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# Indo-Pacific Insights

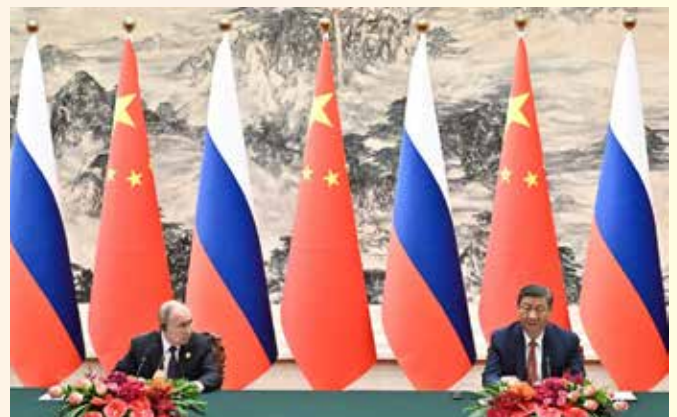
CGS Centre for Governance Studies



## A Bi-Weekly Roundup of Key Events

**May 16**

### Putin's State Visit to China: Main Takeaways



Russian President Vladimir Putin's state visit to China, greeted warmly by Chinese President Xi Jinping, showcased a deepening partnership between the two nations. Their joint statement, spanning 7,000 words in Russian, heralded a "new era" of cooperation, positioning Russia and China against perceived U.S. hegemony. While specifics on agreements were scant, discussions revolved around security issues like Taiwan, Ukraine, and North Korea, alongside collaboration in nuclear technology and finance.

Putin's choice of China for his first foreign trip in his new term underscores the importance of Russo-Chinese relations. The grand reception, marked by military honors and flag-waving children, symbolized the strength of their alliance.

**May 15**

### Lawrence Wong Becomes Singapore's First New Prime Minister in 20 Years



Lawrence Wong assumed office as Singapore's 4th prime minister following Lee Hsien Loong, signaling a transition in leadership. Aged 51, Wong pledges to chart his own course while ensuring continuity. Amid global uncertainties, he vows to fortify partnerships with the US and China. Retaining the finance portfolio, Wong made minor cabinet adjustments, prioritizing stability ahead of upcoming elections. Lee retains a cabinet position as senior minister, upholding the family's political influence. Wong is committed to fostering innovation and equity, refusing to accept the status quo, as Singapore strives to maintain its economic success.

Moreover, Russia and China aired grievances against the United States, voicing concerns about U.S. actions that disrupt strategic balance, such as global missile defense systems and development of non-nuclear precision weapons. This visit underscores the alignment of interests between Moscow and Beijing amidst shifting global dynamics.

## **Sri Lanka investigates trafficking of ex-soldiers to Ukraine**

Sri Lanka dispatches a high-ranking delegation to Russia to probe allegations of trafficking hundreds of its citizens, predominantly ex-military, to participate in the Ukraine conflict. Social media campaigns have enticed retired Sri Lankan soldiers with promises of lucrative salaries and citizenship. Authorities have received 288 complaints and apprehended seven individuals, including a former major general, associated with the trafficking. With at least 16 casualties reported, the delegation, comprising the Defense Secretary and a former ambassador to Russia, seeks to ascertain the extent of Sri Lankan presence in Russia and address this issue amidst an economic crisis driving migration.

## **May 17**

### **Britain Imposes Sanctions Over "Arms-for-Oil" Trade with North Korea**

Britain announced sanctions on three companies and one individual for their involvement in what it termed as "illicit 'arms-for-oil' trade" between Russia and North Korea. This move follows similar sanctions by the United States on two Russian individuals and three companies for facilitating arms transfers, including ballistic missiles destined for Ukraine. The British government stated these sanctions underscored joint efforts by Russia and North Korea to evade UN sanctions on petroleum products, aiding North Korea's unlawful military programs. Foreign Secretary David Cameron emphasized Britain's commitment to hold Moscow and Pyongyang accountable for such actions, citing Putin's alleged involvement in sustaining the conflict in Ukraine through illicit trade deals.

### **France Accuses Azerbaijan of Inciting New Caledonia Riots**

France accused Azerbaijan of exacerbating unrest in New Caledonia by disseminating misleading content on social media targeting French police. Amid protests over contested electoral reforms, Paris is clamping down on rioters to restore order in the remote territory, where four deaths occurred during three nights of upheaval. Viginum, France's online disinformation watchdog, attributed anti-French propaganda to Azeri social media accounts. While French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin accused Azerbaijan without evidence, the Azeri Foreign Ministry denied involvement and urged France to address its failed territorial policies.

## **May 19**

### **Arakan Army Claims Control of Myanmar Town Amid Rohingya Concerns**

The Arakan Army (AA) declared victory over Buthidaung in Myanmar's Rakhine state, countering accusations of Rohingya targeting. Spokesperson Khine Thu Kha stated AA's capture of the town near the Bangladesh border, a blow to the ruling junta facing opposition on various fronts. Rohingya activists allege AA forced residents to flee and set homes ablaze, though accounts conflict. Amidst chaos, the junta remains silent. The Rohingya, persecuted for years, face renewed turmoil. Since the 2021 coup, Myanmar's unrest has intensified, with ethnic rebel groups challenging junta control. AA attributes Buthidaung's burning to junta airstrikes, exacerbating the region's humanitarian crisis.

## **May 20**

### **Iranian President Raisi Killed in Helicopter Crash**

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, a potential successor to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, died in a helicopter crash near the Azerbaijan border. The wreckage, found in mountainous terrain after a blizzard search, included Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian and six others. Supreme Leader Khamenei appointed First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber as interim president, declaring five days of national mourning. The crash occurs amidst internal dissent and external pressures on Iran's nuclear program and military ties with Russia. A new presidential election is mandated within 50 days, potentially maintaining Iran's hardline stance. State media reported the helicopter as a U.S.-made Bell 212, with the crash site in Varzeqan region.

### **Nepal's Prime Minister Dahal Secures Confidence Vote**

Former Maoist rebel leader and current Prime Minister of Nepal, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, won a vote of confidence in parliament despite opposition protests. The protests demanded an investigation into allegations against Home Minister Rabi Lamichhane, accused of accepting money from companies before entering politics. Lamichhane denied the allegations. Dahal, also known as "Prachanda," secured 157 votes, surpassing the required 138, as the opposition largely boycotted the vote. This marks Dahal's third term as PM, following his leadership of the Maoist insurgency until the 2006 peace deal. Nepal, having abolished its monarchy in 2008, has witnessed frequent political instability, experiencing 13 governments since then.

## May 21

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### China Condemns South Korea and Japan Over Taiwan Inauguration Visit"

China vehemently opposes South Korean and Japanese lawmakers' visit to Taiwan for President Lai Ching-te's inauguration, denouncing Lai as a "separatist" and asserting Taiwan as part of its territory. Lodging protests with both nations, China accuses them of violating bilateral commitments and urges South Korea to prioritize their relationship's interests. Japan reaffirms intentions to deepen cooperation with Taiwan, while South Korea's past statements on Taiwan as a "global issue" exacerbate tensions. With a trilateral summit impending in Seoul, China warns against challenging the "one-China principle," underscoring escalating diplomatic friction in the region.

### Solomon Islands' Security Review to Shape Policing Ties with Australia China

Australia's Defence Minister Richard Marles revealed that Solomon Islands Prime Minister Jeremiah Manele has disclosed plans for a security review, indicating significant implications for policing cooperation. The context stems from the previous leader's alignment with Beijing, prompting unease in Canberra and Washington regarding China's maritime ambitions in the area. As Solomon Islands' principal aid provider, Australia has contributed policing assistance during recent electoral processes, while China has also established a policing presence. Marles emphasized Australia's keen interest in the review's conclusions, which will influence the future of Australia's enduring police involvement and potentially Solomon Islands' military aspirations. Manele expressed a desire to strengthen ties with Australia, the nation's preferred partner for economic, social, and security objectives.

## May 22

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### China Retaliates Against U.S. Military Linked Companies Amidst Taiwan Tensions

China announced measures targeting 12 U.S. military-industrial complex companies and their executives in response to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and sanctions on Chinese firms. The affected entities include Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, and General Dynamics units. Actions include asset freezes and entry bans for executives, effective immediately. China criticized U.S. sanctions based on "Russia-related factors" and accused the U.S. of unilateral bullying in the Ukrainian crisis. The statement condemned U.S. arms sales to Taiwan as a violation of the one-China principle, undermining China's sovereignty. Tensions rise as geopolitical conflicts fuel retaliatory measures between the two powers.

## May 24

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### IMF and Pakistan Nearing Agreement on Extended Fund Facility

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Pakistan are making significant strides towards a staff-level agreement for an extended fund facility, the IMF announced. Talks follow Pakistan's completion of a short-term \$3 billion program, averting a sovereign debt default. Led by mission chief Nathan Porter, the IMF team concluded discussions, aiming to finalize policy discussions virtually. The IMF's optimism spurred the benchmark share index to scale record highs, reaching the 76,000 level. Additionally, the UAE pledged \$10 billion for investment in Pakistan, enhancing economic prospects. Amidst potential risks, Pakistan seeks at least \$6 billion under the new program, bolstered by IMF and bilateral support.

## May 25

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### China-Guatemala Trade Tensions Amid Taiwan Relations

Guatemalan President Bernardo Arevalo revealed China's rejection of some Guatemalan shipments, possibly linked to Guatemala's diplomatic ties with Taiwan. As one of Taiwan's few allies, Guatemala's recognition contrasts with China's claim over Taiwan. Arevalo suggested Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te's recent inauguration, attended by Guatemala's Foreign Minister, might be fueling the dispute. Last year, Guatemala exported \$82 million worth of goods to China. Arevalo and Lai express mutual support and extend invitations for state visits. The situation echoes Taiwan's past visit to Guatemala following Honduras' recognition shift to China, highlighting the complex interplay of diplomacy and trade.

## May 26

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### North Korea Warns Against Reconnaissance Activities by U.S. and South Korea

North Korea's defense ministry, via state media KCNA, accused the U.S. and South Korea of intensifying reconnaissance operations near the inter-Korean border. Vice Defense Minister Kim Gang Il cited multiple instances of U.S. strategic reconnaissance planes and drones flying over the Korean peninsula. Additionally, South Korea's navy and coast guard's increased patrols were condemned for heightening military tensions. Kim denounced propaganda leaflets sent from South Korea as "dangerous provocations." Warning against sovereignty violations, Kim stated that North Korea would respond with "offensive" countermeasures to protect its national security. The statement underscores escalating tensions in the region amidst heightened military activities.

May 27

## South Korea, China, Japan Forge New Trilateral Cooperation Agreement



The leaders of South Korea, China, and Japan issued a joint declaration on Monday, outlining cooperation in areas such as trade, climate change, and aging societies. This declaration followed the first trilateral summit in over four years, attended by South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, and Chinese Premier Li Qiang.

### Key Agreements:

**Trilateral Cooperation:** The nations aim to hold regular summits and ministerial meetings, ensuring substantial benefits for their citizens. Japan will host the next summit.

**People-to-People Exchanges:** The countries target 40 million exchanges by 2030, focusing on culture, tourism, and education.

**Climate Change:** They committed to transitioning towards net-zero greenhouse gas emissions and carbon neutrality, supporting the Paris Agreement, reducing dust and sandstorms, promoting marine conservation, and tackling plastic pollution.

**Economic Cooperation and Trade:** They agreed to accelerate negotiations for a trilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA), support an open, rules-based multilateral trading system, and boost supply chain cooperation.

**Health and Aging:** A joint statement was adopted on preventing future pandemics, addressing low birth rates, and managing aging populations through governmental and expert exchanges.

**Regional and International Peace:** The countries reaffirmed their commitment to peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, emphasizing denuclearization and addressing abductions.

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