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Indo-Pacific Insights

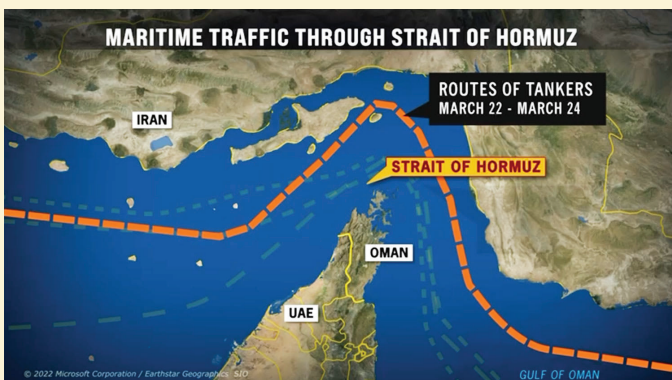
CGS Centre for Governance Studies



A Bi-Weekly Roundup of Key Events

March 16

Trump Urges Global Role in Securing Strait of Hormuz



U.S. President Donald Trump has called on multiple countries to help secure shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, as the ongoing conflict involving Iran, the United States, and Israel continues to disrupt global oil flows. He argued that nations heavily dependent on Gulf energy must assume a

more direct role in safeguarding the route. Iran, however, dismissed suggestions of renewed talks with Washington, insisting it remains prepared to defend itself. The disruption has unsettled global energy markets, keeping oil prices elevated, even as U.S. officials express cautious optimism that the conflict may not be prolonged.

Azerbaijan Jails French National in Espionage Case

A court in Azerbaijan has sentenced French citizen Martin Ryan to 10 years in prison on charges of espionage. Authorities allege he collected sensitive information on Azerbaijan's military ties with Turkey and Pakistan and helped recruit French-speaking Azerbaijanis for French intelligence services. A co-defendant, Azerbaijani national Azad Mammadli, was handed a 12-year sentence. The case is likely to deepen already strained relations between Baku and Paris, particularly in light of France's support for Armenia. Ryan, who was arrested in December 2023, had been working in Azerbaijan in the food import and consulting sector.

March 17

Allies Reluctant to Join U.S. Effort to Protect Hormuz Shipping

Several U.S. allies, including Germany, Spain, and Italy, have declined to commit naval forces to escort tankers through the Strait of Hormuz, despite Washington's appeal for support. The strait remains heavily disrupted as the U.S.–Israeli conflict with Iran enters its third week, sustaining pressure on global energy markets. President Trump has criticised allies for their lack of enthusiasm, while European governments point to the absence of a clear legal or political mandate. Meanwhile, Israel is preparing for a prolonged campaign, and Iran continues retaliatory strikes across the region.

Pakistan Retains Overwhelming Military Advantage Over Afghan Taliban

Pakistan continues to hold a decisive military advantage over the Afghan Taliban, according to an assessment cited by Reuters from the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Pakistan's armed forces comprise around 660,000 personnel, supported by extensive armour, artillery, 422 combat aircraft, over 260 helicopters, and nuclear capabilities. In contrast, the Afghan Taliban fields roughly 150,000 fighters, with limited equipment, no effective air force, and no nuclear deterrent. Although Taliban forces have reportedly deployed drones in recent months, their overall capacity remains significantly constrained.

Trump's Delayed China Visit Raises Questions Over Trade Momentum

President Donald Trump's decision to postpone a planned summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping has introduced uncertainty into an already fragile U.S.–China trade détente. The delay followed what were described as constructive talks in Paris, covering agricultural exports, rare earths, and broader trade management. While analysts do not interpret the move as a fundamental rupture, it has complicated the optics of progress. Officials have cited multiple factors behind the postponement, including the Iran conflict and Washington's request for Chinese assistance in easing disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz. Chinese authorities have indicated that discussions over the timing of the visit are ongoing.

March 18

U.S. Assures Taiwan Arms Deliveries Unaffected by Iran War

U.S. officials have told Congress that the conflict with Iran has not disrupted arms shipments to Taiwan or altered Washington's policy towards the island. At a House hearing, administration representatives emphasised that Taiwan remains a priority for U.S. security assistance, despite an existing multibillion-dollar backlog in deliveries. They added that earlier guidance continues to place Taiwan ahead of other buyers for certain weapons systems. It remains unclear whether President Trump's postponed visit to Beijing will affect the timing of a new arms package.

U.N. Revises Kabul Strike Death Toll to 143

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan has confirmed that 143 people were killed in the bombing of a drug rehabilitation centre in Kabul. The Taliban government had earlier claimed significantly higher casualties, reporting over 400 deaths and 265 injuries. Pakistan has rejected allegations that it targeted a civilian facility, stating that its strikes were aimed at military sites and what it described as terrorist infrastructure.

China Links Taiwan Energy Security to "Reunification"

China has suggested that Taiwan could secure more stable energy supplies if it accepted Beijing's rule, presenting "peaceful reunification" as a guarantee of energy access amid disruptions caused by the Middle East conflict and instability in the Strait of Hormuz. Taiwan has not formally responded, though President Lai Ching-te stated that current energy supplies remain secure and that additional U.S. gas imports are expected from June. Taiwan continues to rely heavily on liquefied natural gas imports, with a significant share coming from Qatar.

Nations Propose Safe Corridor for Stranded Gulf Seafarers

Several countries have proposed the creation of a protected maritime corridor to evacuate an estimated 20,000 seafarers stranded in the Gulf due to disruptions linked to the Iran conflict. The proposal, submitted to the International Maritime

Organization by Bahrain, Japan, Panama, Singapore, and the United Arab Emirates, with U.S. backing, seeks to allow merchant vessels to exit safely. Hundreds of ships have remained anchored following Iranian threats in the Strait of Hormuz. IMO Secretary-General Arsenio Dominguez warned that at least seven sailors have already been killed and urged de-escalation.

US Expands Airstrikes in Iran as Missile Attacks Decline

The United States says Iran has been launching fewer missiles compared with the early days of the conflict, suggesting that Iranian military capabilities may be weakening. US military officials announced plans to extend airstrikes deeper into Iranian territory to gain greater operational flexibility and target additional military infrastructure. Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth stated that the US believes it is gaining the upper hand in the war, despite the loss of several American troops. In a separate development, a US submarine sank an Iranian warship near Sri Lanka, marking the first torpedo attack by the US Navy on an enemy vessel since World War II.

Japan Balances U.S. Pressure and Domestic Constraints on Iran Mission

Japan is facing growing pressure from Washington to contribute to efforts to secure shipping routes in the Strait of Hormuz. Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's visit to the White House has been complicated by President Trump's expectations of Japanese involvement. While Japan depends heavily on energy passing through the strait, its pacifist constitution and domestic public opinion limit the scope for direct military engagement. Tokyo is therefore exploring alternative ways to support the United States without incurring legal or political risks.

March 19

Iran Calls for Regional Coordination After Energy Site Attacks

Iran has urged neighbouring countries to remain vigilant and coordinate responses following strikes on its energy infrastructure. Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi held discussions with counterparts in Turkey, Egypt, and Pakistan, accusing the United States and Israel of escalating tensions and seeking to destabilise the region. The warning followed attacks on facilities linked to the South Pars gas

field and Asaluyeh. Iran's military has signalled that any further targeting of energy installations would prompt stronger retaliation.

March 20

U.S. Charges Network in Alleged AI Server Smuggling to China

U.S. prosecutors have charged three individuals linked to Super Micro Computer, including a co-founder, for allegedly routing at least \$2.5 billion worth of AI server technology to China in violation of export controls. Authorities say the network used transit points in Taiwan and South-east Asia, altered packaging, and deployed decoy equipment to evade detection. Two suspects have been arrested, while another remains at large. Super Micro stated that it is cooperating with the investigation and confirmed that the company itself has not been charged.

Taiwan Warns of Persistent China Threat Despite U.S. Assessment

Taiwan's defence minister has cautioned that China continues to pose a serious threat, despite recent U.S. intelligence suggesting Beijing is not preparing for an invasion in 2027. Wellington Koo stressed the need for stronger deterrence to ensure that any potential attack would appear too costly to pursue. His remarks came as President Lai Ching-te visited Taiwan's submarine fleet and pushed for increased defence spending, a proposal that has drawn scepticism from opposition lawmakers.

March 21

Allies Shift Defence Production Closer to Asia's Flashpoints

The United States and its partners are moving to localise defence manufacturing in Asia, producing missiles, drones, and ammunition nearer to potential conflict zones. The Pentagon announced new initiatives under the Indo-Pacific defence partnership, including a Japan-led missile motor programme, expanded joint drone production, and plans to assess a 30mm ammunition assembly line in the Philippines. The partnership, formed in 2024 to reduce supply vulnerabilities, has now expanded to 16 members with the inclusion of Thailand and the United Kingdom.

March 22

Baikonur Launch Pad Returns to Service with ISS Mission

Russia has successfully launched a Soyuz-2.1a rocket carrying the Progress MS-33 cargo spacecraft from the Baikonur Cosmodrome, marking the first use of the repaired launch pad since damage in November 2025. Roscosmos confirmed that the spacecraft has entered orbit and is scheduled to dock with the International Space Station on 24 March. The restoration of the pad reinstates a critical component of Russia's logistical capacity for ISS missions.

China Seeks to Reassure Investors Amid Falling Foreign Investment

Chinese Premier Li Qiang has sought to reassure foreign investors, promising equal treatment with domestic firms and signalling further economic opening. Speaking at the China Development Forum, he also pledged more balanced trade and increased imports following a record trade surplus in 2025. The remarks come as Beijing attempts to address concerns over industrial overcapacity, trade tensions, and declining foreign investment, which continued to fall in early 2026. Senior executives from global companies, including Apple, Samsung, and Volkswagen, attended the forum.

March 25

US Pushes to Return Mine Sweepers to Gulf Amid Iran Threats

The United States is seeking to speed up the return of two mine-countermeasure ships from Singapore to the Persian Gulf as tensions with Iran escalate. The vessels are undergoing maintenance but are considered vital amid concerns that Iran could mine the Strait of Hormuz. A U.S. official said efforts are underway to minimise delays, as the strategic waterway remains disrupted, posing risks to global energy supplies and maritime security.

March 27

Ex-Rapper Shah Becomes Nepal's Youngest Prime Minister in Decades

Balendra Shah, a former rapper turned politician, has been sworn in as Nepal's prime minister after his party secured a landslide election victory.

At 35, he is the youngest leader in decades and faces the challenge of restoring political stability and creating jobs. Shah, a former Kathmandu mayor, has promised lean governance and appointed a small cabinet. His government must also address demands for justice over the deadly 2025 anti-corruption protests. Backed by a strong parliamentary majority, Shah's leadership marks a major political shift in Nepal after years of instability and public discontent.

March 28

Manila, Beijing Resume South China Sea Talks Amid Energy Concerns

The Philippines and China have resumed high-level talks on the South China Sea, marking their first meeting since early 2025. Discussions focused on easing maritime tensions, exploring oil and gas cooperation, and ensuring stable energy and fertiliser supplies amid disruptions linked to the Middle East conflict. Manila reiterated its concerns over incidents involving Filipino personnel and stressed adherence to international law. Both sides also discussed renewable energy, trade, and confidence-building measures at sea. The talks come as the Philippines faces an energy emergency, highlighting the urgency of balancing territori-

Nepal's Former PM Oli Arrested Over Deadly Protest Crackdown



Nepal's former prime minister K.P. Sharma Oli has been arrested over alleged negligence during last year's deadly Gen Z-led protests, in which 76 people were killed. The arrest follows a probe recommending prosecution and comes days after Balendra Shah took office as prime minister. Oli's supporters have staged protests, calling the move politically motivated, while authorities say it marks the beginning of accountability.

Houthis Open New Front as Iran War Expands Across Region

Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthis have entered the Iran war, launching missile and drone attacks on Israel, raising fears of a wider regional conflict. The strikes came as U.S. Marines began arriving in the Middle East to reinforce Washington's military presence. Iran has continued attacks across the Gulf, including a strike on a Saudi base that injured U.S. personnel. Israel has intensified operations in Iran and Lebanon, while diplomacy shows little progress. The expanding conflict is disrupting global energy supplies and heightening risks to key shipping routes, including the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait.

March 29

China Protests U.S. Alert Over Hong Kong Security Rules

China has protested a U.S. security alert issued after Hong Kong tightened enforcement of its national security law. Beijing accused Washington of interference, while the U.S. urged its citizens to seek consular help if detained under new rules requiring access to encrypted devices.

March 30

Myanmar's Junta Chief Moves Closer to Presidency

Myanmar's military leader Min Aung Hlaing has stepped down as armed forces chief to pursue the presidency, signalling the junta's effort to retain power under a civilian façade. The move follows widely criticised elections that excluded key opposition groups, including Aung San Suu Kyi's party. Having led the military since 2011, Min Aung Hlaing is now a vice-presidential nominee, with a final parliamentary vote pending. His transition comes amid an ongoing civil war triggered by the 2021 coup, which has killed thousands and displaced millions. Analysts see the shift as a consolidation of military control rather than a genuine political transition.

Pakistan-Afghanistan Clashes Intensify Amid Diplomatic Moves

Pakistan and Afghanistan exchanged heavy fire along their border days after a temporary ceasefire, raising tensions in an already volatile region. Both sides used artillery, with casualties reported in Afghanistan's Kunar province. Islamabad denied targeting civilians. The clashes come as Pakistan positions itself to host potential U.S.-Iran talks, highlighting the contrast between escalating regional violence and fragile diplomatic efforts.

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