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# Indo-Pacific Insights

CGS Centre for Governance Studies



## A Bi-Weekly Roundup of Key Events

### May 31

#### Philippine President Marcos Warns of Potential Conflict Amid U.S.-China Rivalry in South China Sea

During the Shangri-La Dialogue, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. criticized illegal and aggressive actions in the South China Sea, hinting at China's maritime expansion and confrontations with Philippine vessels. Marcos cautioned that any harm inflicted by China's coast guard on Filipinos could be seen as an act of war. The Philippines, caught between U.S.-China tensions, faces growing pressure amidst the escalating power struggle. U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin stressed the importance of freedom of navigation, while China accused the U.S. of exacerbating tensions. Marcos urged both nations to manage their rivalry responsibly, highlighting its destabilizing impact on Southeast Asia and its strategic constraints.

### June 1

#### South Korean Defense Minister Alleges North Korea-Russia Weapons Trade Escalates Tensions

South Korean Defense Minister Shin Won-sik stated that mounting evidence suggests weapons utilized by Russia in the Ukraine conflict were unlawfully imported from North Korea.

### May 28

#### U.S. Imposes Visa Restrictions on Chinese, Hong Kong Officials

The United States announced new visa restrictions on Chinese and Hong Kong officials following guilty verdicts in Hong Kong's National Security Law trial of pro-democracy activists. Fourteen activists were convicted while two were acquitted in the subversion trial, raising concerns about Hong Kong's rule of law and global financial reputation. State Department spokesman Matthew Miller condemned the verdicts as politically motivated prosecutions, urging an end to the use of vague national security laws to suppress peaceful dissent. The trial, the city's largest against democratic figures, occurred more than three years after the arrest of 47 activists charged with conspiracy to commit subversion.

Shin emphasized the escalating military cooperation between Russia and North Korea heightens tensions on the Korean Peninsula and impacts the European battlefield. Concerns rise over North Korea's enhanced conventional military capabilities if the illicit transfers persist. The U.S. reported North Korea dispatched over 10,000 containers of munitions to Russia since September. Both Russia and North Korea deny allegations of weapon transfers. Shin urged China to play a more active role in Korean peninsula denuclearization while emphasizing South Korea's trust in the global nonproliferation treaty. He advocated for a stronger U.S.-South Korean alliance to counter North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Shin's remarks were made during the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Asia's largest defense forum, ongoing until June 2.

## June 2

### **U.S., Japan, South Korea Strengthen Military Cooperation Amid North Korea Threats**

The United States, Japan, and South Korea have agreed to conduct new trilateral joint military exercises this summer and establish a Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework to formalize their defense collaboration. This decision, reached during a meeting of the three countries' defense ministers in Singapore, aims to ensure peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula, the Indo-Pacific region, and beyond. Officials denounced North Korea's recent ballistic missile launches and military spy satellite deployment as violations of UN Security Council resolutions. The trilateral cooperation seeks to counter North Korea's provocative actions and bolster regional security.

## June 3

### **South Korea to Halt 2018 Military Pact Over North's 'Trash Balloons'**

South Korea intends to suspend a 2018 military agreement with North Korea, originally designed to ease tensions, following Pyongyang's launch of balloons carrying trash across the border. The presidential office stated the suspension would enable South Korea to conduct training near the military border and address North Korea's provocations involving the balloons. The 2018 pact, a significant outcome of historic inter-Korean summits, was rendered ineffective after North Korea renounced it last year. South Korea warned of a robust response to the trash balloons, retaliating against Seoul's anti-Pyongyang propaganda campaign by defectors. Analysts suggest North Korea's concern lies in potential psychological impact on its populace.

### **Pakistan High Court Overturns Imran Khan's State Secrets Conviction**

A high court in Pakistan overturned former Prime Minister Imran Khan's conviction for leaking state secrets, as announced by his lawyer and party.

However, Khan, 71, will remain incarcerated due to a separate conviction. Khan had challenged his 10-year sentence for disclosing a classified cable from Pakistan's Washington ambassador in 2022. The Islamabad High Court's order acquitted Khan of the charges, a major victory for the imprisoned leader. His party's legal affairs spokesman expressed gratitude for the overturned sentence. Khan alleged the cable revealed a conspiracy by Pakistan's military and the U.S. government to oust him in 2022, a claim denied by both parties.

## June 4

### **Modi's Historic 3rd Term Tainted by Diminished Mandate**

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has secured a historic third term, but with a significantly reduced majority, marking an unusual electoral setback for the leader who has dominated the nation's politics. Modi's BJP lost its parliamentary majority for the first time in a decade, becoming reliant on regional allies. This outcome, despite Modi's presidential-style campaign and high approval ratings, signals a personal setback and shifting political landscape. Amid concerns over India's drift towards authoritarianism under his Hindu nationalist base, Modi vows a transformative next five years, aiming to elevate India to the world's third largest economy. However, the reduced mandate limits the possibility of constitutional changes, pushing the BJP's Hindu nationalist agenda to the backburner.

### **Modi's Historic 3rd Term Tainted by Diminished Mandate**



U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin arrived in Cambodia, aiming to address China's expanding influence, particularly its utilization of the Ream Naval Base. Cambodia's decision to permit China's development of Ream has prompted worries in Washington regarding Beijing's increased proximity to the South China Sea. Compounding concerns, China recently dispatched two warships to Cambodia. Despite hopes for Prime Minister Hun Manet to lean towards the U.S., obstacles persist. Prior to China's involvement, Ream hosted joint U.S.-Cambodia exercises, but Cambodia razed a U.S.-constructed facility in 2020. China has bolstered military ties with Cambodia, including berthing warships at Ream since last December. Additionally, Cambodia intends to construct a Chinese-backed canal, sparking apprehensions of potential military utilization by China, despite Cambodian reassurances.

## June 5

### U.S. Approves \$80 Million F-16 Spare Parts Sale to Taiwan

The U.S. State Department has approved an \$80 million sale of F-16 fighter jet spare and repair parts to Taiwan, the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) announced. The sale aims to enhance Taiwan's security, political stability, military balance, and economic progress. Taiwan's defense ministry expressed gratitude, noting the sale would boost the air force's combat readiness, especially amid Chinese "gray-zone" activities. China, which opposes U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, did not immediately comment. Taiwan's Defense Minister Wellington Koo emphasized the importance of self-defense to support the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, adding that some military cooperation details remain undisclosed.

## June 6

### Australia's Push for Deeper Ties with Solomon Islands Amid China's Influence



Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong emphasized Canberra's desire for stronger relations with the Solomon Islands and a region where decisions are made "without fear." During a visit to Honiara, Wong reiterated Australia's role as the Solomon Islands' largest development partner and pledged \$3.4 million for school infrastructure. Wong's visit follows high-level Australian delegations meeting new Prime Minister Jeremiah Manele. Amid security concerns, Australia provided policing support for April's national elections. Concurrently, China's envoy reaffirmed the "special relationship" with the Solomon Islands, highlighting Beijing's extensive support since diplomatic ties shifted from Taiwan to China in 2019.

### Indonesia Accepts Aged South Korean Corvette Amid Concerns Over Refurbishing Costs

Indonesia's parliament approved the acceptance of a donated South Korean corvette for its navy, despite concerns from the defence committee about the vessel's age and the estimated \$85 million needed for maintenance.

This decision aligns with Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto's strategy to modernize Indonesia's outdated military hardware through significant purchases of jets and submarines. While Indonesia's defense spending lags behind its regional peers, Prabowo's approach to acquiring used equipment has faced resistance, leading to the abandonment of a plan to buy old fighter jets from Qatar.

## June 7

### Xi Jinping Meets Pakistani PM to Strengthen Economic Ties

Chinese President Xi Jinping met Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif in Beijing, reaffirming China's support for Pakistan's sovereignty and economic development. This meeting comes as Pakistan prepares its annual budget and seeks a new \$6 billion IMF loan amid a debt crisis. Xi emphasized the strategic importance of Pakistan's location for China and promised continued assistance through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). With Pakistan owing China \$27 billion, Xi urged improved security for Chinese projects in Pakistan. Their discussions highlighted the "all-weather strategic partnership" and the signing of 31 MoUs covering technology, agriculture, and energy cooperation.

## June 8

### The Philippines to Maintain South China Sea Outposts Without Seeking Foreign Permission

The Philippines will continue to maintain and supply its outposts in the South China Sea without seeking permission from any other country, affirmed National Security Adviser Eduardo Ano. The National Security Council reiterated its commitment to uphold sovereign rights over the Second Thomas Shoal. Ano criticized China's suggestion that Manila must notify Beijing for access, labeling it "absurd, nonsense, and unacceptable." Despite this stance, the Philippines remains open to dialogue for resolving disputes. The ongoing territorial conflict intensified as the Philippine coastguard accused China's coastguard of obstructing an evacuation of a sick soldier.

June 9

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## U.S. Military Deployment in South China Sea Spurs Arms Race, Says China

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong has identified the U.S. as the largest security challenge in the South China Sea, accusing its military presence of escalating an arms race. Following a high-level meeting on East Asian cooperation in Laos, Sun criticized U.S.-led forces for promoting military actions that incite maritime disputes. He warned that deploying medium-range missile systems would drag the region into geopolitical conflicts. Amid recent maritime tensions between China and the Philippines, a U.S. treaty ally, Sun emphasized China's commitment to resolving disputes through dialogue. The South China Sea remains a strategic flashpoint, with competing claims over its vital shipping lanes.

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