



CrisisWatch 2023 – March Trends and April Alerts

Asia

North East Asia

➔ **China/Japan** China continued maritime presence in Japan’s territorial waters, while Tokyo bolstered its defence posture and enhanced cooperation with allies and partners.

Chinese maritime presence continued, including near disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. As of 23 March, Japan detected 85 Chinese vessels in Japan’s contiguous zone, with eight vessels venturing inside Japan’s territorial sea 15-17 March. Japan 18 March spotted two Chinese Coast Guard vessels around Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, lingering for 16 hours; Tokyo condemned Beijing for violating waters around islands, while China described it as routine to safeguard its sovereignty. Russia 3 March claimed it fired Kalibr cruise missile during submarine drill in Sea of Japan that struck land target over 1,000km away.

Japan strengthened defence posture, bolstering Okinawa base. Japan 16 March deployed Ground Self-Defense Force units, including missile squads, to newly established garrison at Ishigaki Island in Okinawa, near Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and Taiwan. Okinawa authorities 17 March conducted first-ever tabletop exercise on evacuating more than 100,000 people from Japanese islands near Taiwan. Meanwhile, Tokyo 4 March announced plan to introduce new homegrown missile capable of intercepting ballistic missiles and hypersonic glide weapons by 2027. Media reports early March suggested Japan was considering sending drones instead of manned jets to intercept foreign aircraft approaching its sovereign airspace.

Japan continued alliance-building efforts, held summit with South Korea. FMs of “Quad” (U.S., Australia, India and Japan) 3 March pledged to address maritime challenges in South and East China Seas. U.S., Canada, India, Japan and South Korea 16 March staged “Sea Dragon” joint anti-submarine exercises. South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol 16-17 March visited Japan for bilateral summit, bringing curtain down on extended period of bilateral friction in recent years; Japanese PM Kishida called it “major step towards normalizing relations” (see Korean Peninsula). German Chancellor Olaf Scholz 18 March visited Japanese capital Tokyo aiming to strengthen economic and defence ties. Japan’s PM Fumio Kishida 20 March visited India to coordinate Japan’s G7 presidency and India’s G20 presidency; pair 17 Feb-2 March conducted joint exercises in Japan’s Shiga region.

➡ **Korean Peninsula U.S. and South Korea held large-scale military drills as North Korea continued missile tests and hinted at upcoming provocative satellite launch, while Seoul and Tokyo improved relations.**

U.S.-South Korea conducted military exercises as Pyongyang launched missiles. U.S. and South Korea 13 March commenced 11-day Freedom Shield military exercise on scale last seen in 2018, ushering in moment of relatively high risk due to competing military activities on peninsula. During drills, North Korea conducted three separate missile launches, including intercontinental ballistic missile (Hwasong-17) on lofted trajectory into East Sea on 16 March; missile did not cross Japanese territory. Other missiles launched included multiple long-range cruise missiles on 22 March.

North Korea hinted at satellite launch and unveiled purported warhead casings. North Korea 5 March indicated that it had developed powerful rocket engine that, it claims, now guarantees that it can launch satellites successfully. Comments may pave way for North Korea to use one of its most powerful ballistic missiles to launch satellite on or around 15 April to mark anniversary of birth of national founder Kim Il-sung; military reconnaissance satellite launch is one of five main military priorities announced by leader Kim Jong-un in Jan 2021 for 2021-2026 period. North Korea 28 March for first time released images of purported tactical nuclear warhead casings, suggesting regime has – or wishes to project – confidence that it can master miniaturisation and produce such weapons at scale.

South Korea and Japan revived partnership. South Korea 6 March announced plan to compensate small number of remaining victims of Japanese wartime forced labour by funding compensation through donations from firms that received investment capital from reparations obtained from Japan in 1960s. While deal effectively resolves longstanding thorn in relations, issue proved extremely contentious among liberals and youth in South Korea. President Yoon Suk-yeol 16-17 March visited Japan for bilateral summit, bringing curtain down on extended period of bilateral friction in recent years; Japanese PM Kishida called it “major step towards normalizing relations”.

➡ **Taiwan Strait China continued aerial and maritime activity around island, while Taiwan’s President Tsai visited U.S. as Beijing vowed retaliation over possible meeting with U.S. House Speaker.**

China continued military activities in Taiwan Strait. As of 26 March, Taiwan detected 316 Chinese military aircraft entering its Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), of which at least 117 crossed unofficial demarcation “median line” or were detected in south west ADIZ; Taiwan detected 92 Chinese naval vessels in surrounding waters. Taiwan’s defence minister 6 March warned of China’s potential “sudden entry” into areas close to island amid rising tensions. Taiwan 8 March said it suspected Chinese ships of cutting internet cables to outlying Matsu Island.

President Tsai’s stopover in U.S. prompted Beijing’s warnings. Tsai 29 March arrived in U.S., en route to Guatemala and Belize, and is expected to meet U.S. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in early April; Beijing late March threatened “serious confrontation” and to “fight back” if meeting goes ahead, raising prospect of China increasing military or economic pressure on Taiwan. Earlier, U.S. 3 March

approved package for Taiwan worth \$619mn related to F-16 fighter jets. Taiwan 7 March announced \$236mn deal with U.S. arms company to refurbish Taiwan's tank fleet and 18 March \$47.1mn deal with U.S. related to Apache helicopters. U.S. House of Representatives's Committee on Foreign Affairs 1 March approved bill supporting Taiwan's inclusion in International Civil Aviation Organization; U.S. Congress 10 March introduced bill for U.S. to lend or lease material support for Taiwan's national defence.

Beijing emphasised peaceful cross-strait relations, Honduras sought ties with China. Chinese leader Xi Jinping 13 March said peaceful development of cross-strait relations will be actively promoted and vowed to oppose all external interference and Taiwan's separatist activities. Former Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou 27 March began visit to China, making him first former or sitting president to visit mainland. Meanwhile, Honduras – one of 14 states that maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan – 16 March announced it will seek official ties with Beijing, ending recognition of Taiwan. Separately, Taiwan's Election Commission 10 March set general election for 13 Jan 2024.

South Asia

➔ **Afghanistan** **Islamic State's local branch killed Balkh governor in highest-profile attack since Taliban takeover, while Taliban emir exercised his authority with series of edicts.**

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) resumed deadly attacks. With advent of warmer weather, violence appeared to rise as ISKP broke its weeks-long hiatus in attacks, killing head of water supply department in Herat province on 8 March. In highest-profile killing since Taliban's takeover in Aug 2021, ISKP next day conducted suicide bombing inside complex of governor of Balkh province (north), Daud Muzamil, killing Muzamil, who was considered one of emir's close allies and who had previously served as first deputy interior minister. In response to attack, Taliban forces launched several raids against ISKP cells, including in Balkh province. ISKP 27 March conducted suicide attack in capital Kabul, killing six. U.S. Central Command's General Michael Kurilla 16 March told U.S. Congress that ISKP set its sights on Western targets and could launch attack in under six months. Meanwhile, Afghanistan Freedom Front, which claimed several assaults in south in recent months, continued its activities and claimed attacks in capital Kabul and Takhar province (north).

Emir sought curb on cannabis production, corruption and nepotism. Emir 18 March issued edict banning cultivation of cannabis plants countrywide; cultivation of cannabis plants has recently spiked despite Taliban narcotics ban. Emir same day issued two more edicts to combat corruption and nepotism, including that all relatives of senior Taliban leaders who were appointed due to familial relations be removed from their posts. Emir continued to appoint several provincial ulema councils, which have no formal role and acts as conduit between govt and residents of province, marking one of few attempts by authorities to increase provincial decision-making.

Economic and humanitarian crises persisted countrywide. UN Special Representative for Afghanistan Roza Otunbayeva 8 March briefed UN Security Council, stating that two-thirds of population (28mn people) will need humanitarian assistance this year to survive; assistance will cost \$4.62bn – single largest country appeal ever – but it is unlikely that target will be met. UN Security Council 16 March renewed UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan’s mandate for another year.

➡ **Bangladesh Govt and opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) supporters clashed as Islamist groups attacked minority Ahmadiyas, while arson and violence ravaged Rohingya refugee camps.**

Govt and opposition supporters clashed amid sectarian attacks. Violence 11 March broke out between student wings of ruling Awami League and opposition BNP in Moulvibazar district. Forty eminent individuals, including Hilary Clinton and Ban Ki-moon, 8 March urged govt to cease “unfair” attacks against Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus amid investigations by authorities into his businesses. Meanwhile, approximately 7,000-8,000 activists of several Islamist groups, including Islamic Movement, 3-4 March attacked some 8,000 members of minority Muslim Ahmadiya community and their properties during annual three-day gathering in Panchagar district, killing two and injuring at least 50; many ultra-Orthodox groups consider Ahmadiyas non-Muslims.

Arson destroyed thousands of shelters in Cox’s Bazar refugee camp. Fire 5 March broke out in Ukhiya Rohingya refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar, destroying 2,664 shelters, damaging 90 facilities related to health and education, and leaving almost 16,000 refugees without shelter. After several Rohingya leaders alleged that fire was result of sabotage amid feuding between Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army and Rohingya Solidarity Organisation over control of camps, authorities 12 March concluded fire was indeed intentional. Meanwhile, attacks continued in Ukhiya camp: shootings killed camp leader 7 March and volunteer 15 March, and young man was hacked to death 16 March. Myanmar’s regime took small step toward possibly repatriating 1,000 Rohingya refugees (see Myanmar); Human Rights Watch 31 March warned conditions are not “conducive to voluntary, safe, or dignified returns”.

Militant attacks and counter-terror operations continued in Bandarband district. Kuku-Chin National Front (KNF) separatists 11 March shot and injured construction workers in Bandarband. KNF militants next day shot army officer dead and injured two others in Rowangchhari sub-district. Paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion 13 March arrested nine militants of Jama’atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya in Bandarband. In Chittagong district, police 9 March arrested militant of Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh armed group on the run for 17 years in Feni city.

➡ **India Govt discussed disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China, authorities arrested over 100 Sikhs in search for separatist leader, and Maoist violence continued.**

Govt discussed LAC dispute with China on sidelines of G20. FM S. Jaishankar 2 March held bilateral talks with Chinese counterpart Qin Gang at G20 gathering in capital New Delhi; following meeting, S. Jaishankar said talks “focused on addressing current challenges [...] especially peace and tranquillity in the border

areas”, while China said both sides should “work for the regular management of border areas at an early date.” S. Jaishankar 18 March said situation at disputed border remains “very fragile”. Indian army chief Gen. Manoj Pande 27 March said Chinese transgressions along LAC remain “potential trigger” for escalation.

Govt launched major security operations against Sikh separatist leader. Security forces 18 March deployed thousands of paramilitary personnel to Punjab state (north) as part of search operation to arrest leader of outlawed separatist Khalistan movement, Amritpal Singh, who since 2022 has revived calls to establish independent state for Sikhs; police accuse Singh of attempted murder and creating discord in Punjab. Authorities 18-22 March blocked internet access state-wide and arrested around 154 alleged Singh supporters.

Maoist violence persisted in centre and east. In Odisha state (east), Maoists 17 March killed man in Nabarangpur district. In Chhattisgarh state (centre), Maoists 19 March set ablaze around 14 construction vehicles in Kanker district; security forces 21 March killed one Maoist in clashes in Bijapur district; explosive device 27 March killed army officer in Bijapur district; Maoists 28 March killed two villagers in Narayanpur and Sukma districts.

In other important developments. Manipur state (north east) govt 10 March withdrew from 2008 ceasefire agreement with two militant outfits – Kuki National Army and Zoumi Revolutionary Front – citing recent protests and violence. Govt hosted top leaders from Germany, Italy, Australia, Japan and U.S. during month. Court in Gujarat state 23 March sentenced opposition Congress party’s leader Rahul Gandhi to two years in prison for alleged defamation; hundreds of Congress party supporters 27 March took to streets in capital New Delhi to protest ruling.

➔ **India-Pakistan (Kashmir) Tensions persisted between India and Pakistan, security operations continued in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), and Hindu Pandits suspended months-long relocation campaign.**

Tensions persisted between New Delhi and Islamabad. In its annual 2022 report released 13 March, India’s foreign ministry said “Pakistan continues to sponsor cross border terrorism” against India and “restrict normal trade, connectivity and people-to-people exchanges”; report also claimed no decrease in cross-border terrorism, infiltration and illegal smuggling across Kashmir’s Line of Control and international boundary. Indian security forces 10-11 March intercepted two drones, claiming one was carrying arms to Punjab state’s Gurdaspur district and other was carrying drugs to Punjab state’s Amritsar district. UN high commissioner for human rights 7 March noted “worrying human rights situation in Kashmir”; India’s UN ambassador rejected “unwarranted and factually inaccurate portrayal”, rejecting body’s oversight in “an internal affair”.

Security operations persisted in J&K. Security forces 7 March arrested two suspected The Resistance Front (TRF) associates in Baramulla district. Security forces 12 March claimed to have recovered arms, drugs and bomb in Nowshera sector of Jammu’s Rajouri district, and sophisticated weapons, including rockets, in Handwara district; forces next day located cache of arms in Anantang district. Security forces 14 March arrested alleged Lashkar-e-Tayyaba associate in Sopore district, and next day another suspected TRF associate in Baramulla district.

Kashmiri Pandits suspended relocation campaign, opposition parties called for elections. Kashmiri Pandit employees, who had been agitating for over 300 days demanding relocation to Jammu region following targeted attacks on community, 4 March suspended their protest; protester told media, “We were choked financially and our families suffered a lot”. Security forces 1 March killed militant allegedly responsible for late Feb attack that killed Pandit man in Pulwama district. Meanwhile, former chief minister and National Conference President Farooq Abdullah 16 March led delegation of 13 opposition parties in New Delhi and submitted memorandum to Election Commission calling for early Assembly elections in J&K.

➡ **Nepal Senior Nepali Congress leader won presidential election, while protests by Indigenous communities over renaming dispute roiled easternmost province.**

Nepali Congress leader won presidential poll. In presidential election decided by federal and provincial lawmakers, senior Nepali Congress leader Ram Chandra Paudel with support of Maoist-led ruling alliance 9 March secured comfortable victory over candidate nominated by opposition Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), winning more than 64 per cent of votes; lawmakers 17 March elected Ram Sahaya Yadav, leader of ruling alliance member Janata Samajbadi Party, vice president. PM Pushpa Kamal Dahal 31 March reshuffled his cabinet for seventh time in three months, giving leaders from five new parties ministerial portfolios; several key ministries, including foreign affairs, remain vacant due to disagreements among ruling parties.

Official renaming of Province 1 sparked protests by Indigenous communities. Provincial Assembly members of Nepal’s easternmost province (known as Province 1) 1 March decided to rename region Koshi Province, becoming last of Nepal’s seven provinces to adopt official name since provincial system was set up under 2015 constitution. In doing so, Assembly effectively rejected proposals to name province after Indigenous communities residing in region’s hilly districts, which prompted activists of Limbu, Rai and Sherpa communities to hold street protests and shutdowns throughout month; notably, clashes between riot police and protesters in Sunsari district 24 March killed one demonstrator, further fuelling tensions.

↓ **Pakistan Standoff between govt and former PM Imran Khan escalated as unrest roiled capital Islamabad and Lahore, and Election Commission postponed Punjab polls.**

Delayed Punjab polls and tensions between Khan and authorities raised threat of further violence. After Supreme Court 1 March ruled that elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces should be held within 90 days, President Alvi 3 March announced polls in Punjab for 30 April. Govt warned, however, that local polls could disrupt general elections schedule; civilian and military agencies 10-14 March ruled out role in securing polls, citing militant threats and lack of personnel. Election Commission 22 March delayed Punjab polls till 8 Oct, citing security concerns. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa governor 24 March informed elections body that his province’s polls should also be delayed to same date. Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) 26 March asked Supreme Court to overrule Election Commission’s

order; any court decision against elections body could fuel political tensions and have constitutional implications. Meanwhile, amid mounting tensions, police acting on warrant 6 and 13 March sought to arrest Khan at his residence in Lahore, but Khan's supporters prevented entry and clashed with police, injuring over 60 officers. Khan 18 March attended Islamabad court alongside 4,000 PTI activists, who fought with police, leaving over 50 officers injured; unrest forced judge to adjourn case. Khan 19 March claimed he narrowly avoided assassination outside court. Khan 25 March addressed large-scale rally in Lahore, accusing govt of attempting to stop his return to power.

Pakistan Taliban continued attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Pakistani Taliban targeted police escorting census teams, killing one officer in Dera Ismail district 9 March. Group 13 March killed two officers in attacks in Tank and Lakki Marwat district. Governor of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 14 March highlighted challenges for polls, including "inconclusive reconciliation process" with Pakistani Taliban. In Balochistan province, Islamic State's regional franchise 6 March killed nine police officers in Bolan district.

Govt deepened cooperation with U.S. Following counter-terrorism dialogue in Islamabad 6-7 March, foreign ministry said govt and U.S. would enhance collaboration to counter regional threats.

➡ **Sri Lanka International Monetary Fund (IMF) authorised bailout loan, granting govt access to international lines of credit, while postponement of local polls continued to fuel political tensions.**

IMF approved bailout loan amid strikes and protests over hardship. Executive Board of IMF 20 March formally approved Extended Fund Facility bailout package, paving way for release of first of nine tranches totalling \$3bn, and additional lending from World Bank, Asian Development Bank and bilateral donors; decision followed debt-restructuring assurance given by China on 6 March. President Wickremesinghe 22 March presented agreement to parliament and discussed difficult debt-restructuring negotiations. Austerity policies mandated in part by IMF continued to provoke strikes and protest during month. Notably, public sector staff at hospitals, banks and ports 1 March walked out in protest of newly enacted income tax hikes amid soaring living costs. Nationwide strike reportedly backed by opposition National People's Power took place 15 March.

Dispute over local polls' postponement prompted opposition. After local polls initially scheduled for 9 March were postponed last month due to govt's refusal to provide funds, Supreme Court 3 March issued restraining order preventing treasury chief and Wickremesinghe in his capacity as finance minister from "withholding funds allocated in the 2023 budget for the purpose of conducting local government polls"; multiple court challenges followed as govt failed to comply with Supreme Court's order. Bar Association of Sri Lanka 11 March expressed "grave concern" over undermining judiciary's independence. Responding to protests against postponement last month, Core Group members of UN Human Rights Council 7 March expressed "concerns over heavy-handed responses to peaceful protests".

Govt unveiled alternative to controversial prevention of terrorism act. Govt 22 March published "Anti-Terrorism Act" – long-awaited draft law designed to replace

much-criticised Prevention of Terrorism Act – that was quickly condemned by local and international human rights organisations for over-broad definition of terrorism and expanded executive powers of detention and proscription. FM Ali Sabry and Justice Minister Dr. Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe 21-25 March undertook “fact-finding” visit to South Africa to study country’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, amid rising expectations govt will initiate its own process in coming months.

South East Asia

➔ **Myanmar** **Military continued alleged abuses against civilians and resistance, while regime disbanded political parties ahead of possible election and took step toward small-scale Rohingya repatriation.**

Military faced allegations of abuses and civilian massacres. Daily accusations surfaced against military, particularly in Dry Zone region. Notably, National Unity Govt 6 March highlighted alleged atrocities committed by military late Feb, such as beheading of two teenage boys and massacre of at least 14 people, including several women who were first sexually abused. In Shan State, regime 11 March raided Nam Neint village in southern Pinlaung township following clashes since 24 Feb, torching homes and launching airstrikes to counter attempted resistance offensive; soldiers reportedly massacred 21-28 people. Regime spokesperson Zaw Min Tun denied civilian killings. Concurrent reports of abuses, albeit fewer, by resistance groups surfaced.

Regime disbanded National League for Democracy (NLD) and dozens of other parties. Ahead of possibly elections that regime appears intent on holding between Nov and Jan, eight new political parties as of 26 March applied to register under new Political Party Registration law, with 44 existing parties applying to remain registered; of eight parties that won more than single seat in 2020, only four have re-registered. Regime 28 March disbanded NLD and 39 other parties after not registering; NLD 3 March expelled four senior members for “disrespecting the public’s will” and “cooperating with the dictator” amid intra-party divisions over whether to contest election or support armed struggle against regime.

Regime took small step toward possibly repatriating Rohingya refugees. Regime 8 March brought ambassadors from China, India, Bangladesh and regional bloc ASEAN to Sittwe and Maungdaw reception facilities in northern Rakhine State in pilot project aiming to repatriate some 1,000 Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh.

China stepped up diplomatic overtures, U.S. imposed sanctions. Chinese Special Envoy to Myanmar Deng Xijun 6 March met leader Min Aung Hlaing to discuss regime’s negotiations with ethnic armed groups and other issues. Chinese Ambassador Chen Hai next day met Union Election Commission in capital Naypyitaw to discuss election preparations. Meanwhile, U.S. 2 March sanctioned three Myanmar entities for providing surveillance technology to regime.

➔ **Philippines** **Govt launched security operation against Islamist militants in south, as deadly hostilities continued with Communist militants.**

In south, military launched operations against militants amid ongoing surrenders. Insecurity persisted in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Suspected Bangsamoro Islamic Liberation Front (BIFF) militants 22 March shot and killed two soldiers in Mamasapano town, Maguindanao del Sur province. Govt forces next day commenced operation against Moro armed fighters allegedly linked to Islamic State faction under Almoben Silud on boundary of Maguindanao del Sur and Cotabato provinces, killing two militants and injuring four as of 24 March. Meanwhile, in Sulu province, more than 20 Abu Sayyaf Group fighters and sympathisers 5 March surrendered to military in Indanan town; six more 15 March surrendered in Patikul town. Seven BIFF members same day surrendered in Buayan village, Datu Piang town, Maguindanao del Sur.

Clashes between military and communist rebels led to school closures. Military operations and some militant ambushes by communist New People's Army (NPA) in Mindanao Island in south, Visayas Islands in centre and Luzon Island in north killed at least 15 combatants and civilians and wounded eight; NPA operations may be linked to group's anniversary on 29 March. Notably, clash 22 March saw suspension of in-person school classes in four towns in Masbate province.

Marawi authorities announced infrastructure plan. Department of Human Settlements and Urban Development 20 March said at least 18 structures worth 200mn pesos were set to be established in Marawi City, including health centre and transport terminal, as part of reconstruction efforts five years after conflict.

► **South China Sea Maritime tensions persisted as China asserted presence in disputed waters, U.S. and Philippines held joint drills and negotiations resumed between Beijing and regional bloc ASEAN.**

Chinese vessels maintained presence in disputed waters. Over 40 alleged Chinese maritime militia, naval and coast guard vessels 4-7 March lingered in vicinity of Philippine-administered Thitu/Pag-asa Island, with vessels lingering in area thereafter. Media reports early March said Philippines had intensified patrols in area and increased efforts to document and publicise assertive Chinese behaviour; Manilla late Feb said it was discussing joint coast guard patrols with U.S. in South China Sea (SCS). Beijing and Philippines 23 March held in-person consultations in Manilla to discuss range of issues. Meanwhile, Chinese research vessel *Haiyang Dizhi 4* 15 March lingered in Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) for over 17 hours; local think-tank South China Sea Chronicle Initiative claimed Chinese vessels had been operating within Vietnam's EEZ. U.S. navy vessel *USS Milius* 23 March sailed near Paracel Islands; China claimed it warned away warship but U.S. denied that account.

Philippines and U.S. conducted exercises, AUKUS unveiled plans. Manilla and Washington 13 March began three-week "Salaknib" joint exercises involving over 3,000 Philippine and U.S. soldiers, ahead of largest ever "Balikatan" joint drills set for 11-28 April involving 17,600 participants. Meanwhile, Australia, UK and U.S. – as part of trilateral security pact AUKUS – 13 March announced pathway for Australia to acquire up to eight nuclear-powered submarines in coming decades.

ASEAN-China negotiations resumed. Member states of regional bloc ASEAN and China 8-10 March met to negotiate SCS Code of Conduct, setting aim to conduct

security hotline exercise this year to prevent accidental collisions. Japan 13 March launched hotline with ASEAN member states to communicate on security issues.

➔ **Thailand** **Activists ended two month-long hunger strike, king dissolved parliament ahead of May election, while insecurity persisted in deep south.**

Activists concluded hunger strike, as country prepared for May election. Activists Tantawan Tuatulanon and Orawan Phuphong 10 March ended 52-day hunger strike that demanded release of suspects detained on lèse-majesté charges and to reform lèse-majesté and sedition laws. Meanwhile, *Royal Gazette* 20 March announced King Maha Vajiralongkorn had endorsed decree to dissolve parliament; Election Commission next day announced 14 May as date of next general election.

Militant attacks persisted in deep south. In Narathiwat province, militants 2 March threw grenades and fired small arms at army outpost in Si Sakhon district, with no casualties; 50kg IED – twice as large as devices typically used by militants – next day targeted four-vehicle convoy some 800m from outpost, killing two officers and wounding one. In Pattani province, assailants 8 March torched two vehicles belonging to emergency medical services provider in Yaring district. Woman 11 March found IED beneath her mother's vehicle in Mayo district; police officers removed device with no casualties.