperative, over disputed claims of pests in the product. Exports had almost stopped earlier, in May, when China imposed an [80% anti-dumping tariff](#) on Australian barley in response to the Australian push for Corona virus investigations.

In response the Australian decision to seek powers to veto agreements its provincial governments conclude with foreign nations if they go against Australian national interest, the CCP mouthpiece [Global Times warned](#) that decoupling with China will not send China back to poverty, but risks Australia becoming the "poor white trash of Asia".

The controversial lease of Darwin port in 2015 to a Chinese company for 99 years poses no strategic concerns, according to Australian Defence Minister Linda Reynolds. [Ms Reynolds said](#) that Australia's main defence port in the area was HMAS Coonawarra, not Port Darwin.

The Republic of Palau received its [replacement Guardian-class patrol boat](#) from Australia at a ceremony on September 18, 2020. Six boats under the Pacific Patrol Boat Replacement Programme have already been delivered to Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu, Tonga, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Fiji. Another 14 are building for delivery to 12 Pacific Island nations and Timor Leste. Palau also [invited the US to build ports](#), bases and airfields in the island nation. Located between Guam and the Philippines in the westernmost cluster of the Caroline Islands, [Palau](#) became independent in 1978 and has an association with the US since 1986.



PSS President H.I. Remeliik II (001), the Guardian Class Patrol Boat delivered by the Government of Australia to the Republic of Palau

Source: Defpost

The Solomon Islands province of Malaita said that it would [conduct an independence referendum](#) after rejecting the nation's decision to cut its association with Taiwan and establish formal ties with China. The move risks provoking civil conflict in the island state.

The United States

The US announced the next steps with respect to its announced [withdrawal from the World Health Organisation](#) due to the failure of the WHO to respond effectively to COVID-19 and to carry out much-needed reform, including demonstrating its independence from the Chinese Communist Party.

In a speech titled "[State Legislatures and the China Challenge](#)" at the Wisconsin State Legislature on September 23, 2020, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo focused on the CCP's influence and espionage operations at the state, city and municipal levels. Drawing a distinction between the CCP and the people of China, he accused the CCP of trying to foment racial strife of the type the US has seen in Minneapolis, Portland and Kenosha whose objective was to put itself in an undefeatable and invincible position. In response, [China's spokesperson said](#), "sub-national cooperation and people-to-people and cultural exchange is an integral part of China-US relations. It is the two people's shared wish to enhance such exchange, which serves the interest of both sides". He also said, "Pompeo's remarks are shameless lies with no respect for facts. China firmly

rejects them. We have also seen quite some criticism on him in the US, pointing out that his speech is clearly motivated by selfish political gains and that he is merely using foreign policy as a cover in the service of domestic agenda”.

Secretary of State Michael Pompeo formally called out the hypocrisy of the PRC’s propaganda system in a press statement on September 09, 2020, based on China’s People’s Daily [refusing to publish](#) an [Op Ed](#) written by the US ambassador in Beijing calling for resetting of the US – China relationship based on reciprocity. The refusal “shows just how much China’s unelected party elites fear their own people’s free thinking”, [according to the statement](#). Shortly thereafter, Ambassador Terry Brandstad, whose tenure has been marked by a sharp deterioration in US – China relations, [announced](#) that he would step down as the US ambassador to Beijing in early October.

A statement from the US State Department titled “[China’s Empty Promise in the South China Sea](#)” urged the international community to continue to raise its opposition to China’s unlawful claims in the South China Sea and its efforts to seek dominion over the region. “The CCP does not honour its word or commitments”, it said.

[Testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee](#), David Stillwell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, provided an overview of America’s China Policy, the CCP’s malign actions globally and how the State Department was responding, with special focus on the East Asia and Pacific region. China’s spokesperson [described his remarks](#) as disregarding and distorting facts and loaded with ideological bias and Cold War mentality.

The Department of Defense published its 20th annual [China Military Power Report](#) on September 01. The report acknowledges that China has the largest navy in the world, with about 350 ships and submarines including over 130 major surface combatants as compared to the 293 ships in the USN; is ahead of the US in shipbuilding; has more than 150 ground launched ballistic and cruise missiles as compared to just one type of GLBM and no GLCMs in the US; and the world’s largest force of advanced long-range SAM systems. However, major gaps and shortcomings remain and the report opines that the PLA leadership envisages almost 30 more years of modernisation and reform. Underpinning the military build-up is the blending of China’s civilian and military industrial bases and the technology innovation sector, driven by its Military – Civil Fusion Development Strategy, which allows the military to pick the best and most fully developed technologies for its own use. “The CCP desires the PLA to become a practical instrument of its statecraft with an active role in advancing the PRC’s foreign policy, particularly with respect to the PRC’s increasingly global

interests and its aims to revise aspects of the international order", according to the report.



Royal Australian Navy, Republic of Korea Navy, Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, and United States Navy warships sail in formation during the Pacific Vanguard 2020 exercise.

Source: Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force

The US Air Force Chief of Staff CQ Brown has, in an eight page vision document titled "[Accelerate Change or Lose](#)" called for the US to abandon legacy aircraft and fund new network-centric technology so that the US can best Russia and China. Whether he can overcome the post COVID budgetary crunch, a possible change in administration and the Department of Defense bureaucracy and build the coalition required to support his vision, however, remains to be seen.

The US Indo-Pacific Command conducted [Exercise Valiant Shield](#), centred on Guam and the Mariana Islands, from September 14 – 25. The exercise focuses on integration of training of joint forces in a blue water environment. Maritime forces from Australia, Japan, South Korea and the US also conducted [Exercise Pacific Vanguard](#) off Guam on September 12, 2020. The Command also hosted the 13th annual [Indo-Pacific Intelligence Chiefs Conference](#) virtually, with participation from 24 countries.



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