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# Indo-Pacific Insights

CGS Centre for Governance Studies



## A Bi-Weekly Roundup of Key Events

### May 1

#### South Korea Eyes Joining AUKUS 'Pillar 2' Amid Talks of Expanding Tech-Sharing Pact

South Korea has held discussions about joining the second phase of the AUKUS defense deal between the U.S., Britain, and Australia, aimed at sharing military technology to counter China's growing power in the Asia Pacific region. Defence Minister Shin Won-sik stated that South Korea could contribute to "Pillar 2" with its defense, science, and technological capabilities. AUKUS partners have raised the possibility of including other countries like Japan, Canada, and New Zealand in Pillar 2. However, China has criticized the pact, stating that adding new members would destabilize the region. The U.S. has recently unveiled a plan to relax restrictions on sharing sensitive technology with Britain and Australia to facilitate the deal.

### May 2

#### India Begins Deporting Myanmar Refugees

India has deported the first group of Myanmar refugees who fled to India after the 2021 military coup. The border state of Manipur sent back 38 refugees, with plans to deport 77 in total, as the state grapples with ethnic clashes that have killed over 220 people since last year. India, which has not signed the UN Refugee Convention, cited the refugee influx as one reason for the violence in Manipur. The deportations follow India's announcement of plans to fence its Myanmar border and end a visa-free movement policy due to concerns over the thousands of Myanmar civilians and troops seeking refuge. However, the deportation efforts were initially hampered by fighting between Myanmar's rebel forces and the junta.

#### France, Japan to Negotiate Troop Access Deal Amid Mounting Security Concerns

France and Japan have agreed to start formal negotiations on a reciprocal military access deal, strengthening defense cooperation amidst rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific and the Ukraine war. Reciprocal access agreements facilitate military cooperation by easing entry for foreign troops and equipment. The G7 allies have held numerous joint exercises recently. Japan, leaving behind post-war pacifism, announced a major military buildup last year and has already signed similar deals with Australia and the UK. The agreement with France could take about a year to finalize. For Japan, it aims to boost defense ties over concerns about China's actions. France, which has territories in the Indo-Pacific, wants to underscore its potential role in Japan's defense industry as Tokyo adopts a more muscular military policy in the region.

## Solomon Islands Elects PM Favoring Continued China Ties Despite Western Concerns



Solomon Islands lawmakers have selected Jeremiah Manele as their new prime minister, elevating the former foreign minister who has pledged to continue the Pacific Island nation's policy of closer ties with China. Manele won 31 votes to Opposition leader Matthew Wale's 18 in the 50-seat parliament. The election was closely watched due to concerns over China's increasing influence in the region after the previous government struck a security pact with Beijing in 2022. The U.S. and Australia are wary of China's naval ambitions in the Pacific. Manele, a former diplomat, helped formalize the Solomon Islands' switch in diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China in 2019. He has said he will maintain a "friends to all and enemies to none" foreign policy, while the opposition had criticized the arrival of Chinese police and favored closer ties with traditional partners.

## May 4

### Ex-Trump Envoy Expects Renewed Taiwan Support if Former President Regains White House

James Gilmore, a former U.S. ambassador appointed by Donald Trump, expressed his belief that Trump would again support Taiwan if he regains the presidency. Taiwan received strong backing from Trump's administration, including arms sales that have continued under President Joe Biden. Gilmore, visiting Taiwan, said Trump was not an isolationist but wanted allies to take their defense more seriously. He stated, "I believe that President Trump will be supportive of Taiwan when he becomes president as he was in his first term." Gilmore plans to meet Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen and report back to Trump on his visit. The U.S. is Taiwan's most important backer and arms supplier, angering China which claims the island as its territory. Despite concerns, bipartisan U.S. delegations have visited Taiwan this year, with one Republican lawmaker asserting U.S. support would continue regardless of the election outcome.

## May 5

### North Korea Dismisses New Sanctions Monitoring Efforts as 'Self Destructive' Amid Tensions

North Korea's UN envoy Kim Song stated that efforts by the U.S. and Western allies to form new groups to monitor sanctions on North Korea will fail. This comes after the U.S. and allies issued a statement calling to continue the work of a UN panel of experts monitoring sanctions against Pyongyang over its nuclear and missile programs. Earlier this year, Russia vetoed the renewal of that panel amid accusations that North Korea transferred weapons to Russia for use in Ukraine. Kim said "hostile forces may set up the second and third expert panels," but they are "bound to meet self-destruction."

## May 6

### U.S., Philippines Hold Drills Simulating Invasion Repulse Amid China Tensions



The U.S. and Philippine armed forces conducted military exercises simulating the repelling of an invasion in the northern Philippines facing Taiwan. About 200 soldiers fired missiles, artillery, and machine guns to thwart a mock amphibious landing as a part of the annual "Balikatan" (shoulder-to-shoulder) drills involving 16,000 troops. The exercises come amid rising regional tensions, with the Philippines accusing China of using water cannons against its vessels near the disputed Scarborough Shoal. Several drills were set in areas facing Taiwan and the South China Sea. The U.S. stated the exercises aim to improve interoperability, not target any adversary. However, China warned against destabilizing acts by outside forces. The drills highlight strengthening U.S.-Philippine defense ties under President Marcos, who has allowed increased U.S. access to Philippine bases near flashpoint areas under an enhanced defense cooperation agreement.

## May 7

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### **Taliban-Pakistan Tensions Escalate Over Attack Allegations and Militancy**

The relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have soured, with the Taliban rejecting Pakistan's allegations that Afghans were involved in an attack on Chinese engineers in Pakistan. The Taliban denied the involvement of Afghans and accused Pakistan of deflecting attention from the weakness of its security agencies. Tensions have risen as Pakistan claims Afghanistan is not doing enough to tackle militant groups targeting Pakistan, leading to airstrikes by Pakistan on Afghan territory. Pakistan has also expelled undocumented Afghan nationals, citing their involvement in attacks. Meanwhile, the Taliban seeks economic ties with China and aims to join the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, highlighting the complex dynamics between the three nations.

### **Germany Deploys Warships to Indo-Pacific Amid China Tensions Over Taiwan and Sea Routes**

Germany has sent two warships to the Indo-Pacific region to strengthen its military presence amid rising tensions between China and Taiwan, as well as disputes over the South China Sea. The move aims to support freedom of navigation and trade routes, with 40% of Europe's foreign trade flowing through the South China Sea. While the ships will pass through the South China Sea, it remains unclear if they will sail through the Taiwan Strait, a move that could irritate China, Germany's top trade partner. The deployment follows a German warship sailing into the South China Sea in 2021, joining other Western nations in expanding their military presence in response to China's territorial claims.

## May 8

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### **Australia Boosts Aid to Tuvalu to Secure Climate Migration Deal and Counter China**

Australia has decided to quadruple its financial assistance to Tuvalu, a Pacific Island nation threatened by rising sea levels, to cement a landmark climate migration and security deal. Australia committed A\$110 million (\$72.27 million) to Tuvalu, including funds for an undersea cable, land reclamation, a national security coordination center, and direct budget support. This move aims to strengthen ties with Tuvalu and counter China's growing influence in the region. The deal allows Tuvalu citizens to migrate to Australia for work or study and recognizes Tuvalu's statehood despite rising sea levels. Australia also seeks to vet Tuvalu's deals with third countries in security-related areas.

## May 9

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### **Myanmar Junta Discusses Elections Amid Growing Armed Resistance**

The Myanmar military chief discussed plans for holding an election with former Cambodian leader Hun Sen during talks, despite facing an expanding armed resistance against the junta's rule. The military government has repeatedly promised to return Myanmar to democracy but has not provided a timeframe for elections. Hun Sen requested to speak with detained Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, whose elected government was ousted in the 2021 coup. The junta spokesperson said necessary measures are being implemented for a multi-party democratic election. However, the military has plunged Myanmar into chaos, leading to a protest movement that has transformed into an armed resistance, posing a significant challenge to the military's control.

### **China's Warship Visits to Cambodia Fuel U.S. Concerns Over Military Presence**

China will send two large warships, including an amphibious warfare vessel capable of carrying troops and equipment, to Cambodia and East Timor from May to June for naval training exercises. The visit raises concerns in the United States about China's growing military presence at Cambodia's Ream Naval Base, which has been undergoing Chinese-funded expansion. The U.S. is worried that China could use the base as an outpost near the disputed South China Sea. Cambodia insists the presence of Chinese warships docked at Ream since December does not constitute a permanent Chinese military deployment. The naval visits come amid strengthening military ties between China and Cambodia, with both countries pledging further cooperation.

## May 11

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### **Philippines Deploys Ships Amid South China Sea Dispute**

The Philippines announced the deployment of ships to a contested area in the South China Sea, alleging China's construction of "an artificial island" in an escalating maritime dispute. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr's office stated that the coast guard sent a vessel to monitor China's activities, with two others on rotational deployment. Philippine Coast Guard Commodore Jay Tarriela noted "small-scale reclamation" at Sabina Shoal, known as Escoda to Manila, attributing it to China. The move heightens tensions, potentially deepening bilateral rifts. Amidst heated stand-offs, the South China Sea remains a focal point, contested by multiple nations despite international rulings against China's claims.



May 13

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## India Strengthens Trade Ties with Iran through Chabahar Port Deal

India has bolstered relations with Iran by signing a 10-year contract to develop and operate the Chabahar Port. Located on Iran's south-eastern coast along the Gulf of Oman, Chabahar serves as a crucial trade route for India to reach Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asian countries, circumventing Pakistan's ports in Karachi and Gwadar. Despite setbacks due to U.S. sanctions on Iran, the deal signifies a significant step in enhancing regional connectivity and trade resilience. Indian Ports Global Limited (IPGL) will invest \$120 million, with an additional \$250 million in financing, totaling \$370 million, facilitating further growth and investment in the port.

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