

Indo-Pacific Insights

CGS Centre for
Governance Studies



A Bi-Weekly Roundup of Key Events

March 5

China to Increase Defence Spending by 7.2% Amid Taiwan Tensions

China announced a 7.2% boost in defence spending, sustaining a trend of escalating military budgets under President Xi Jinping's leadership. The move, reflecting last year's rate, surpasses economic growth forecasts, indicating Beijing's prioritization of military modernization. Notably, the omission of "peaceful reunification" rhetoric in the budget report underscores a hardened stance on Taiwan. Amidst regional tensions, especially concerning Taiwan, analysts suggest Beijing's intent to bolster military capabilities signals readiness for potential conflict scenarios. Despite economic challenges, China's defence expenditure has surged significantly, reflecting a strategic shift towards enhancing military preparedness under Xi's tenure, surpassing annual economic growth targets consistently.

March 6

India Opens Naval Base Near Maldives Amidst Regional Tensions

India inaugurated INS Jatayu, a new naval base on Minicoy Island, bolstering its presence in the Indian Ocean region amidst strained relations with the Maldives and increased competition with China. Located on the Lakshadweep archipelago, the base enhances India's maritime surveillance capabilities and extends its operational reach. The move coincides with Maldives' shift towards Beijing, challenging traditional ties with New Delhi. With geopolitical stakes rising, India aims to secure vital maritime passages and counterbalance China's influence. Additionally, the commissioning of American MH-60R "Seahawk" helicopters in Kochi strengthens India's anti-submarine warfare capabilities, signaling proactive measures in regional security dynamics.

March 7

Modi's First Visit to Kashmir



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed the transformation and integration of Jammu and Kashmir with India, attributing the change to his government's decision to revoke its special status. Addressing a public gathering in Srinagar, Modi emphasized Kashmir's development as a national priority, promising a prosperous future. His visit, amidst tight security, signals a strategic move ahead of upcoming elections. While the decision to end Kashmir's special status remains contentious, Modi asserts it unleashes development opportunities. Amidst heightened security measures, Modi launches tourism and agricultural projects, aiming to showcase Kashmir as a global success story and fulfill electoral promises.

March 8

India Begins Deporting Myanmar Refugees Amidst Policy Shift



India initiated the deportation of the first group of Myanmar refugees who sought asylum after the 2021 military coup, signaling a change in its border policy with Myanmar. Concerns over communal tensions and security risks prompted this action, especially in northeastern states like Manipur, where violence has claimed nearly 200 lives since last year. The move drew criticism from the U.S. State Department, emphasizing the need for refugee protection. India's decision to end the visa-free border policy with Myanmar underscores its evolving stance on border security. However, India's approach to refugees remains under scrutiny due to its lack of formal refugee protection laws.

March 9

North Korea's Kim Jong Un Supervises Artillery Drill Near Border

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un oversaw a recent artillery firing drill by the Korean People's Army near the border, state media KCNA reported. The drill involved units positioned within firing range of South Korea's capital, Seoul, fulfilling crucial military objectives for deterrence. South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) confirmed North Korea's test-firing of multiple rocket launcher and self-propelled artillery shells towards the Yellow Sea.

The activity coincided with ongoing joint exercises between South Korea and the U.S., termed "Freedom Shield," prompting calls for restraint from Washington. Kim emphasized enhancing combat readiness and urged artillery units to prepare for rapid and merciless strikes in the event of war.

March 10

Chinese Research Vessel Near India's Coast Raises Concerns

Amidst ongoing tensions, a second Chinese research vessel within two months near India's coastline triggers apprehensions in New Delhi. The sighting amplifies existing anxieties over potential military intelligence-gathering activities in the region. The presence of the Xiang Yang Hong 01 off India's eastern shores follows a similar incident involving another Chinese vessel docking in the Maldives last month. While Beijing maintains these vessels conduct peaceful ocean-bed surveys for scientific purposes, Indian officials express concerns about potential military implications, including submarine deployments. With the vessel observed in the Bay of Bengal, Indian authorities maintain active surveillance as both nations remain silent on the matter.

March 11

Vietnam's Weapon Imports Dip Amid Supply Diversification Efforts

Vietnam's efforts to diversify its weapon supplies away from Russia led to a significant slowdown in imports last year, data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) revealed. Despite an annual budget exceeding \$1 billion for arms acquisitions, Vietnam made no major orders in 2023, except for a donated naval corvette from India. With rising tensions in the South China Sea and limited modern weaponry, experts caution Vietnam's vulnerability in regional conflicts. Meanwhile, Vietnam is relying on diplomacy to uphold positive relations with major global powers.

March 12

India Rebuts Chinese Criticism Over PM Modi's Arunachal Pradesh Visit

India dismissed Chinese objections to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Arunachal Pradesh, reaffirming the state's integral status within India. Modi inaugurated infrastructure projects, including a vital tunnel enhancing connectivity to the border region of Tawang. China's claim over Arunachal Pradesh as part of southern Tibet faces staunch rejection from India. New Delhi underscores the routine nature of Indian leaders' visits to the state and asserts its sovereign authority over the region. With a lengthy and contested frontier, tensions between India and China persist, compounded by past clashes and recent territorial disputes, reflecting the enduring complexities in their relationship.

March 13

Australia Confident in U.S. Commitment to AUKUS Submarine Deal

Australian Defense Industry Minister Pat Conroy expressed confidence in the AUKUS deal, assuring that the United States will proceed with the sale of nuclear-powered submarines despite concerns over potential delays or cancellations. Under the AUKUS partnership, the U.S. is slated to supply Australia with three to five Virginia-class attack submarines from the early 2030s. While cuts to the U.S. submarine program raised apprehensions, Conroy emphasized progress in upgrading shipyards to meet production demands. Despite challenges, including backlog issues, both nations are committed to ensuring timely delivery, reaffirming the resilience of the AUKUS alliance amidst periodic speculations of its demise.

Nepal's Prime Minister Dahal Secures Parliamentary Confidence Vote

Nepal's Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, leading his third coalition government in over a year, won a vote of confidence in parliament. The liberal communist-dominated government, including the Nepali Congress party, faced a challenge after Dahal changed allies, citing constraints on his authority. The coalition, predominantly led by the Nepal Communist Party (UML), secured 157 votes, surpassing the required threshold of 138 in the 275-member parliament. Despite political shifts and criticisms from the opposition, Dahal emphasized the regularity of coalition changes in Nepali politics.

March 14

New Delhi Office Channels Millions to India's Ruling Party



Housed in a modest New Delhi office, the Prudent Electoral Trust emerges as the largest-known donor to India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). With just two individuals at its helm, the trust raised \$272 million since its 2013 inception, directing 75% to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party.

Despite electoral trust mechanisms introduced in 2013 for transparency in campaign financing, opacity persists. Eight major business conglomerates, contributing over \$50 million each, funnel funds through Prudent to the BJP, evading direct association. Amidst scrutiny, companies like GMR and Bharti Airtel assert Prudent's autonomy in donation allocation, maintaining political neutrality.

March 15

U.S. Special Ops Prep for Global Uncertainty Amidst North Korean Advancements

Brigadier General Derek Lipson, leading Special Operations Command - Korea, emphasized the need for vigilance amidst interconnected global crises. Amidst North Korea's advancements in weapons programs, including potent ballistic missiles, Lipson stresses the unpredictable nature of future threats. Recent missile use in Ukraine heightens concerns, alongside regional flashpoints like the South China Sea and Taiwan. Lipson prioritizes adaptable training to confront evolving challenges, moving beyond basic marksmanship to strategic decision-making. Despite North Korea's condemnation of joint drills, Lipson maintains readiness amid geopolitical uncertainties, including the upcoming U.S. elections. He underscores the imperative for military focus amidst political distractions.

March 16

Deadly Militant Attack Rocks Pakistani Military Post

Militants launched a devastating assault on a military post near the Afghanistan border in northwest Pakistan. Six attackers orchestrated the onslaught, employing a vehicle packed with explosives and suicide bombs. The vicious attack claimed the lives of seven security force members. Initial explosions were followed by suicide bombings, causing a building to collapse, resulting in five deaths. Two more security personnel fell during subsequent clashes with militants. The incident exacerbates tensions in the region, with attacks on the rise in recent months, many attributed to the Pakistani Taliban operating from Afghan territory. The assault strains relations between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban, amid denials of harboring militants.

Taiwan Warns Off Chinese Coast Guard in Waters Dispute



Taiwan issued a stern warning to Chinese coast guard vessels for the second consecutive day as tensions escalate near the Taiwan Strait. Four Chinese ships breached restricted waters around Taiwan-controlled Kinmen islands, prompting Taiwan's coast guard intervention. Despite demands to leave, the Chinese vessels lingered for over an hour. China's persistent military activities near Taiwan exacerbate the situation, with frequent incursions into air defense identification zones. Taiwan broadcasted radio messages urging immediate withdrawal, captured in released footage. The incident disrupts maritime traffic and endangers safety, prompting Taiwan's coast guard to urge cessation of such provocations to prevent naval conflicts. China's coast guard offered no immediate response.

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