

Welcome to This Week's Asia on the Horizon

(02 JUNE 2025)

As June unfolds, the Indo-Pacific finds itself not just reacting to global shifts — but actively reshaping them. This week's issue captures a region at the forefront of military innovation, diplomatic realignment, and economic strategy, where the choices of Asian actors are reverberating across global power structures. The stories we bring together here trace a vivid arc: from hard defense capabilities to soft power influence, from regional partnerships to cross-continental summits, and from fragile trade routes to robust new corridors of collaboration.

At sea, China's third aircraft carrier, the Fujian, is fast advancing through sea trials, testing next-generation electromagnetic catapults and signaling Beijing's intent to project power far beyond its shores. South Korea, by contrast, is rethinking its delayed carrier program and moving toward drone-centric naval platforms, reflecting a wider global pivot toward unmanned systems in military operations. Meanwhile, Taiwan is under growing pressure to ramp up defense spending amid U.S. plans to exceed its previous record arms sales — even as Beijing warns that Washington's deepening military ties with Taipei cross its red lines.

Diplomacy has been no less active. French President Emmanuel Macron's Indo-Pacific tour — spanning Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, and a landmark visit to ASEAN headquarters — has positioned France as a proactive player seeking to balance U.S.-China tensions. Macron's keynote at the Shangri-La Dialogue urged Europe and Asia to form a “positive new alliance” that upholds a rules-based international order, while U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth called on Indo-Pacific allies to dramatically boost defense spending in response to what he called China's “imminent” threat. Notably absent from the Singapore summit: China's defense minister, replaced by a lower-level delegation, highlighting the chilling of U.S.-China military channels.

Amid these tensions, the Global South is forging new strategic pathways. The inaugural ASEAN-GCC-China Summit in Kuala Lumpur marked a historic trilateral alignment, bringing together the economic heft of Southeast Asia, the Gulf, and China — a bloc representing over \$25 trillion in combined GDP. Leaders emphasized economic openness, cross-regional trade, and multilateral resilience in the face of rising U.S. protectionism, with Malaysia's Anwar Ibrahim and China's Li Qiang championing an agenda of shared prosperity. Simultaneously, China is expanding its diplomatic reach in the Pacific, cementing a five-point consensus with Pacific Island nations to align Belt and Road initiatives with local development priorities.

This week's statistics remind us how far East Asia has come: from just 2% of global exports in 1948 to nearly 25% today, the region's economic rise has reshaped global supply chains and technology flows. Our map of the week illustrates the growing importance of Arctic shipping routes linking Russia to South Korea, where Busan and Ulsan are positioning themselves as Arctic gateways for Asia-Europe trade — a strategy with sweeping implications for maritime commerce and energy logistics. And our

featured photo captures the symbolic unity of the ASEAN-GCC-China Summit, where leaders joined hands in a rare moment of Global South solidarity, sending a clear message that they are not mere spectators but active architects of a new world order.

Taken together, this issue reveals a world where Asia is not just a stage for great-power rivalry but an arena of agency, adaptability, and ambition. Whether navigating the pressures of U.S.-China competition, forging innovative regional alliances, or expanding into new technological and commercial frontiers, Asia's actors are increasingly setting the terms of global engagement. Stay tuned as we unpack these currents, explore the stakes, and connect the dots shaping the Indo-Pacific's—and the world's—future.



1. KEY DEVELOPMENTS

Fujian Aircraft Carrier Advances Sea Trials, Signaling Leap in China's Naval Capabilities

China's third aircraft carrier, the Fujian, is undergoing intensive sea trials, marking a significant milestone in the nation's naval development. As the first Chinese carrier equipped with electromagnetic catapults, the Fujian represents a technological leap over its predecessors. The ongoing trials aim to test the new catapult systems' performance, including their ability to launch various aircraft types, such as fighter jets and early warning planes, under different conditions. Experts suggest that, despite the complexity of these tests, the Fujian is progressing steadily towards commissioning, having completed eight sea trials since May last year .

The Fujian's advanced capabilities are expected to enhance the People's Liberation Army Navy's operational flexibility and combat readiness. Electromagnetic catapults allow aircraft to take off with heavier payloads, increasing sortie rates and enabling the deployment of a broader range of aircraft, including those with larger fuel and weapon loads. This advancement positions the Fujian as a formidable asset in China's maritime strategy, potentially extending its reach and influence in regional and global waters.

South Korea Reconsiders Aircraft Carrier Plans with Drone-Centric Approach

South Korea's Navy is exploring a shift from its stalled aircraft carrier program towards developing drone carriers. Originally initiated during the Moon administration, the aircraft carrier project faced delays under President Yoon's tenure. Recent reports indicate that the Republic of Korea Navy (ROKN) presented two proposals to the Ministry of National Defense: one to adapt the existing aircraft carrier design for drone operations, and another to modify the Dokdo-class amphibious assault ships for the same purpose. HD Hyundai and Hanwha Ocean have been assigned to conduct preliminary research on these respective proposals.

This initiative aligns with a global trend of integrating unmanned systems into naval operations. In November 2024, the ROKN successfully launched a U.S.-made Mojave drone from the deck of ROKS Dokdo, demonstrating the potential for drone operations from naval platforms. While the drone did not land back on the ship due to deck constraints, the test highlighted the feasibility of such operations. However, some experts caution that further research is needed to define the strategic role of drone carriers, especially concerning potential conflicts on the Korean Peninsula.

France and Vietnam Forge \$10 Billion Strategic Partnership Amid Global Trade Tensions

During French President Emmanuel Macron's state visit to Hanoi, France and Vietnam signed agreements totaling over \$10 billion, encompassing sectors such as aviation, defense, space, nuclear energy, and healthcare. A notable highlight was VietJet's order of 20 Airbus A330neo aircraft, reinforcing Airbus's significant presence in Vietnam's aviation market. Additional agreements included collaborations on nuclear energy, railways, Sanofi vaccines, and a satellite partnership between Airbus Defence and Space and Vietnam. Macron emphasized enhanced defense collaboration, particularly in cybersecurity and anti-terrorism, alongside supporting Vietnam's rights in South China Sea maritime issues.

This diplomatic engagement occurs amid escalating U.S. trade pressures on both Europe and Vietnam. President Trump's recent threats to impose 50% tariffs on EU goods, though delayed to July 9, have intensified concerns. Simultaneously, Vietnam faces U.S. demands to increase American imports to avoid 46% tariffs, leading to potential purchases of 250 Boeing jets. European officials have expressed apprehension that Vietnam's concessions to the U.S. might undermine European trade interests. Macron's visit underscores France's intent to solidify its strategic presence in Southeast Asia, presenting itself as a reliable partner amid global trade uncertainties.

ASEAN Summit Tackles Tariffs, Myanmar Crisis, and Regional Integration

The 46th ASEAN Summit commenced in Kuala Lumpur, focusing on pressing regional challenges such as U.S. tariffs, the Myanmar conflict, and maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, chairing the summit, emphasized the need for a unified ASEAN response to the U.S. tariffs, which range from 10% to 49% on member states. He has requested a summit with U.S. President Donald Trump to address these concerns. Anwar also highlighted the importance of maintaining an open, inclusive, and rules-based international order amid rising protectionism.

In addition to economic issues, the summit addressed the ongoing crisis in Myanmar, advocating for an expanded nationwide ceasefire and inclusive dialogue. ASEAN leaders also discussed the bloc's future direction, unveiling the "ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future" vision, aiming for a resilient, innovative, and people-centered community. The summit included engagements with China and the Gulf Cooperation Council, reflecting ASEAN's commitment to strengthening ties with key partners.

China and Malaysia Chart 'Golden 50 Years' of Strategic Cooperation

On May 26, 2025, Chinese Premier Li Qiang met with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in Kuala Lumpur, reaffirming their commitment to deepening bilateral relations. The leaders agreed to implement outcomes from President Xi Jinping's recent state visit, focusing on enhancing political trust and expanding cooperation in digital economy, green technology, and artificial intelligence. Key projects like the "Two Countries, Twin Parks" initiative and the East Coast Rail Link were highlighted as symbols of this strategic partnership. Additionally, both nations committed to facilitating people-to-people exchanges through mutual visa exemptions and cultural collaborations.

Premier Li emphasized the importance of upholding open regionalism and multilateralism amid rising protectionism. He advocated for closer economic ties among China, ASEAN, and GCC countries, aiming to build a model of global cooperation. Prime Minister Anwar expressed support for China's accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and pledged to work closely with China to ensure the success of the inaugural ASEAN-GCC-China Summit.

ASEAN-GCC-China Summit Charts New Course for Global South Amid Trade Turmoil

At the inaugural ASEAN-GCC-China Summit held in Kuala Lumpur, leaders from Southeast Asia, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and China convened to strengthen economic ties and present a united front against escalating global trade tensions, particularly those stemming from U.S. tariff policies. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim highlighted the combined economic potential of the participating regions, noting their collective GDP of nearly \$25 trillion and a population exceeding 2 billion. He emphasized the importance of this trilateral cooperation in fostering resilience and connectivity in the face of protectionist challenges.

Chinese Premier Li Qiang called for the removal of trade barriers and a commitment to multilateralism, urging ASEAN and GCC nations to uphold a trading system centered on the World Trade Organization. He stressed that economic globalization is under unprecedented strain and that collaborative efforts are essential to counteract unilateral actions disrupting global markets. The summit also served as a platform for China to deepen its engagement with both ASEAN and GCC countries, reinforcing its role as a key partner amid shifting geopolitical dynamics.

France and Indonesia Deepen Strategic Ties with New Defence and Economic Agreements

On May 28, 2025, French President Emmanuel Macron met with Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto in Jakarta to strengthen bilateral relations, focusing on defence and economic cooperation. The leaders signed a letter of intent that could lead to additional orders of French military equipment, including 12 more Rafale fighter jets, Scorpène-class submarines, and light frigates. This builds upon Indonesia's previous \$8.1 billion defence deal in 2022, which included 42 Rafale jets and submarine development. Macron emphasized that the agreement opens new perspectives for future collaborations .

Beyond defence, the two nations signed over 20 memorandums of understanding worth at least \$11 billion, covering sectors such as energy, mining, and technology. French mining group Eramet, part of Macron's delegation, discussed resolving issues related to mining permits at Weda Bay and explored battery supply-chain investments with Indonesia's sovereign wealth fund. Indonesia, as the world's largest nickel producer, remains central to France's strategic economic interests in the region .

Czech Republic Accuses China of Cyberattack on Foreign Ministry

On May 28, 2025, the Czech Republic publicly accused China of orchestrating a "malicious cyber campaign" targeting its Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The attacks, ongoing since 2022, were attributed to APT31, a cyber espionage group linked to China's Ministry of State Security. In response, Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský summoned the Chinese ambassador to formally condemn the incident, stating that such actions could have serious consequences for bilateral relations. The Czech government has since implemented a new, more secure communication system to safeguard its infrastructure.

The European Union and NATO expressed solidarity with the Czech Republic, with EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas condemning the attack as a violation of international norms in cyberspace. Kallas emphasized that states should not allow their territory to be used for malicious cyber activities and warned that the EU is prepared to take further action to prevent, deter, or respond to such behavior. China's embassy in Prague rejected the accusations, urging the Czech side to cease "microphone diplomacy" and asserting that the evidence presented was insufficient and unprofessional.

China and Pacific Island Nations Deepen Ties with Five-Point Consensus

On May 28, 2025, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi co-chaired the Third China–Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting with Kiribati's President and Foreign Minister Taneti Maamau in Xiamen, Fujian Province. Commemorating the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Pacific Island nations, the meeting culminated in a five-point consensus aimed at strengthening their comprehensive strategic partnership. Key agreements included mutual respect for sovereignty, alignment of China's Belt and Road Initiative with the Pacific's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, and enhanced cooperation in areas such as infrastructure, climate change, and green development. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to multilateralism and the one-China principle, emphasizing the importance of equality among nations regardless of size.

The consensus also highlighted the significance of cultural exchanges and mutual learning between Chinese civilization and the unique maritime cultures of the Pacific Islands. By promoting people-centered governance and safeguarding equity and justice, the parties aim to build a peaceful and prosperous Pacific region. This meeting underscores China's ongoing efforts to deepen its ties with Pacific Island countries, positioning itself as a key partner in their development and regional stability.

Macron's Historic Visit to ASEAN Headquarters Reinforces France's Indo-Pacific Strategy

On May 28, 2025, French President Emmanuel Macron made a historic visit to the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta, marking the first time a French head of state has visited the regional bloc's headquarters. Welcomed by ASEAN Secretary-General Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, the visit underscored France's commitment to deepening its strategic partnership with Southeast Asia. This engagement coincided with the fifth anniversary of France being conferred Development Partner status by ASEAN in 2020, highlighting Paris's ongoing efforts to enhance cooperation in areas such as defence, climate resilience, digital innovation, and cultural exchange .

Macron emphasized France's vision of serving as a "reliable partner and bridge-builder" in the Indo-Pacific, advocating for a multipolar order grounded in multilateralism and regional cooperation. His visit to the ASEAN Secretariat was part of a broader Southeast Asia tour, which included stops in Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore. In Singapore, Macron delivered a keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue, calling for a "positive new alliance" between Europe and Asia to counterbalance the escalating U.S.-China rivalry and to uphold a rules-based international order . This diplomatic outreach reflects France's strategic intent to bolster its presence and influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

U.S. to 'Aggressively Revoke' Chinese Student Visas Amid Escalating Tensions

On May 28, 2025, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced that the United States would begin "aggressively revoking" visas for Chinese students, particularly those with connections to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or studying in critical fields. This move is part of the Trump administration's broader strategy to counter perceived national security threats posed by Chinese nationals in American academic institutions. Rubio stated that the State Department, in coordination with the Department of Homeland Security, would also enhance scrutiny of all future visa applications from China and Hong Kong. The announcement did not specify the number of students affected, but it has raised concerns about the potential impact on the approximately 277,000 Chinese students currently studying in the U.S.

The policy has elicited criticism from educational institutions and experts who warn of its potential to undermine U.S. scientific progress and innovation. Many universities rely on international students, including those from China, for research contributions and financial support. The lack of clear guidelines for determining CCP affiliations and the broad definition of "critical fields" have led to concerns about arbitrary enforcement and racial profiling. Additionally, the State Department has paused new student visa interviews to implement a new vetting process, including social media checks, further complicating the situation for prospective students.

U.S. Plans to Surpass Previous Arms Sales to Taiwan Amid Rising Tensions

The United States is preparing to significantly increase arms sales to Taiwan, aiming to exceed the \$18.3 billion approved during President Donald Trump's first term. This initiative is part of a broader strategy to bolster Taiwan's defense capabilities in the face of escalating military pressure from China. U.S. officials anticipate that the forthcoming arms packages, focusing on cost-effective systems like missiles, munitions, and drones, will not only enhance Taiwan's deterrence but also reassure allies of Washington's commitment to the island's security. The move comes amid concerns over President Trump's previous ambiguous remarks about Taiwan's defense responsibilities and its semiconductor industry.

Taiwan's government, under President Lai Ching-te, is advocating for an increase in defense spending to 3% of GDP. However, this proposal faces resistance from opposition parties controlling the parliament. U.S. officials have urged these parties to prioritize national security over political differences, emphasizing that the proposed defense budget is crucial for Taiwan's survival. Meanwhile, China continues to oppose U.S.-Taiwan military cooperation, reiterating its claim over the island and pledging reunification if necessary.

Macron Calls for Europe-Asia Alliance to Counter Superpower Rivalry at Shangri-La Dialogue

French President Emmanuel Macron delivered the keynote address at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, urging European and Asian nations to forge a "positive new alliance" to uphold a rules-based international order amid escalating U.S.-China tensions. He emphasized that the growing divide between the two superpowers poses the greatest global threat, advocating for strategic autonomy and collaboration based on shared principles. Macron warned that failing to check Russia's actions in Ukraine could embolden China regarding Taiwan, highlighting the interconnectedness of global crises.

Macron's speech also addressed concerns over U.S. unpredictability under President Trump's administration, particularly regarding tariff policies and defense commitments. He criticized unilateral decision-making by major powers and stressed the need for Europe and Asia to avoid becoming collateral victims of superpower decisions. Macron reaffirmed France's commitment to the Indo-Pacific region, referencing its military presence and recent deployments, and called for greater cooperation between NATO and Asian states to counter global coercion.

U.S. Defense Secretary Urges Asian Allies to Bolster Defense Spending Amid China Concerns

At the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth emphasized the urgency of addressing China's growing military assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region. Describing the threat as "real and potentially imminent," Hegseth called on Asian allies to increase their defense expenditures, highlighting that any aggression toward Taiwan could have devastating global consequences. He noted that while European NATO members are moving toward spending 5% of their GDP on defense, many Asian nations maintain spending at around 1.5%, urging a reevaluation in light of regional security challenges.

China responded to Hegseth's remarks by accusing the U.S. of promoting a "Cold War mentality" and being the primary destabilizing force in the region. The Chinese Foreign Ministry criticized the U.S. for deploying offensive weapons in the South China Sea and warned against interference in Taiwan, labeling such actions as provocative. The absence of China's Defense Minister Dong Jun from the summit, replaced by a lower-level delegation, further underscored the strained military relations between the two nations.

U.S. Defense Secretary Hegseth Reinforces Commitment to Southeast Asian Security

On May 30, 2025, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth convened with defense leaders from nine Southeast Asian nations—Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Timor-Leste—during the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. The meeting underscored the United States' enduring commitment to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its central role in regional security. Secretary Hegseth highlighted advancements in U.S.-ASEAN defense relations, emphasizing capacity-building initiatives and the importance of multilateral cooperation through mechanisms like the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus).

Reiterating the Trump administration's vision for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," Hegseth advocated for pragmatic collaboration to deter aggression and maintain peace through strength. He expressed concerns over China's coercive activities in the South China Sea, urging Southeast Asian nations to share the responsibility of preserving regional stability. The Secretary also announced U.S. support for upcoming joint initiatives, including co-chairing the ASEAN-United States Maritime Exercise and the ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Group on Military Medicine with Indonesia later this year.

China's Defence Minister Skips Shangri-La Dialogue Amid Rising U.S. Tensions

Chinese Defence Minister Dong Jun will not attend the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, marking a notable departure from previous years when China's top military official participated in the high-profile security forum. Instead, China is sending a lower-level delegation from the People's Liberation Army National Defense University. The Chinese Defence Ministry did not provide a reason for Dong's absence. This decision comes amid escalating tensions between China and the United States, particularly concerning military relations and regional security dynamics.

The absence of China's defence minister coincides with U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's debut at the forum, where he emphasized the "real and potentially imminent" threat posed by China, urging Indo-Pacific allies to increase their defence spending. Hegseth's remarks were met with criticism from China, which accused him of "vilifying" the nation and promoting a "Cold War mentality." The Chinese Foreign Ministry stated that Hegseth's comments were intended to sow division and that the U.S. actions are turning the region into a "powder keg."

South Korea Eyes Arctic Shipping to Revitalize Busan Port

South Korea is positioning the Port of Busan as a strategic hub for Arctic maritime trade, leveraging its northern location and advanced shipbuilding industry. Presidential candidate Lee Jae-myung has proposed transforming Busan and Ulsan into gateways for the emerging Northern Sea Route, which offers a shorter shipping path between Asia and Europe. Lee emphasizes that Arctic shipping could rejuvenate the southern port cities' economies, which face challenges like population decline and industrial slowdown .

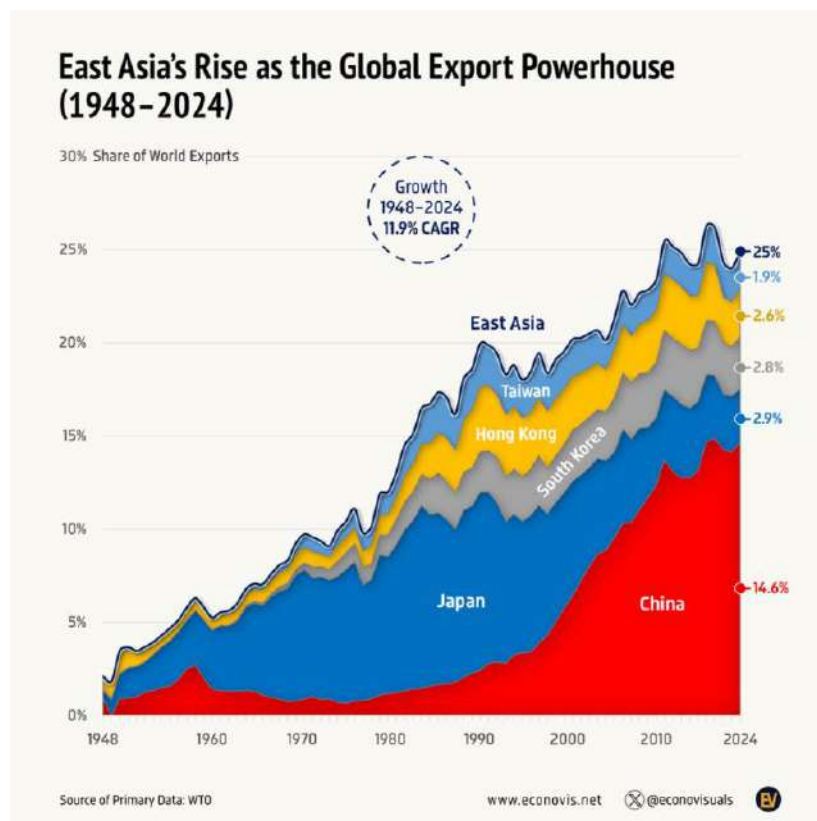
To support this vision, Busan has established an Arctic Shipping Route Task Force, bringing together industry leaders, researchers, and policymakers to develop strategies for integrating the port into Arctic trade networks. The initiative aims to capitalize on Busan's proximity to the Northern Sea Route and its shipbuilding expertise, with South Korean firms having constructed numerous ice-class vessels for Arctic operations . Additionally, Lee has proposed relocating the headquarters of HMM, South Korea's largest container shipping company, and the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries to Busan to bolster the city's maritime significance .

2. STATISTICS OF THE WEEK

East Asia's Rise as the Global Export Powerhouse (1948–2024)

This week's statistics spotlights East Asia's extraordinary ascent in global trade over the past eight decades. In 1948, China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan combined accounted for just \$1.2 billion, or 2.1% of global exports. By 2024, that figure has soared to \$6.1 trillion—24.9% of the world total—reflecting a stunning compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 11.9%.

The region's export dominance unfolded across three distinct waves: Japan's postwar surge (peaking at 9.9% global share in 1986), the rise of South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong through the 1980s and early 1990s (collectively reaching 8.0% global share by 1993), and China's explosive expansion from the 2000s onward (rising from 0.9% in 1980 to a stable 14.5% today). This layered growth not only reshaped East Asia's role in the global economy but also anchored the region as a central player in 21st-century trade and supply chains.



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3. MAP OF THE WEEK

Shipping Traffic from Russia's Northern Sea Route Near South Korea

This week's map visualizes the rising flow of maritime traffic from Russia's Northern Sea Route (NSR) as it reaches the busy waters near South Korea, highlighting the growing geopolitical and commercial importance of Arctic shipping routes. The NSR offers a shorter link between Europe and Asia, cutting travel time by up to 40% compared to traditional routes through the Suez Canal.

As shown in the image, a dense network of shipping lines from the Russian Arctic converges near the Korean Peninsula, underscoring why South Korea is actively positioning the Port of Busan as a gateway for Arctic trade. With Arctic routes becoming more navigable due to climate change, Seoul is pushing to transform Busan and Ulsan into regional hubs for NSR-linked trade, aligning with its shipbuilding strengths and Arctic-ready fleet. This development has wide-reaching implications for supply chains, energy security, and the evolving competition over northern maritime corridors.



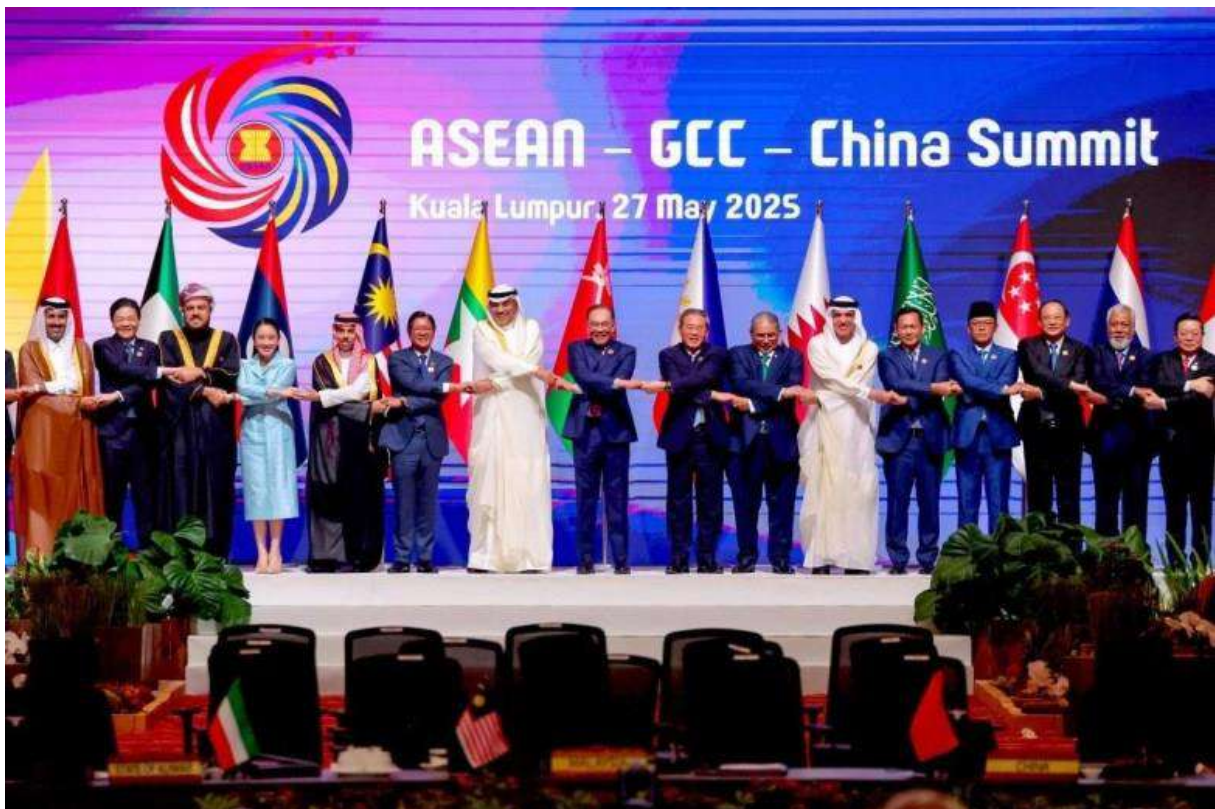
<https://www.highbnorthnews.com/en/south-korea-looking-transform-port-busan-arctic-shipping-gateway>

4. PHOTO OF THE WEEK

Leaders Unite at ASEAN-GCC-China Summit in Kuala Lumpur

This week's photo captures the historic moment at the inaugural ASEAN-GCC-China Summit, held on May 27, 2025, in Kuala Lumpur. The image shows leaders and senior officials from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and China standing in solidarity, hands linked across national lines—a powerful visual of trilateral cooperation.

Against the backdrop of a world grappling with rising protectionism, trade fragmentation, and geopolitical tensions, the summit emphasized multilateralism, regional connectivity, and shared prosperity across Asia and the Gulf. The leaders' collective stance sends a symbolic message: amid shifting global dynamics, the Global South is stepping forward to shape a more balanced, multipolar order.



<https://asiatimes.com/2025/05/asean-gcc-china-summit-a-civilized-vision-in-a-fractured-world/>

5. INFOGRAPHIC OF THE WEEK

China–Pacific Island Countries Meeting: Five-Point Consensus and Shared Goals

This week's infographic spotlights the outcomes of the Third China–Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting, held in Xiamen, China, on May 28, 2025. The meeting produced a five-point consensus emphasizing equality, sovereignty, Belt and Road cooperation aligned with the Pacific 2050 Strategy, and enhanced cultural and civilizational exchanges. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi underscored the priority of mutual respect and shared development, framing the Pacific partnership as a cornerstone of China's Global South engagement.

The joint commitments reaffirmed the one-China principle, strengthened trade and supply chains, advanced infrastructure and green development, promoted peace and non-nuclear policies, and supported the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. The meeting reflects China's continued efforts to deepen influence in the Pacific through a blend of diplomatic, economic, and cultural initiatives, positioning itself as a long-term development partner in the region.



6. REGIONAL ALLIANCES

ASEAN, GCC, and China Forge New Strategic Pathways

In a landmark move signaling a shift in global economic alliances, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and China convened their inaugural trilateral summit in Kuala Lumpur on May 27, 2025. This unprecedented gathering brought together leaders from three of the world's most dynamic regions, collectively representing a population exceeding two billion and a combined GDP nearing \$25 trillion. Amid escalating global trade tensions and rising protectionism, the summit underscored a collective commitment to fostering economic resilience, regional stability, and multilateral cooperation.

Economic Synergy and Strategic Alignment

The summit's central theme revolved around enhancing economic integration and strategic alignment among the participating regions. Chinese Premier Li Qiang emphasized the importance of removing trade barriers and expanding openness to counteract the challenges posed by unilateralism and protectionism. He advocated for the creation of a large, shared market facilitating the free flow of resources, technologies, and talent.

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim highlighted the potential of this trilateral cooperation to serve as a model for global collaboration. He noted that the summit's outcomes could pave the way for new economic opportunities, particularly in sectors like digitalization, artificial intelligence, renewable energy, and infrastructure development.

Addressing Global Trade Challenges

The summit occurred against the backdrop of intensified trade tensions, notably the U.S. administration's imposition of tariffs affecting several ASEAN members. In response, ASEAN leaders have sought a unified approach to engage with the U.S., aiming to ensure that bilateral agreements do not undermine the interests of other member states. The formation of a task force to coordinate responses to these tariffs reflects ASEAN's commitment to collective economic security.

Furthermore, discussions are underway to establish free trade agreements between ASEAN and both the GCC and the European Union, signaling a strategic diversification of economic partnerships.

Cultural and Civilizational Exchange

Beyond economic considerations, the summit emphasized the importance of cultural and civilizational exchanges. Premier Li Qiang called for the promotion of mutual learning among civilizations, advocating for a model of cross-civilizational integration that respects diversity while fostering unity. This approach aims to strengthen people-to-people ties and enhance mutual understanding among the regions.

Conclusion

The ASEAN-GCC-China Summit marks a significant step toward a more interconnected and multipolar global order. By aligning their economic strategies, addressing shared challenges, and promoting cultural exchange, these regions are laying the groundwork for a collaborative future. As global dynamics continue to evolve, the success of this trilateral partnership could serve as a blueprint for other regions seeking to navigate the complexities of the 21st-century geopolitical landscape.

7. ANALYSIS

The Global South's Rise: Shaping a Multipolar World in 2025

In 2025, the Global South has emerged as a pivotal force reshaping global politics, economics, and security. From sweeping diplomatic tours to major regional summits, developing nations are no longer just recipients of great power maneuvers — they are becoming architects of new alignments. Recent events like Donald Trump's Gulf tour, Xi Jinping's Southeast Asia trip, the ASEAN–GCC–China summit, China's Pacific Island outreach, and Emmanuel Macron's Southeast Asia visit highlight a world steadily shifting toward multipolarity, with the Global South at its heart.

Diplomatic Momentum Across the South

Donald Trump made the Middle East his first foreign destination in May 2025, striking massive investment and arms deals with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE. His trip marked a strategic pivot: moving Washington's Middle East focus toward Sunni Arab states and away from old dynamics with Israel or Iran. Simultaneously, Beijing deepened its influence in Southeast Asia. Xi Jinping's visits to Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia resulted in over a hundred agreements across infrastructure, digital economy, and agriculture — solidifying China as Southeast Asia's indispensable partner as U.S. tariffs bite into regional exports.

Europe has also jumped into the game. French President Emmanuel Macron's Indo-Pacific tour, including Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore, saw major defense deals, particularly with Indonesia, where Jakarta is diversifying its military suppliers beyond the U.S. and Russia. Macron's keynote at the Shangri-La Dialogue presented Europe as a champion of rules-based cooperation, eager to fill gaps left by a more inward-looking Washington.

Summits have added another layer to this momentum. The ASEAN–GCC and inaugural ASEAN–GCC–China trilateral summit in Kuala Lumpur brought together Southeast Asia, Gulf nations, and China to launch negotiations on a free trade agreement, align infrastructure and investment strategies, and push back against Western protectionism. China's parallel diplomatic efforts in the Pacific, promising climate resilience projects to small island states, show Beijing's determination to strengthen its ties across the Global South as Western aid stagnates.

Shifting Security Alignments

Security dynamics are evolving alongside economics. Trump's Gulf visit consecrated a new Middle East order led by Sunni Arab states, emboldened by U.S. arms deals and diplomatic backing. Washington's endorsement of Saudi-brokered efforts in Syria and Yemen, over Israeli objections, signaled a more pragmatic, Gulf-centric approach. Meanwhile, Gulf states diversify their defense relationships — for example, by acquiring Chinese drones — reducing reliance on any single great power.

In Southeast Asia, hedging is the norm. ASEAN leaders at the Shangri-La Dialogue emphasized “strategic autonomy,” refusing to align fully with either Washington or Beijing. Countries like the Philippines are reinforcing maritime defenses and seeking a binding South China Sea Code of Conduct with China, even as they deepen military ties with the U.S. and explore new European partnerships. Indonesia’s defense deals with France reflect this careful balancing, as does ASEAN’s broader diplomatic strategy: engaging all powers without becoming a pawn in their rivalries.

Economic Partnerships Driving Multipolarity

The economic rise of the Global South is perhaps the most striking feature of 2025. Facing U.S. tariffs, ASEAN members have doubled down on intra-regional integration and partnerships with the Gulf and China. The ASEAN–GCC–China corridor promises to link Southeast Asian manufacturing, Gulf capital, and Chinese technology into a potent economic bloc. Gulf sovereign wealth funds are pumping money into Southeast Asian infrastructure, while China’s Belt and Road Initiative continues to finance railways, ports, and digital networks.

Beyond Asia, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and Latin American efforts at regional integration signal a shared determination to reduce dependency on Western markets. Expanded BRICS membership, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Argentina, is transforming that grouping into a more influential economic coalition. New technology partnerships — like Gulf-Asia clean energy projects, Turkish drone exports, and India’s satellite services — further deepen South-South ties and reduce reliance on Western tech.

The Global South’s Growing Leverage

Multipolarity means no single power can dictate global outcomes. In 2025, Global South nations have become critical swing actors. Gulf states extracted concessions from Washington by leveraging their oil and investments; ASEAN played the U.S. and China off each other to secure economic benefits. Countries like India, Brazil, and Turkey are emerging as regional poles, pursuing flexible, issue-based alignments — sometimes with the West, sometimes with China or Russia.

Crucially, Global South nations are pushing for greater inclusion in global governance. The African Union’s admission to the G20, louder calls to reform the UN Security Council, and coordinated demands for climate finance show that developing countries want institutions to reflect today’s realities, not outdated post–World War II power structures. Their collective push on issues like climate justice, fairer trade rules, and technology access reflects a determination to shape global norms, not just adapt to them.

Conclusion: Toward a More Inclusive World Order

The rising importance of the Global South is not a passing trend but a structural shift. Diplomatically, economically, and militarily, developing nations are asserting their agency and reshaping the international system. This new reality offers opportunities — for trade, cooperation, and more balanced global governance — but also challenges, requiring adaptable strategies and mutual respect.

For major powers, engaging the Global South as equal partners, not just spheres of influence, is key to building a resilient international order. For the Global South itself, this is a historic moment to solidify gains, deepen inter-regional collaboration, and set shared agendas for the global commons. As the events of 2025 have shown, the world's future increasingly runs through the Global South — and its rise will define the international landscape in the years to come.

