

Welcome to This Week's Asia on the Horizon

As strategic alignments deepen and power dynamics shift across the Indo-Pacific, this week's edition of Asia on the Horizon captures a pivotal moment in regional security, diplomacy, and cooperation. From the shores of Tokyo to the contested waters of the South China Sea, the Indo-Pacific is witnessing the emergence of new dialogues, revived defense partnerships, and informal coalitions.

As geopolitical currents surge across the Indo-Pacific, this week's edition captures a region in motion—strategically fluid, diplomatically active, and militarily alert. At the heart of it all is a rising India, fast evolving from regional balancer to global shaper.

The United States has begun forging a more permanent submarine presence in Western Australia under AUKUS, a strategic pivot that underscores mounting tensions with China and the growing importance of forward-deployed deterrence. Meanwhile, China sends a stark message with one of its largest single-day air incursions near Taiwan, escalating cross-strait brinkmanship.

In a surprising shift, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi strikes a conciliatory tone toward Beijing, while simultaneously advancing bold new ties—launching free trade negotiations with New Zealand, conducting carrier-led naval drills with France, and emerging as a sought-after member of the expanding “Squad” security grouping in the South China Sea.

The Raisina Dialogue becomes a global focal point, with New Zealand's PM delivering a keynote, U.S. intelligence chief Tulsi Gabbard reinforcing Indo-U.S. ties, and regional leaders gathering to address everything from pandemic preparedness to maritime security. Even as India courts dialogue with China, it also signals its readiness to anchor a new Indo-Pacific security web.

Elsewhere in the region, Vietnam solidifies its maritime claims under UNCLOS, Japan prepares for a landmark naval port call at Cambodia's Chinese-funded base, and Russia and North Korea deepen a shadowy partnership tied to the Ukraine war. Meanwhile, North Korea lashes out against Japan's missile plans, and trilateral diplomacy resumes among Tokyo, Seoul, and Beijing in a cautious step toward stability.

In this issue, we chart the evolution of regional alliances—from the Quad's multilateral resilience to the Squad's emerging tactical edge—while spotlighting the statistics, maps, photos, and strategic infographics that bring Asia's dynamic transformation into sharp focus. From diplomacy to deterrence, from strategy to statecraft—this is your essential read on Asia's future, unfolding now.



1. KEY DEVELOPMENTS

U.S. Begins Building Submarine Presence in Strategic Western Australia Under AUKUS

The United States has initiated a significant buildup of its submarine capabilities on Australia's strategically crucial western coast under the AUKUS defense partnership. This shift was underscored by the recent training deployment of the USS Minnesota, a Virginia-class nuclear-powered attack submarine, operating off Western Australia after relocating its home port from Hawaii to the forward-deployed U.S. base in Guam. By mid-year, HMAS Stirling naval base, which is currently undergoing a major A\$8 billion (US\$5 billion) infrastructure upgrade, will welcome an initial contingent of 50-80 U.S. Navy personnel, a number expected to rise to hundreds within two years as the "Submarine Rotational Force West" is established by 2027.

This strategic move aims to bolster Indo-Pacific defense capabilities, particularly as China's increasing naval operations—including recent unprecedented live-fire drills and naval circumnavigation around Australia—underscore the region's growing geopolitical volatility. The Trump administration, recognizing the critical role these submarines play in deterring regional threats and safeguarding Taiwan, has prioritized funding for the Virginia-class program despite broader Pentagon budget reductions. Concurrently, Australia is actively preparing its future fleet under AUKUS, with around 245 Australian personnel currently embedded in specialized U.S. nuclear submarine training programs, as Canberra readies itself to acquire two Virginia-class submarines in the next decade and eventually build its own nuclear-powered fleet jointly with Britain.

Modi's Positive Remarks Signal Pragmatic Shift in China-India Relations

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently emphasized the importance of dialogue and cooperation with China, signaling a pragmatic shift toward improving bilateral ties after several years of border tensions. In a high-profile podcast interview, Modi advocated for a relationship defined by "healthy and natural competition" rather than confrontation, highlighting centuries of mutual cultural exchange and shared contributions to global civilization. Modi underscored the inevitability of differences between neighboring nations but stressed the priority of preventing disputes, reflecting India's cautious yet constructive approach to its complex relationship with China.

In response, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning welcomed Modi's statements, noting their alignment with the positive momentum initiated during the Xi-Modi meeting in Kazan last October. Mao emphasized that, as the world's two largest developing countries, cooperation is mutually beneficial and essential for global stability and prosperity, characterizing their partnership as a "cooperative pas de deux of the dragon and the elephant." While experts acknowledge that resolving border

disputes remains a lengthy process requiring sustained diplomacy, recent engagements—such as December’s successful border consultation meeting—suggest steady progress toward stabilizing the relationship, with both sides committed to managing competition responsibly.

New Zealand and India Launch Comprehensive Free Trade Negotiations

New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the launch of negotiations for a Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, marking a significant milestone in bilateral economic relations. Luxon described the agreement as an "economic breakthrough," highlighting the mutual benefits expected from deeper trade ties, though he acknowledged challenges—particularly regarding dairy exports. Trade Minister Todd McClay emphasized the breadth of these negotiations, stating that the proposed agreement would go beyond commerce, encompassing political, defense, environmental, and cultural connections, thereby establishing a more holistic partnership between the two countries.

The initiation of these negotiations comes during Luxon's historic visit to India, the first by a New Zealand Prime Minister in nearly a decade, accompanied by the largest-ever delegation of New Zealand business and community leaders. As part of efforts to strengthen broader ties, discussions are underway regarding the establishment of direct flights between Auckland and India, a step aimed at significantly boosting tourism, business links, and people-to-people interactions. Nevertheless, alongside economic aspirations, Modi raised concerns during bilateral discussions about pro-Khalistani activities in New Zealand, seeking cooperation in addressing security threats and emphasizing joint commitment to combating terrorism and illegal migration.

Vietnam Formally Registers Tonkin Gulf Maritime Boundaries with UN Under UNCLOS

Vietnam has formally registered its maritime boundaries in the Tonkin Gulf with the United Nations, submitting detailed nautical charts and geographic coordinates that outline its territorial sea baselines in accordance with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The UN Secretary-General confirmed receipt of Vietnam’s submission, which provides official documentation of straight baselines for Vietnam’s mainland territory and clearly defines the outer limits of its territorial waters within the strategically significant Tonkin Gulf region.

The submission, officially published by the UN on March 14, reinforces Vietnam's maritime claims under international law and will be included in a forthcoming edition of the UN’s authoritative "Law of the Sea Bulletin." By registering these boundaries, Vietnam not only solidifies its territorial claims but also aims to enhance maritime security and clarify jurisdictional rights amid ongoing regional tensions. This move is consistent with Hanoi’s broader diplomatic strategy of utilizing international legal frameworks to assert its sovereignty and promote stability in disputed waters.

Japan, South Korea, and China Reignite Trilateral Diplomacy Amid Rising Geopolitical Tensions

The foreign ministers of Japan, South Korea, and China convened in Tokyo on March 22 for their first trilateral meeting since 2023, signaling a cautious effort to reinvigorate regional diplomacy amid escalating global instability. Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya, South Korea's Cho Tae-yul, and China's Wang Yi agreed on the importance of "future-oriented cooperation" and reaffirmed their shared responsibility in maintaining peace on the Korean Peninsula. The meeting addressed a broad spectrum of issues, from regional security and climate change to aging populations and free trade. Notably, the ministers also pledged to accelerate preparations for a long-delayed trilateral leaders' summit later this year.

Despite symbolic consensus, deep divisions remained evident. While Beijing pushed to resume free trade talks and expand the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, Tokyo and Seoul raised concerns over China's support for North Korea, military maneuvers near Taiwan, and alignment with Russia in the war in Ukraine. South Korea urged Beijing to play a constructive role in persuading Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear program and halt military cooperation with Moscow. On the sidelines, Japan and China held their first high-level economic dialogue in six years, where Tokyo pressed for the lifting of Chinese restrictions on Japanese seafood and agricultural exports. While historical grievances and strategic rivalries persist, the meeting underscored a pragmatic recognition that regional dialogue is essential at a time many describe as a "turning point in history."

India Hosts 10th Raisina Dialogue; Modi and Luxon Highlight Strategic Cooperation

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the 10th edition of the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi, India's flagship conference on geopolitics and geoeconomics, held from March 17 to 19. The keynote address was delivered by New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon, who is visiting India with the largest-ever business and community delegation accompanying a New Zealand leader. The forum, co-hosted by India's Ministry of External Affairs and the Observer Research Foundation, convened over 3,700 participants and 800 speakers from more than 130 countries under the theme "Kalachakra: People, Peace, Planet." Alongside Luxon's keynote, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar held a series of bilateral meetings with counterparts from Europe, Latin America, and the Caucasus, securing agreements on trade, education, agriculture, and health, and reinforcing India's growing diplomatic momentum.

Prominent U.S. voices also featured at the dialogue, including Admiral Samuel Paparo, Commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, who spoke on maritime security and regional defense cooperation amid deepening U.S.-India ties. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard delivered a widely noted address, invoking themes of mutual respect and spiritual unity while underscoring U.S. President Trump's foreign policy vision centered on peace through strength. Gabbard emphasized the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific, warning of growing global instability and calling for practical, multilateral efforts to advance peace, prosperity, and freedom. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha, meanwhile, reiterated Kyiv's openness to a diplomatic resolution with Russia, stressing that sovereignty remains non-negotiable. Together, the sessions reflected India's central role as a convener of global dialogue and strategic cooperation amid an increasingly fragmented international order.

China Conducts Large-Scale Military Drills Near Taiwan in Warning Against "Separatism"

China launched extensive military exercises near Taiwan on March 17, describing the maneuvers as a punitive response to what it called President Lai Ching-te's continued promotion of separatism. According to Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense, 54 Chinese aircraft—including J-10 fighter jets and drones—conducted joint combat readiness patrols across multiple directions surrounding the island, with 42 planes crossing the Taiwan Strait median line, a traditional unofficial buffer zone. The show of force marks one of the largest single-day air incursions in recent months and underscores Beijing's strategy of normalizing frequent military pressure on the island amid rising cross-strait tensions.

In a strongly worded statement, China's Taiwan Affairs Office warned that the Lai administration's actions could lead to "self-destruction" if it continues to "provoke and play with fire." Taiwan responded by condemning Beijing's destabilizing behavior, with the Mainland Affairs Council labeling the Chinese Communist Party a "troublemaker" threatening regional peace and security. Taipei also called on the international community to resist China's growing military assertiveness. While President Lai has repeatedly offered dialogue with Beijing, those overtures have been met with silence, as China maintains its claim over Taiwan and refuses to engage with what it views as a pro-independence government.

U.S. Intelligence Chief Gabbard Reinforces Strategic Ties with India Amid Global Realignment

During a high-profile visit to New Delhi, U.S. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard emphasized the deepening strategic partnership between the United States and India, highlighting shared commitments to peace, security, and economic cooperation. Speaking at the Raisina Dialogue, Gabbard underscored that President Trump’s “America First” doctrine does not equate to isolationism, stating that building alliances—particularly with like-minded countries like India—is essential in navigating today’s volatile global order. Gabbard’s visit, the first by a senior official of Trump’s second administration, signals a renewed focus on India as Washington reassesses traditional alliances in light of escalating tensions with China and growing uncertainty over U.S. commitments in Europe and East Asia.

Gabbard held wide-ranging talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Defense Minister Rajnath Singh, focusing on maritime and cyber security, counterterrorism, and Indo-Pacific defense cooperation. Modi welcomed the ongoing momentum in bilateral relations, noting Trump is expected to visit India later this year, and even joined Trump’s Truth Social platform in a symbolic gesture. While concerns persist over potential U.S. tariffs on Indian exports, Gabbard confirmed direct top-level dialogue on the issue is underway. Analysts view India as an increasingly central partner in U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, particularly as the Trump administration leans toward flexible coalitions like the Quad over traditional alliances. Amid shifting global alliances and rising geopolitical risks, Gabbard’s visit underscores India’s elevated status in U.S. strategic calculus.

India Hosts Quad Workshop on Pandemic Preparedness for Indo-Pacific Region

India, under its current presidency of the Quad, hosted the “Quad Workshop on Pandemic Preparedness for the Indo-Pacific Region” from March 17–19 in New Delhi. The event, a key deliverable from the 6th Quad Leaders’ Summit held in September 2024, aims to enhance regional health security through multilateral cooperation on governance, disease surveillance, and public health innovation. Senior health officials and experts from Quad nations—India, the United States, Japan, and Australia—were joined by over 25 delegates from 15 Indo-Pacific countries, including Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Kenya, as well as representatives from international health organizations.

Panel discussions are focused on strengthening global health frameworks, enhancing resilience, and advancing the One Health approach to manage pandemic threats at the human-animal-environment interface. The workshop features simulation exercises on pandemic scenarios, designed to improve emergency preparedness and cross-border coordination. The workshop reflects the Quad’s growing emphasis on non-traditional security cooperation and India’s leadership in promoting a more robust, coordinated pandemic response architecture across the Indo-Pacific.

North Korea Warns Japan Over Planned Long-Range Missile Deployment in Kyushu

North Korea has issued a sharp warning to Japan over Tokyo's reported plans to deploy long-range missiles in the Kyushu region by March 2026, claiming the move would trigger "constant escalation of tension" in Northeast Asia. According to a statement published by state media outlet KCNA, Pyongyang views Japan's pursuit of counterstrike capabilities—reported by Kyodo News—as a revival of militarist aggression and a direct threat to the Korean Peninsula. The statement, attributed to a policy official from the Institute for Japan Studies under North Korea's Foreign Ministry, declared that all military measures aimed at the DPRK would be treated as hostile and subject to preemptive counteraction.

The warning comes amid heightened regional tensions fueled by deepening trilateral defense cooperation between the United States, Japan, and South Korea. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un recently denounced the alliance, promising retaliatory steps, including further expansion of the country's nuclear arsenal. Pyongyang's latest rhetoric reflects growing unease over Japan's evolving security doctrine, which now increasingly emphasizes deterrence and first-strike capability in response to rising threats from China and North Korea. As Northeast Asia becomes more militarized, North Korea's reaction signals the likelihood of continued provocations and an accelerating arms race in the region.

India Eyed for Potential Inclusion in Emerging 'Squad' Military Grouping in South China Sea

India may soon be invited to join a new informal security coalition, dubbed the "Squad," focused on maritime deterrence and defense cooperation in the South China Sea. The existing members—Japan, Australia, the United States, and the Philippines—have been conducting joint maritime activities for over a year in response to China's assertive behavior in the contested region. The possibility of India and South Korea joining was raised by General Romeo Brawner, Chief of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, during a panel at the Raisina Dialogue, where he emphasized the need for enhanced regional collaboration to counter Beijing's expansive maritime claims.

The South China Sea, a critical maritime trade corridor with over \$3 trillion in annual traffic, remains a flashpoint amid escalating tensions between China and its Southeast Asian neighbors. General Brawner noted growing military and intelligence cooperation within the 'Squad' and underscored shared strategic concerns with India, referring to China as a "common enemy." While the proposal to include India was floated during bilateral engagements at the summit, Indian defense officials have yet to confirm formal discussions on the matter. Nonetheless, the development reflects India's deepening strategic role in the Indo-Pacific, as regional actors look to strengthen a collective front in upholding international maritime law and a rules-based order.

Japan to Make First Port Call at Chinese-Funded Cambodian Naval Base Amid Geostrategic Scrutiny

Japan is set to become the first foreign navy to visit Cambodia's newly modernized Ream Naval Base, a facility extensively renovated with Chinese funding. The visit, scheduled shortly after the base's inauguration in early April, is being framed by Cambodian officials as a demonstration of openness and strategic neutrality. Cambodian military chief Gen. Vong Pisen announced that the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) would be granted priority access as a reflection of deepening ties and mutual trust between Phnom Penh and Tokyo. While the Cambodian government insists that the base will remain open to vessels from all countries, the development is widely seen as an effort to counter Western suspicions that Ream may become a de facto Chinese military outpost.

Located near the strategic Gulf of Thailand, Ream Naval Base has drawn intense scrutiny from the United States and its allies since reports in 2019 alleged a secret agreement granting China exclusive military access. Despite repeated denials from both Phnom Penh and Beijing, the presence of Chinese warships and plans for a Cambodia-China joint logistics hub have fueled concerns about long-term Chinese military entrenchment. The decision to host a Japanese vessel at Ream follows a broader effort by Cambodia to rebalance its foreign policy—reflected in recent outreach to Washington, including the potential resumption of U.S.-Cambodia military exercises and last year's visit of a U.S. Navy ship to Sihanoukville. Nonetheless, with China underwriting much of Ream's development, the symbolic gestures of openness may do little to dispel apprehensions about Beijing's strategic footprint on Cambodia's coast.

Russia and North Korea Deepen Security Ties Amid Ongoing Ukraine War

In a rare high-level meeting, Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu met with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Pyongyang to discuss the ongoing war in Ukraine and broader geopolitical coordination between Moscow and Pyongyang. The visit comes amid mounting international concern over reports that North Korea has deployed more than 10,000 troops to support Russian operations in Ukraine's eastern Kursk region and supplied heavy weapons, including artillery and ballistic missiles. While previously denied, both nations have softened their denials in recent months, with Russian President Vladimir Putin notably declining to dispute the deployment. During the two-hour meeting, Shoigu conveyed a message from Putin and reaffirmed the strategic importance of the Russia–North Korea mutual defense treaty signed last year.

According to North Korean state media, Kim Jong Un offered his “unwavering” support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, vowing to uphold agreements from recent bilateral summits and expressing solidarity with Moscow’s position on global security. The two sides also reportedly discussed U.S.-Russia dialogue and regional security dynamics on the Korean Peninsula. Although no new agreements were publicly announced, Shoigu’s visit underscores the growing strategic alignment between the two isolated regimes. In exchange for its support, North Korea is believed to have received advanced military technology, civilian infrastructure aid, and economic assistance from Moscow—raising alarm in Seoul, Washington, and Kyiv over the militarization of Russia–North Korea ties.

Rubio Affirms Trump’s Continued Commitment to Taiwan’s Status Quo Amid Rising Pressure from Beijing

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio reaffirmed President Donald Trump’s position on Taiwan, stating that the administration remains firmly opposed to any attempt by China to alter the status quo through force or coercion. Speaking on the Hugh Hewitt Show, Rubio emphasized that Washington’s long-standing policy remains unchanged and that Trump’s decisions on Taiwan are deliberate and resolute. Rubio highlighted the significance of Trump’s recent meeting with TSMC Chairman C.C. Wei at the White House, framing it as a clear signal of U.S. support for Taiwan’s economic and strategic role. While asserting that deterrence remains a viable strategy, Rubio acknowledged the complexity of the situation, particularly given Chinese President Xi Jinping’s ambition to make Taiwan’s annexation a defining achievement of his leadership.

In a broader statement, the U.S. Department of State condemned Beijing’s global intimidation campaign targeting Taiwan and its supporters, including recent legal actions under China’s controversial Anti-Secession Law. U.S. officials criticized these efforts as draconian and destabilizing, warning that they threaten free speech and undermine the decades-old cross-strait equilibrium. The State Department also raised concerns over South Africa’s downgrading of Taiwan’s diplomatic office, calling it a result of Chinese pressure. Reaffirming its commitment to Taiwan’s security and international engagement, Washington urged the global community to strengthen ties with Taipei, describing it as a democratic and reliable partner facing an increasingly aggressive Chinese campaign of isolation and coercion.

India and France Conduct 23rd Edition of Varuna Naval Exercise

India and France are conducting the 23rd edition of their flagship bilateral naval exercise, Varuna, from March 19 to 22, underscoring their growing maritime cooperation and shared commitment to a free and secure Indo-Pacific. Initiated in 2001, Varuna has become a cornerstone of naval interoperability between the two nations. This year’s exercise features joint operations involving aircraft carriers INS Vikrant and FS Charles de Gaulle, accompanied by fighter aircraft, destroyers, frigates, and an Indian Scorpene-class submarine, highlighting the depth of strategic collaboration between the Indian and French navies.

Varuna 2025 includes complex multi-domain drills across surface, sub-surface, and aerial theaters. Key highlights include advanced air defense and anti-submarine warfare exercises, as well as mock air-to-air combat between India's MiG-29K and France's Rafale-M fighter jets. Replenishment-at-sea operations and maritime patrol sorties are also being conducted to enhance logistical coordination and situational awareness. The exercise reflects both countries' strategic convergence in the maritime domain and reaffirms their readiness to operate jointly in high-threat, high-complexity environments—advancing a shared vision of maritime peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

2. STATISTICS OF THE WEEK

Asia’s Military Manpower – India Leads the Pack

According to the 2024 Asia Power Index by the Lowy Institute, India now tops the list of countries with the largest number of active military personnel, boasting an estimated 3.09 million troops. It is followed closely by China (2.53 million) and Russia (1.66 million), while North Korea and the United States round out the top five with 1.47 million and 1.32 million respectively.

The data reflects not only the scale of manpower but also the enduring significance of traditional military strength in regional power calculations. Several Southeast and East Asian countries—including Pakistan, Indonesia, South Korea, Vietnam, and Thailand—also maintain large active forces, underscoring the region's growing focus on military preparedness amid intensifying geopolitical rivalries. As the Indo-Pacific security environment becomes more volatile, such statistics reinforce the central role of manpower alongside advanced technologies and strategic alliances in shaping deterrence and defense capabilities.



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3. MAP OF THE WEEK

Vietnam-Singapore Subsea Cable Connectivity

This week’s featured map illustrates the vast footprint of U.S. military presence across the Indo-Pacific, highlighting over 100,000 troops deployed throughout the region and a dense network of strategic bases from Northeast Asia to the Pacific Islands and Australia. As the Indo-Pacific emerges as the epicenter of great power competition, particularly with China, the map underscores Washington’s commitment to maintaining a robust forward posture across key geopolitical flashpoints.

Japan and South Korea continue to serve as the most critical anchors of U.S. military strength in Asia, hosting approximately 53,000 and 28,500 troops respectively, with a combined total of nine major bases. The Philippines, while hosting fewer permanent U.S. personnel, is gaining renewed prominence through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which includes key rotational sites. In parallel, Australia, Guam, and even remote outposts like Wake Island and Diego Garcia support trans-Pacific operations and missile defense. Notably, India stands out as a strategic partner without hosting U.S. bases—yet it features prominently through joint exercises and logistics cooperation. The map visually captures the U.S.’ evolving defense strategy: dispersed, resilient, and increasingly networked to deter aggression and maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific.



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4. PHOTO OF THE WEEK

Naval Power on Display – Varuna 2025

This striking image captures a formation of Indian and French naval vessels participating in the 23rd edition of the bilateral Varuna exercise, held from March 19 to 22, 2025. At the center is the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle, flanked by destroyers, frigates, and support ships from both navies. Notably, India's indigenous aircraft carrier INS Vikrant also took part in the exercises, underscoring the operational synergy between the two navies.

Varuna 2025 marked a new level of complexity and interoperability with high-end air defense drills, anti-submarine warfare operations, and simulated air-to-air combat between Rafale-M and MiG-29K fighter jets. This visual snapshot is a powerful reminder of the growing Indo-French defense partnership and their shared commitment to securing the Indo-Pacific maritime domain through joint readiness, strategic cooperation, and a rules-based order.



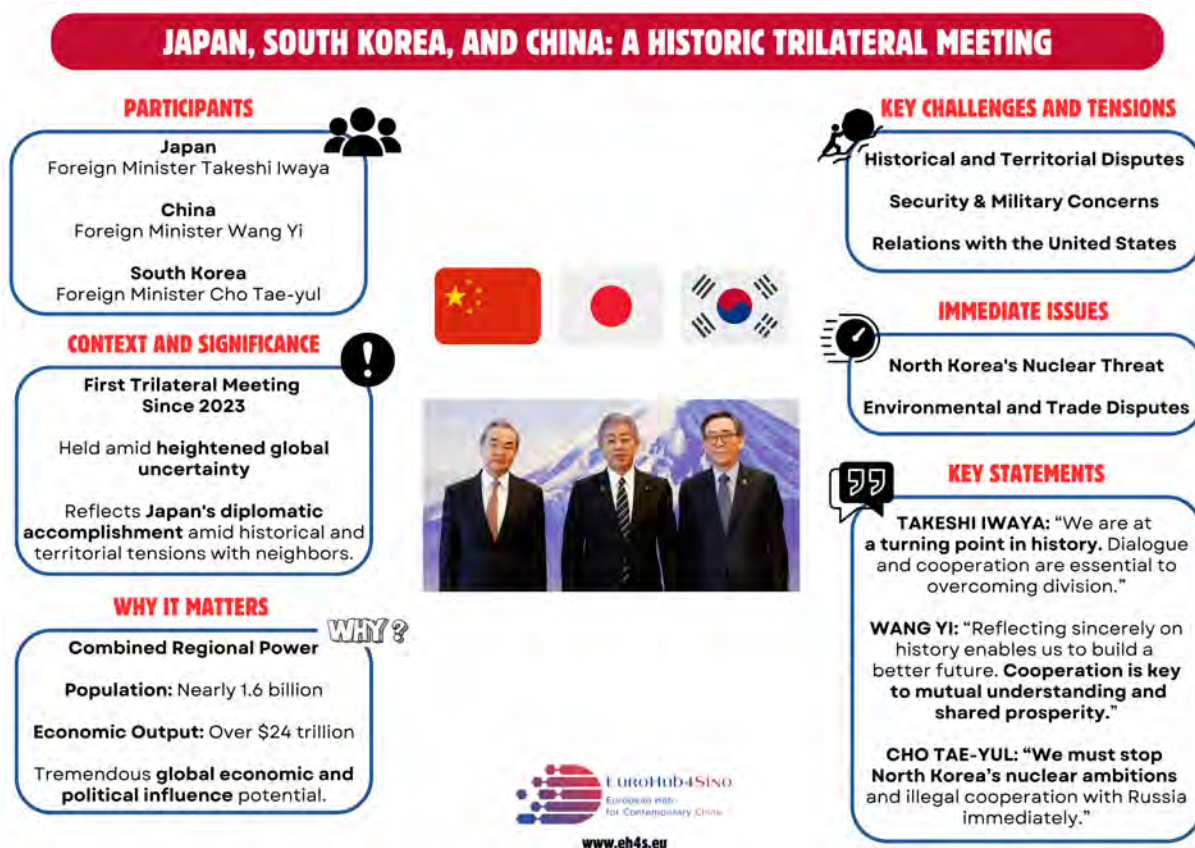
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5. INFOGRAPHIC OF THE WEEK

Japan, South Korea, and China – A Historic Trilateral Meeting

Amid heightened global uncertainty and regional tensions, the foreign ministers of Japan, South Korea, and China convened for their first trilateral meeting since 2023. This high-level diplomatic engagement, hosted in Tokyo, marked a significant milestone in Northeast Asian diplomacy and was widely seen as a diplomatic achievement for Japan. The meeting brought together Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul to address pressing regional issues and seek avenues for cooperation.

As the infographic highlights, the stakes are considerable: the combined population of these three countries nears 1.6 billion, with a collective economic output exceeding \$24 trillion. Discussions centered on immediate challenges including North Korea’s nuclear threat, environmental concerns, and ongoing trade disputes. However, deeper undercurrents—historical and territorial grievances, divergent security alignments, and the broader implications of U.S. relations—added complexity to the dialogue. Despite these tensions, key statements from all three ministers underscored a shared emphasis on dialogue, cooperation, and the need to overcome division. The meeting reflects growing recognition that trilateral coordination among Northeast Asia’s major powers will be critical in navigating regional and global challenges ahead.



6. REGIONAL ALLIANCES

From Quad to Squad – Informal Security Architecture in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific's evolving security landscape is giving rise to new, flexible forms of cooperation that transcend traditional alliance models. While the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) — comprising India, the U.S., Japan, and Australia — has emerged as a central pillar of regional security cooperation, a new group informally dubbed the "Squad" is rapidly gaining traction. Comprising the U.S., Japan, Australia, and the Philippines, the Squad represents a new generation of strategic alignments focused more narrowly on countering Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. As the Philippines and Japan intensify efforts to expand the group's reach, India has been identified as a key prospective member.

The Rise of the Squad

The Squad's origins trace back to the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2023, where the first meeting of defense chiefs was held, followed by joint maritime patrols in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone in April 2024. With tensions in the South China Sea mounting, the Squad has taken on a clear security posture, emphasizing maritime domain awareness, intelligence-sharing, and coordinated deterrence. While its structure remains informal, its growing operational focus and strategic intent are evident. During the 2025 Raisina Dialogue, Philippine Armed Forces Chief Gen. Romeo Brawner confirmed Manila's intent to extend an invitation to India and South Korea, underlining the group's ambition to expand its geographic and operational footprint.

Quad vs. Squad: Complement or Competition?

Although often seen in comparative terms, the Quad and Squad serve complementary roles. The Quad's broader agenda, including pandemic preparedness, climate resilience, and technology governance, reflects its multi-dimensional character. In contrast, the Squad's focus is narrowly tactical — geared toward addressing immediate threats posed by China's naval expansion and regional coercion. This distinction in scope and geography suggests that India's participation in both need not dilute either initiative. Instead, it could enhance India's flexibility and deepen its influence across multiple theaters.

India's Strategic Calculation

India's consideration of a role in the Squad reflects both converging threat perceptions and a pragmatic approach to informal coalitions. Speaking at the Raisina Dialogue, Gen. Brawner referred to China as a "common enemy," a characterization rarely echoed so bluntly in Indian official discourse but indicative of growing alignment. While New Delhi has yet to confirm its intention to join, its ongoing military partnerships with Squad members and its stake in preserving freedom of navigation in the South China Sea suggest that such participation would be strategically consistent.

Conclusion: The Emergence of a Security Web

Rather than signaling the decline of the Quad, the rise of the Squad reflects an Indo-Pacific security architecture increasingly defined by flexible, overlapping coalitions. These informal groupings — including AUKUS, Quad, and Squad — represent a move away from rigid alliance systems toward a "networked security web" capable of adapting to regional dynamics. For India, the choice is not binary. Its involvement in the Squad, if realized, would strengthen its presence in the Western Pacific while reinforcing its identity as a multi-aligned actor central to shaping the future of Indo-Pacific security.

7. ANALYSIS

India's Expanding Indo-Pacific Footprint

India's strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific is reaching new heights amid shifting global alliances, rising regional threats, and mounting expectations from its partners. As traditional security structures face uncertainty, particularly with renewed doubts about long-term U.S. commitments under President Trump, India is stepping into a more assertive regional role.

A series of recent diplomatic and defense engagements illustrate India's growing prominence as a central player in shaping the Indo-Pacific strategic landscape. From hosting the Quad Workshop on Pandemic Preparedness to conducting high-end joint naval exercises with France under Varuna 2025, India is deepening its regional partnerships through a balanced mix of hard and soft power. The momentum was especially visible at this year's Raisina Dialogue, where Indian officials met counterparts from across continents, while the U.S. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard described the U.S.–India relationship as a cornerstone of Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy. The buzz around India potentially joining the emergent "Squad" maritime coalition—currently comprising the U.S., Japan, Australia, and the Philippines—signals that New Delhi's maritime clout is being actively courted in response to China's increasingly assertive behavior in the South China Sea.

India's nuanced strategic approach has also been on display through its efforts to position itself as a stabilizing force amid rising regional tensions. Its careful diplomacy with China, continued support for a rules-based order in Taiwan, and willingness to explore new multilateral formats without binding security obligations reflect a strategy rooted in pragmatic hedging. At the same time, India's naval power projection, as evidenced by joint carrier operations with France, and its increasing presence in health security and humanitarian cooperation underscore a broadened conception of regional leadership. While New Delhi continues to resist formal alliance structures, its active role in coalitions like the Quad and prospective entry into groupings such as the Squad suggest that India is becoming an indispensable Indo-Pacific power—one that is confident, capable, and increasingly seen by partners as vital to regional security and resilience.

Strengthening Bilateral and Multilateral Ties

Recent weeks have seen a flurry of diplomatic and defense activity highlighting India's rising profile. U.S. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard's visit to New Delhi underscored Washington's recognition of India as a pivotal partner in ensuring Indo-Pacific security. Gabbard emphasized that "America First" does not mean "America alone," echoing a growing U.S. reliance on like-minded democracies to uphold regional order. In parallel, India hosted a Quad workshop on pandemic preparedness, reinforcing its role as a regional health security hub. The initiative brought together senior officials from all Quad nations and over 15 Indo-Pacific countries, showcasing India's capacity to convene and lead critical regional initiatives.

Emerging Role in New Security Architectures

India's invitation to join the 'Squad' — an informal security grouping currently comprising the U.S., Japan, Australia, and the Philippines — signals the next frontier in India's Indo-Pacific engagement. Though still nascent, this potential alignment reflects a shared desire to counter China's assertive posture in the South China Sea. The Philippines' top defense official openly described China as a "common enemy," suggesting that strategic clarity, rather than ambiguity, is driving new alignments. India's participation, even informally, would lend significant weight to this coalition and broaden its operational and political legitimacy.

Operational Interoperability and Regional Diplomacy

India's deepening defense cooperation with France is another marker of its expanding strategic network. The 23rd edition of the Varuna naval exercise, involving aircraft carriers INS Vikrant and FS Charles de Gaulle, highlighted high-level interoperability across air, surface, and sub-surface domains. The complex drills, including mock air combat and anti-submarine warfare, demonstrated India's readiness to engage with advanced military partners in multi-domain operations. Furthermore, India's anticipated involvement in the Squad, alongside its proactive diplomacy with the EU, underscores its unique position as both a reliable defense partner and an autonomous actor capable of navigating the complexities of great power competition.

Conclusion: From Strategic Autonomy to Strategic Influence

India's expanding Indo-Pacific engagement reflects a broader transformation in its foreign policy doctrine — from strategic autonomy to strategic influence. By deepening bilateral partnerships, leading multilateral platforms, and engaging in complex military operations, New Delhi is signaling its intent to shape regional outcomes rather than merely respond to them. As uncertainties grow around existing alliance structures and China continues its assertive maneuvers, India's pragmatic, multi-aligned approach offers a credible path to regional stability. Whether through leadership in the Quad, potential membership in the Squad, or high-end defense cooperation with France, India is fast becoming an indispensable anchor in the Indo-Pacific security architecture.

