



INDO-PACIFIC August 2019

The “Indo-Pacific” comes to Bangkok

The Indo-Pacific was high on the agenda of participants assembling in Bangkok from the 31st of July to the 2nd of August for various regional and sub-regional meetings.

On the 31st of July, India’s Ministry of External Affairs announced that Subrahmanyam Jaishankar would “enumerate India’s Indo-Pacific vision”. New Zealand’s Foreign Ministry announced on the 1st of August that it would be “engaging with our regional partners on the challenges facing the Indo-Pacific”; while Japan and Canada affirmed their shared “vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific”. Mike Pompeo’s plea in his Press Conference on the 2nd of August was that “what the U.S. is asking of all our Indo-Pacific partners” is for them “to speak out against Chinese coercion in the South China Sea”.

India pushed its own regional links. At the India-ASEAN ministerial meeting on the 1st of August, Jaishankar gave a “warm welcome” to the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, released in June 2019, and stressed “ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in the areas of maritime cooperation, connectivity and achieving sustainable development goals”. Further links were reiterated that day by him at the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Ministerial Meeting (MGCMM).

The US both reassured and warned: at the US-ASEAN ministerial meeting on the 1st of August, Mike Pompeo remarked that “we don’t ever ask any Indo-Pacific nation to choose between countries”, nevertheless he sought to nudge ASEAN towards the US position, by announcing “I was heartened to see that ASEAN has released its outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which supports sovereignty, transparency, good governance, and rule-based order”. Explicit “troubling” behaviour by China was raised by Pompeo at the Lower Mekong Ministerial Initiative (LMMI), held on the 1st of August, along with the announcement of the Japan-US Mekong Power Partnership (JUMP).

A pointed Australia-Japan-US trilateral was held on the 1st of August, strengthening their cooperation “throughout the Indo-Pacific region”. Particular emphasis was on maritime security and infrastructure cooperation, with China implicitly in mind. Explicit “serious concerns” were raised about Chinese land reclamation projects in the South China Sea, with “strong opposition” to their militarization of holdings,

and reiteration of the need for freedom of navigation and overflight. They “underscored the importance” of China complying with the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) South China Sea ruling of July 2016. Indo-Pacific regionalism remained weak. On the 2nd of August the Chairman’s Statement for the East Asia Summit “noted with appreciation the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo- Pacific, based on the principles of strengthening ASEAN centrality”, but this ignores ASEAN’s position of weakness in steering larger powers. EAS discussions were held on the South China Sea, but in private. The EAS remains severely hampered in dealing with China, based as it is on consensus, and with China as one of its leading members.

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