

Source: Reuters

In this week, we cover:

- Philippines adopts a 6-year development plan; Malaysia-Singapore agreements on digital and green economy cooperation;
- US-Philippines strengthen military relations; Death toll rises upto 100 in the Peshawar mosque suicide attack

Highlight:

FLAME University attends discussion on **Reformed Multilateralism** by ORF at Symbiosis University, Pune.



Source: Financial Times



Source: SCMP

Dr. Roger C. Liu
Chair, CSSAS FLAME



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MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR



Dear Readers,

In Newsletter #4, our team provides you with the most essential news in the Indo-Pacific Region, covering the latest development in foreign policy, domestic politics, and economics in the South/east Asian countries and regional powers including China, India, and the US.

Reorganized in 2018 on the FLAME Campus with an international collaboration model with the National Chengchi University of Taiwan, CSSAS FLAME aims to promote the research capacity in political, economic, social, and cultural studies of the Indo-Pacific region. A member of an international network of prominent think tanks in the Asia Pacific, CSSAS FLAME is dedicated to the understanding, collaboration, and connection between research communities, educators and students within India and across the region. At the same time, CSSAS FLAME serves as a platform for FLAME community members to better interact with their international counterparts in Indo-Pacific countries.

Since 2018, CSSAS has hosted talks, workshops, and conferences as well as other forms of scholarly and student exchange activities to promote Indo-Pacific studies in the context of India's Act East Policy. With the launch of our routine newsletter, we wish to enhance our readers' understanding of the regional political, social, economic, and strategic developments in South and Southeast Asia.

We hope you enjoy it and look forward to your feedback and suggestions.

Dr. Roger C. Liu
Chair, CSSAS FLAME

US-Philippines strengthen military relations:

On 2 February, the Philippines permitted U.S. forces to broaden their presence within the nation by granting access to four additional military camps. This move is a direct result of the U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's efforts to reinforce security partnerships in the face of China's growing assertiveness regarding its claims to the South China Sea and Taiwan. Additionally, it may be a resumption of the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement to support combined training and exercise between the two countries. The location of the bases hasn't been revealed. Yet, it is speculated that three of them could be located on Luzon, an island at the northern end of the Philippines—the closest land to Taiwan apart from China. With this new deal, Washington now has an arc of US alliances stretching from South Korea and Japan in the north to Australia in the south. While the agreement is a big deal it does not connote the re-establishment of permanent American bases in the Philippines.

ASEAN talks commence with Myanmar:

On January 3, the year's first meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations began in Jakarta with "frank" discussions on the current conflicts in Myanmar. Indonesia, which chairs ASEAN this year, is pushing for inclusive dialogue between all stakeholders in Myanmar. Currently, Myanmar's junta leaders have been barred from the ASEAN meetings and their representation at other events is under discussion, said Indonesia's External Affairs representative Sidharto R. Suryodipuro. February 1, marks two years since Myanmar came under the control of the military under the leadership of Army Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.

On the same day, Min Aung Hlaing was quoted by MRTV, assuring that Myanmar's military would work to hold elections across the country while the country's military leaders extended the country's state of emergency by another six months. Electoral polls cannot be held during a state of emergency. The regional bloc must face tough questions concerning the continual delay in the junta's five-point peace plan.

Myanmar faces aviation fuel sanctions amidst civilian bombings:

Two years after the 1 February 2021 coup in Myanmar, fresh sanctions have been imposed against the military junta by the US, UK, and Canada. Some of these are targeted at aviation fuel supply amidst reports of increasing aerial attacks leading to civilian casualties. Canada has gone a step ahead and suspended direct and indirect supply, sale, or transfer of fuel. At least 600 attacks have taken place since 2021 as analyzed by the conflict-monitoring group ACLED. The actual number of casualties is difficult to estimate with the restriction of access to Myanmar, however, the opposition claims it stands at over 155. The forces have been engaging in attacks for decades but the recent rise of successful opposition by volunteer militias has led to the strategy shift of relying upon aircraft strikes. These sanctions come precisely two years after the coup against the democratically elected Aung San Su Kyi-led government. While the junta promised to hold elections this year, that has currently been postponed. There are several protests and uprisings against the abuses conducted by the junta, with a silent strike declared.

In defiance of China, Taiwan president speaks to the Czech president-elect:

On January 30, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen met at a high-level interaction with Czech President-elect Petr Pavel, in an act of diplomatic defiance against China. This interaction occurred as tensions have been

raging between Taiwan and the PRC over the sovereignty of the island nation. The two presidents spoke for nearly 15 minutes, highlighting their mutual respect for democracy, human rights, and freedom. Taiwan and the eastern European country have maintained unofficial diplomatic connections ever since the Czech Republic recognized the One-China policy in 1979. Pavel, a former NATO general who will replace pro-Beijing President Milos Zeman, is set to take office in March. The day following the phone call, China expressed stark criticism of the move, stating that it was a “serious interference in China’s internal affairs”. Pavel defended the call in an interview, stating that there was no reason why the move should affect the relationship between Prague and Beijing. However, the next day, Czech PM Petr Fiala reaffirmed that while maintaining cordial relations with Taiwan, Prague adhered to its “one-China policy”.

Politics

Myanmar state of emergency extended as protesters mark coup anniversary: On February 1, 2023, Myanmar's military junta prolonged the country's state of emergency for another half a year. The acting head of state declared this decision during a leadership meeting that was broadcasted on state television. Despite announcing the need for multi-party elections, General Min Aung Hlaing, the junta leader, did not give a specific date. Critics claim that any election held while the state of emergency is in place will

likely be a sham, allowing the military to retain control. Both protesters and exiled civilian leaders have promised to put an end to the military's takeover, leading to silent protests and demonstrations in cities across Myanmar, as well as in Thailand and the Philippines. In response, the United States and its allies imposed additional sanctions on Myanmar on 31 January.

Death toll rises upto 100 in the Peshawar mosque suicide attack

100 people were confirmed dead and at least 217 were injured after a suicide bombing at a mosque in Peshawar, Pakistan on 30th January 2023. The mosque was in a police compound and 12 kilograms of explosives have been suspected to be used by a suicide bomber disguised as a policeman. This is one of the deadliest attacks recently in Pakistan and is the latest addition to the deteriorating national security situation associated with the Pakistani Taliban or Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP). Initially, two officials claimed that the attack served as a response to the death of one of their militants, however, the main spokesperson denied any involvement stating that it is an offense under their law to attack any sacred place presenting a conflicting narrative. An investigation is underway but has not yielded results yet with multiple suspects being arrested. There are calls to strike an offensive against militant groups similar to policies in 2014 since the fall through of the ceasefire. This dilemma arises among other crises of economic instability, power grid outages, floods, etc.

Appointment of Tin Pei Ling as Director of Public Affairs and Policy at Grab

causes controversy: The Southeast Asian ride-hailing company Grab has named Tin Pei Ling, a prominent Singaporean politician, as its Director of Public Affairs and Policy in Singapore on 1 February. This has sparked worries among some about the possibility of conflicting interests. Tin has addressed these concerns by saying that she will maintain transparency and prevent any conflicts from arising. As the chairperson of a government parliamentary committee on communications and information, and previously serving as CEO of a non-profit with ties to the Singaporean government, Tin's responsibilities at Grab will encompass managing the company's relationship with the government and potentially presenting Grab's stance to government officials or influencing government policies. Despite this, Grab has defended Tin's appointment and claims that measures have been put in place to prevent conflicts of interest. Nevertheless, there are still concerns about how Tin will handle instances where Grab's and the government's interests may be at odds. Political analysts have noted that Tin's new role may create difficulties for her as a political leader and raise doubts about her priorities.

Former Pakistan PM calls for supporters to be ready for mass arrest movement:

Imran Khan, Chairman of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, on 4 February, urged his supporters to be ready for the "Jail Bharo Tehreek" (mass arrest movement) in opposition to the government's torturing of his party's officials and delaying the declaration of new general elections. The

former prime minister made the remarks during his television address, which was broadcast from his residence in Zaman Park. He continued by saying that under the incumbent PM Shehbaz Sharif, the country was moving towards the law of the jungle, where "might is right". Khan voiced this call a few days after cases of sedition were filed against his party's senior vice-president and former member of the National Assembly Shandana Gulzar, Fawad Chaudhry. The Secretary of the Election Commission of Pakistan filed a complaint against Chaudhry for "threatening" the members of the electoral body and their families, leading to his arrest during the previous week in Lahore.

Indian PM Modi named world's most popular leader by US-based survey:

Prime Minister Narendra Modi was adjudged the most popular leader in the world, with an approval rating of over 75 percent. This rating was provided by a US-based political intelligence company Morning Consult, which released a list of 22 surveyed countries analyzing the world leaders based on their approval ratings. Modi was followed by Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Swiss President Alain Berset. According to the company, the "approval ratings are based on a seven-day moving average of adult residents in each country, with sample sizes varying by country." As of January 31st, Modi's approval rating stands at a staggering 78 percent. In comparison, US President Joe Biden's rating stands at 40 percent, while UK PM Rishi Sunak ranks low at 30 percent.

Pakistan blocks Wikipedia over

“sacrilegious” content: The move to block Wikipedia in Pakistan was announced on the 4 of February after the website was given a 48-hour deadline to remove “blasphemous” material, which the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) declared it had failed to do. According to the Wikimedia Foundation, which operates Wikipedia, Pakistanis will not be able to access “the largest free knowledge resource” as a result of the restriction. In Pakistan, blasphemy is a contentious and susceptible topic. Other platforms like Tinder, Facebook, and YouTube have already been restricted in the past. Speaking on behalf of the PTA, spokesperson Malahat Obaid claimed that despite repeated correspondence for the removal of “blasphemous content” Wikipedia had not responded. He went on to say that part of the material had been removed, but not all of it, and that the website would continue to be blocked until all the offensive material was taken down. The specifics of the disputed material remain unknown. If the restriction persisted, it would “deprive everyone access to Pakistan's knowledge, history, and culture” according to the Wikimedia Foundation.

Free speech advocates have expressed concerns over the ban, claiming it is part of a systematic effort to control internet

content. The ban follows previous restrictions on platforms like Tinder, Facebook, YouTube, Grindr and others for distributing “immoral content” or “growing sacrilegious material”. Digital rights activist, Usama Khilji, argues the ban is meant to silence dissent in the country.

Economy

Bangladesh secures first RSF loan in Asia from IMF: Amidst the economic crises faced by several nations in south Asia, Bangladesh received loans from the IMF on 30 January 2023. It is the first south Asian nation to receive one under the new Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF) gaining \$1.4 billion. As well as \$3.3 billion under the Extended Credit Facility (ECF) and Extended Fund Facility (EFF). The RSF project has been made with the intent to support middle-income nations facing economic vulnerability through long-term financial support provided in installments. This package is for stabilization, rather than bailout- the likes of which Pakistan and Sri Lanka demand. Bangladesh faces issues such as declining global demand for its exports, falling forex reserves, breakdown of remittances, and inflationary tendencies. The aim of the program is to provide structural reforms and maintain macroeconomic stability. The condition for availing loans is the implementation of recommendations given by the IMF, therefore, no longer having a completely independent economic policy. These include having a free-market dictated economy, regulation of the finance sector, modification of laws, disposal, and recovery of defaulted loans, increasing government revenue, etc.

Philippines adopts a 6-year development plan: President Ferdinand Marcos Jr signed an executive order to adopt the Philippine Development Plan on 23 January 2023. Drafted by the National

Economic and Development Authority, the plan will serve as a blueprint for economic recovery post the Covid-19 restrictions. According to Marcos Jr, the development plan aims to reduce poverty down to a single-digit level by 2028. "This will be realized through rapid, sustained, and inclusive growth that will create more, better, and resilient jobs," he said. With this plan, the Marcos Jr administration has projected the Philippine economy to grow by 6-7% in 2023.

UN report identifies India's employment rate as a problem:

The UN report on World Economic Situation and Prospects for 2023 saw bright prospects for India's economy, projected to grow at 6.7% next year and remain strong at 5.8% in 2023. However, the report finds that the country's employment-providing potential is lower than expected and a matter of concern. According to Hamid Rashin, Chief of the Global Economic Analysis and Policy Division of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, India's economic growth is expected to remain stable despite the prospects for its South Asian neighbors being "more challenging."

PM Prachanda urged to solve economic crisis in Nepal:

The Unified Socialist Party's chairman, Madhav Kumar Nepal, submitted a memorandum to PM Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda on January 31, 2023, at Baluwatar, urging him to take immediate action towards the country's deteriorating economic situation. The party drew the PM's attention to the country's living standards, the plight of farmers, and the condition its small and medium enterprises are in, owing to the increasing market prices. The memorandum demands strict

implementation of the Constitution's economic policy, a facility to pay fines and taxes for troubled industries, control of inflationary prices, and an extension to the installment and interest payment period of overdue loans. Additionally, Chairman Nepal suggested that the government should implement effective strategies to reduce youth migration, improve skilled manpower, and increase agricultural productivity to make the food and produce market more self-reliant.

Cambodia to initiate \$30 billion worth of infrastructure projects with China:

Cambodia announced on January 31, 2023, mega infrastructure projects with \$30 billion financing from China. With a \$16 billion real estate development plan at Ream City, a \$4 billion high-speed rail plan from Phnom Penh and Poipet to the Thai borders, a \$1.4 billion expressway from Bavet to Phnom Pehn and Sihanoukville, and a \$1.5 billion new airport for the capital city. Cambodia is set out on a path for development for the next couple of years. However, with China's growing interest in partnerships with Cambodia and the nation's agreements with Chinese investors, Cambodia's development plan raises eyebrows, with many predicting Cambodia's fate to be the same as Sri Lanka's.

Malaysia-Singapore agreements on digital and green economy cooperation:

Singapore and Malaysia signed three agreements during PM Anwar's visit to Singapore on January 30, 2023. The agreements cover a large range of areas including digital economy projects and green economy cooperation. The two countries also signed an MoU stating that personal data protection and cybersecurity were matters of utmost importance in

ensuring the success of these agreements. With this new framework of cooperation, the countries aim to make progress in trade facilitation, cross-border data flows, electronic payments, the development of new and renewable energy-related technologies, and collaborations on electric vehicle and autonomous vehicle standards. The signing of the MoU and the agreements marked PM Anwar's first official visit to Singapore, thereby strengthening the bilateral relations, trade, and cooperation between both countries.

Indonesia is all set to improve rural economy: The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) in conjunction with Indonesia's Ministry of Villages, Development of Disadvantaged Regions and Transmigration has chosen Inegena village as a recipient of funds. The Inegena village has been working towards its long-term economic development goals with a simple strategy - the harvest of candlenuts. Candlenuts are used as raw materials in the cosmetic and pharmaceutical industries, making them an important crop for the country. Harlina Sulistroyini, General Director of Economic Development and Investment at the Ministry of Villages stated, "Places like Inegena are proof of what small funding and big ideas can achieve jointly." The IFAD's Integrated Village Economic Transformation Program (TEKAD) supports Inegena among 1,100 other rural economies with a funding of \$4.4 Billion.

China's huge household savings no guarantee of economic recovery via 'revenge spending': Spurred by China's rigid Covid - 19 containment strategy, which the government rolled back in December, household savings surged by 17.8 trillion yuan in 2022, growing by more than 5 trillion yuan in the last two months of the year alone. Economists and analysts, these "excess savings" represent pent-up demand that could lead to a wave of "revenge spending" this year and drive the global economic recovery. To be sure, the increase in Chinese household savings last year was unusual and reflected consumers' inability to spend as a result of China's strict zero - Covid lockdowns, which forced millions to remain indoors, sometimes for months at a time. Even if consumer spending could return to normal this year, heightened uncertainty will most likely prevent Chinese families from putting their hard-earned savings into housing or stocks, so bank deposits will remain higher. Even in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, where household incomes are relatively high, residents still struggle to afford the exorbitant costs of housing, health care, education, and senior care. Building an adequate supply of government-provided public housing and long-term rentals in urban areas, and ensuring that these flats and homes meet high safety and quality standards across the country, could disincentivize household saving and encourage more current consumption, especially among younger people. Apart from affordable housing, providing financial support to families through welfare programs is crucial to restoring consumer confidence.

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Analysis

Panel discussion on Reformed Multilateralism: Transforming Global Institutions and Frameworks

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On 30 January 2023, FLAME University was invited to ORF's panel discussions on Reformed Multilateralism: Transforming Global Institutions and Frameworks, hosted by the Symbiosis School of International Studies under the Think-20 Task Force 7. Students of FLAME University as well as the members of the Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies (CSSAS) attended the panel discussion.

The panelists were: Gautam Bambawale, the former Indian ambassador to Bhutan, Pakistan, and China; Dr Rajeswari (Raji) Pillai Rajagopalan, Director of the Centre for Security, Strategy, and Technology (CSST) at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi; and Professor Harsh Pant, Vice President – Studies and Foreign Policy at Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi. The discussions were conducted by Professor Shivale Lawale, Professor and Director at Symbiosis School of International Studies.

The discussion started with Professor Shivali Lavale introducing the audience to Reformed Multilateralism, stating that it is necessary in order to expand representation and create accountability. The panelists chimed in on the topic, with Ambassador Bambawale talking about the need for reforms as the current UN structure represents the realities of the post-1945 world order. Dr Rajeshwari spoke about the changing balance of power that has led to a “crisis” of confidence between powerful states. This is a case for creating an accountable, multilateral institution that would be a confidence-building measure among states. Professor Harsh Pant added that multipolarity is the current visible trend in international relations, reflected by the growing US-China rivalry. He said that global institutions, like the UN, were created to avoid anarchy between states, and ended with Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s quote on taking the first step to do the reform ourselves. Professor Shivali Lavale then directed questions toward reforming multilateralism, mini-laterals, and trilateral. Ambassador Bambawale noted that while China is playing a much bigger role in global geopolitics, it still does not act like a responsible stakeholder as it often attempts to reform multilateralism in its own idea and vision.

Professor Pant stated that mini-laterals are used to fill up a void as the global institutions do not reflect the current geopolitical and geographical realities of the world. Dr Rajeshwari noted that mini-laterals allow countries with similar interests to partner together against a common threat, such as China in the Southeast Asia region. She highlighted that mini-laterals allow states to create norms of responsibility that can be codified internationally.

Ending on the challenges of multilateralism, Professor Pant pointed out that nationalism, multi-polarity and great power politics are at the heart of the challenges. Despite that, he remained hopeful that India is poised to bring the Global South to the forefront, taking on a more pragmatic approach, as the Global South faces the worst of these challenges.

Reformed Multilateralism: The Migration Challenge


by Ananya Singh and Reynaa Azmathulla



Multilateral institutions are increasingly becoming a space for power struggles between superpowers, leaving smaller nations on the periphery. This power imbalance contradicts the very premise on which multilateralism was established and thus, helps us in analyzing the shifting trend towards broad and non-binding bilateral and minilateral agreements rather than multilateral initiatives, worldwide. Today multilateralism is characterized by inclusivity and greater participation. It is no longer limited to security alliances between countries, key actors like international organizations, civil society groups, advocacy groups, and corporations also have a stake to claim.

Multilateralism can thus be incorporated into various issues, such as migration. International migration has been on the rise since the Second World War. Factors such as climate change, regional inequality, resource scarcity, poor governance, demographic changes, connectivity, natural disasters, conflict, diaspora activities, and economic aspirations create migratory pressures on countries. While immigration brings in labour, human capital, and new ideas, to countries, not all migration is voluntary. Many migrants move to escape persecution, hunger and deprivation, or to seek refuge. Nations are thus viewing migration as a security concern and the need for an effective multilateral framework is more important than ever.

Yet, global migration is not a new concept. At a regional level, the African Union (AU) adopted a Migration Policy Framework to address regional cooperation within the continent. At the




international level, there are existing frameworks in the UNHRC, Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), ILO, the Declaration of The Hague on the Future of Migration and Refugee Policy, and more. On 19 December 2018, the UNGA approved the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM). Considered a milestone in strengthening multilateral migration governance, it formulates guidelines for the implementation and monitoring of the framework, in a non-binding cooperative approach. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) was given the task to support the GCM's implementation challenges.

A few challenges common to both migration and multilateralism are the rise of nationalist policies, restructuring of global power reshaping mechanisms of cooperation, geopolitical shocks causing sudden instability, complacency and lack of accountability generated from the nature of non-legally binding treaties etc. When it comes to bilateral or minilateral initiatives, they are often created to manage a specific migration crisis at the convenience of the states and are not successful in providing protections for migrant domestic workers. This is due in part to the marginalization of these workers under national laws and the intense competition for jobs between labour-sending countries. Multilateral frameworks will be a much more important avenue to pursue in order to provide basic protections for migrant domestic workers. This leads to the big question of why there has not been an institutional authority for global migration governance despite the existence of various multilateral mechanisms like the IOM, UNHCR, GFMD etc. A few reasons include the fear of security threats and losing sovereignty caused by the imposition of binding norms; the differences that exist in sociopolitical and economic facets among nations means that they all do not derive equal benefit from migration; and that many states only wish to deal with migration issues when they require it rather than participating in an active multilateral framework.

Some recommendations proposed to counter these challenges include:

- Establishing a continual consultative process among the concerned national authorities involving all relevant actors from international and regional organisations to a large range of private and civil society stakeholders in any migration policy decision-making;

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- Maintaining equitable, not equal decision-making since the capacities of all nations and their available resources differ. Countries could be separated into tiers based on security and economic provisions. The nations that do not have the capacity will work on building it to offer alternative resources;
 - Creation of a dispute settlement body to prevent unilateral pushbacks against the institution due to political conflict;
 - Multilateral frameworks should provide security policy guidelines in the areas of Labour Migration; Border Management; Internal Migration; Migration Data Management; Inter-State and Inter-organizational cooperation and partnerships. As well as developing artificial intelligence to monitor and manage migration and prevent and preempt crises. As well as maintain the identification of refugees. Region-specific indicators must be included to ensure that it doesn't solely adhere to western hegemonic standards only;
 - Accountability via regular procedural checks must be conducted to ensure systematic implementation of the framework without having an undemocratic binding clause. Transparency through data-sharing must be ensured by the nations in their migrant policies and implementation.