19 february | 2024

Indo-Pacific Insights

Centre for Governance Studies

A Bi-Weekly Roundup of Key Events

February 6

Bangladesh Issues Protest to Myanmar over Escalating Conflict at Border

Recent violent conflict in Myanmar, exacerbated by clashes between the junta regime and rebel forces, reached a tragic peak when a mortar shell killed a Bangladeshi woman and a Rohingya at the Bangladesh border. Responding to this grave incident, which poses a direct threat to Bangladesh's national security, the Foreign Ministry of Bangladesh has lodged a formal protest with Myanmar Ambassador Aung Kyaw Moe. Reports from Bangladesh's Border Guard and Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner indicate that approximately 294 Myanmar Border Guard and police personnel have sought refuge in Bangladesh to escape anti-junta rebellion attacks, with many ethnic groups anticipating crossing into Bangladesh at the border. In a related move, India has also prohibited its citizens from traveling to Myanmar's Rakhine state.

Guatemala Weighs Trade Links with China Maintains Taiwan Ties

China is contemplating trade ties with Guatemala, an ally of Taiwan. Guatemala, while maintaining its current relations with Taiwan, is contemplating the establishment of official trade links with China. As one of Taiwan's few remaining allies amidst a global trend of nations aligning with China, Guatemala remains committed to its partnership with Taiwan. However, Foreign Minister Carlos Ramiro Martinez emphasized the significance of engaging with China. Taiwan vows to uphold shared values of democracy and freedom by enhancing exchanges and collaboration with Guatemala under President Arevalo's administration. The Chinese Foreign Ministry underscored the "one China" principle as the foundation of its cooperation with all nations, including Guatemala.

February 7

South Korea and Qatar Strengthen Military Ties

South Korea and Qatar are poised to enhance their bilateral diplomatic relations by deepening military cooperation. Seoul's Defense Minister, Shin Won-Sik, has inked an agreement with Qatar's Khalid bin Mohammed Al Attiyah to facilitate regular ministerial-level discussions between the two nations. The collaboration is driven by Seoul's ambition to expand its global arms trade, leading Shin Won-Sik to also visit the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia during his 7-day official tour. This move is particularly significant as the Middle East represents a lucrative market for South Korea, with its arms sales surging tenfold over the past decade.

February 8

India Suspends Visa-Free Movement with Myanmar Amid Border Security Concerns

India's Home Minister, Amit Shah, has announced the immediate suspension of the longstanding visa-free movement policy with Myanmar. The decision aims to protect India's national security and border communities from the internal violence plaguing its neighboring country. Notably, the Manipur state of India has been grappling with ethnic conflict, which Indian officials attribute to Myanmar's internal strife. To prevent further communal tensions and safeguard its territorial integrity, India has opted to erect a fence along the 1,643-kilometer border with Myanmar, currently embroiled in a bloody anti-regime rebellion.

Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Seeks Strategic Cooperation from Allies

Prime Minister James Marape of Papua New Guinea visited Australia. During his visit to Canberra, Marape emphasized the importance of strategic cooperation with major allies like Australia, the USA, and China. He hailed Australia as a steadfast partner, expressing gratitude for its support in various sectors crucial to Papua New Guinea's development. While acknowledging Australia's significant aid contributions, Marape also stressed the need for economic cooperation with China, ensuring mutual benefits for PNG without undermining the interests of its allies. Despite Australia's concerns about security agreements with China, Marape aims to maintain a balanced approach to international relations for the benefit of Papua New Guinea and the Pacific region.

North Korea Votes to Sever Economic Ties with South Korea

The Supreme People's Assembly of North Korea has voted to abolish laws governing economic ties with South Korea, marking a significant deterioration in their relations.

This decision has led to the termination of lucrative joint economic projects, including the Mount Kumgang tourism project and the Kaesong industrial zone. Additionally, a military pact signed in 2018 to reduce tensions has been nullified, resulting in escalating nuclear threats. Pyongyang has labeled Seoul as an 'Enemy in War,' while South Korea has criticized North Korean leadership as 'Irrational.'

February 9

UN Secretary-General Expresses Concern Over Election Violence in Pakistan

The United Nations Secretary-General has expressed concern over election-related violence and breaches of law in Pakistan ahead of its National Election Day on 8th February. Reports of military attacks, suspension of mobile services, and delays in vote counting and result announcements have raised alarms. The election saw rival political parties, including Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League and Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), vying for power. Members of the PTI faced arbitrary arrests and detention, with Khan himself sentenced to a lengthy imprisonment. Antonio Guterres extended condolences for the 26 election-related deaths and urged Pakistan to adhere to the rule of law and denounce violence peacefully.

February 14

Myanmar Military Plans Mandatory Service Amidst Anti-Junta Insurgency

Myanmar's ruling military intends to enforce mandatory military service starting April, requiring young people and retired security personnel to serve. Since the 2021 coup, Myanmar has faced unrest, and the junta's move indicates mounting pressure on the military to quell insurgency. The law mandates conscription for men aged 18 to 35 and women aged 18 to 27 for up to two years, starting in April. Each intake, about 5,000 individuals, will undergo medical checks. Retired security personnel who left within five years may also be called up. Non-compliance carries up to five years in prison under existing legislation.

February 15

Kim Jong Un Inspects Weapons Facility, Urges Increased Output

During a visit to a significant armament facility, North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Un, oversaw the testing of a new surface-to-sea missile named "Sea Eagle-6" or Padasuri-6. The missile successfully struck its target over the ocean. Kim also toured a large weapons plant, where he gained insights into production modernization. He emphasized the factory's role in supporting North Korea's military and outlined steps to enhance output and ammunition quality. This visit coincides with accusations of North Korea exchanging weapons with Russia, particularly concerning reports that Russia used North Korean-sourced short-range ballistic missiles in strikes against Ukraine, as reported by the White House.

Taiwan Defends Coast Guard Actions After Fatal Incident

Taiwan has stood firm in defense of its coast guard following a tragic incident where two occupants of a Chinese speedboat capsized while attempting to evade a coast guard vessel. China's Taiwan Affairs Office has alleged that the incident was primarily caused by Taiwan's "rough and dangerous" treatment of Chinese fishermen. Complaints have been lodged by Taiwan against China's fishing vessels, particularly those operating around the Kinmen and Matsu islands, for encroaching into Taiwan-controlled waters. The Taiwanese Coast Guard asserts that it acted within the bounds of the law and did nothing unlawful. Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council expressed regret over the incident and urged mainland authorities to prevent similar actions from occurring across the Taiwan Strait.

February 16

U.S. House Committee Chairman Supports Funding for Pacific Allies to Counter China

Republican chairman of the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, Michael McCaul, advocates for funding U.S.-allied Pacific Island nations to counter China's influence. At a meeting, he emphasized the strategic importance of supporting these nations amidst China's aggressive tactics. Despite bipartisan support, Congress has yet to approve the funding for the Compacts of Free Association (COFAs), which offer economic assistance and military access to strategic Pacific regions. McCaul aims for a $900 million COFA package and pledges to ensure its inclusion in the House's foreign aid spending bill, diverging from the Senate's recent bill that excluded COFA funding.

February 19

UN Conference on Afghanistan Ends Abruptly as Taliban Representatives Fail to Attend

A United Nations-sponsored conference on Afghanistan, aimed at fostering dialogue with the Taliban rulers, concluded abruptly after the administration's representatives failed to attend. The Taliban-led foreign office refused participation in Doha, citing the UN's rejection of its demand to act as Afghanistan's sole official representative. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres deemed such conditions unacceptable, akin to recognizing the Taliban as the legitimate government. The Afghan foreign office criticized the international community's approach as unilateral. Guterres announced plans to appoint a UN envoy to coordinate engagement with the Taliban, hoping to encourage their participation in future meetings. Taliban response remains awaited.

India Boosts Development Assistance to Maldives Despite Strained Ties

India has intensified development aid to the Maldives, despite strained relations following Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu's call for Indian troops to leave. Amid competition for influence in the Indo-Pacific, India and China vie for the Maldives' favor. Despite Muizzu's shift towards China, India allocated nearly 7.71 billion rupees, surpassing its 4 billion budget for Maldivian projects this fiscal year. An Indian official noted that development cooperation continues unabated, with projects progressing at an accelerated pace. Efforts include infrastructure projects like roads, bridges, and airports, underscoring India's commitment to the Maldives despite recent geopolitical challenges. Muizzu's office has yet to comment on India's initiatives.

Contributors

Debi Karmakar

Research Assistant at Centre for Governance Studies (CGS)
debi@cgs-bd.com

Trapa Sarker

Research intern at Centre for Governance Studies (CGS)
trapa@cgs-bd.com

Bahauddin Ahmed

Digital Coordinator at Centre for Governance Studies (CGS)
bahauddin@cgs-bd.com

cgs Centre for Governance Studies

45/1, New Eskaton, 2nd Floor, Dhaka 1000, Bangladesh
Email: ed@cgs-bd.com, Web: www.cgs-bd.com