



CrisisWatch 2023 – April Trends and May Alerts

Asia

North East Asia

➔ **China/Japan** China continued maritime presence in Japan's territorial waters as sides held talks in Tokyo, where both aired grievances and pledged to establish hotline.

Chinese maritime presence continued. As of 27 April, Japan detected 103 Chinese vessels inside Japan's contiguous zone during month, while 11 vessels were detected within Japan's territorial sea. Japan 19 April protested China's "extremely regrettable" actions to launch weather satellite despite risk of falling debris in East China Sea and for announcing no-fly zones in area.

Tokyo and Beijing held maritime talks. Japan and China 10 April held first in-person maritime talks in Japanese capital Tokyo since 2019. Japan underlined importance of peace in Taiwan Strait, urged Beijing to stop its coastguard ships entering Japanese waters, expressed concerns about Beijing's military activity near Japan and its coordination with Russia, and protested against China's construction of two new structures in East China Sea discovered last year. For their part, Chinese officials criticised Japan's recent "negative moves" regarding East and South China Seas, disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and Taiwan Strait and demanded Tokyo stop "all words and deeds" that violate China's territorial sovereignty, undermine its maritime rights and interests, and meddle in Taiwan issue. In positive step, China and Japan made progress on setting up hotline to resolve maritime disputes; China pledged to speed up its use while Japanese media reports suggested hotline could begin operating as early as spring this year.

In other important developments. In joint statement, G7 18 April expressed concerns over situation of East and South China seas, and urged China to abstain from threats, coercion, intimidation, or use of force; China reacted harshly, accusing G7 of interfering in its internal affairs and issued demarche to Japan, which hosted G7 summit.

➔ **Korean Peninsula** North Korea claimed successful solid fuel missile test and hinted at satellite launch, U.S. and South Korea boosted alliance with new accord, and Yellow Sea incident highlighted maritime tensions.

North Korea continued missile tests and indicated impending satellite launch. North Korea 13 April successfully carried out what it said was its first-ever flight test of solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) Hwasong-18, marking potentially significant milestone in regime's efforts to shield country's missile forces

from pre-emptive attack. Meanwhile, leader Kim Jong Un 18 April reaffirmed Pyongyang's intention to launch what country calls "military reconnaissance satellite" in coming months, which is one of Kim's five military priorities announced in Jan 2021. Kim's remarks implied that satellite launch could be timed to coincide with U.S.-South Korea military drills in June marking 70th anniversary of alliance; statement followed North Korean claim on 5 March that it had developed powerful rocket engine that could guarantee successful satellite launch but satellite imagery suggested that construction work continues at main North Korean rocket launch site Sohae, likely ruling out imminent launch.

U.S. and South Korea boosted alliance with "Washington Declaration". In first state visit to U.S., President Yoon met President Biden in Washington where pair 26 April unveiled new steps to bolster their alliance as 70th anniversary approaches: sides established new group to consult on nuclear planning akin to NATO mechanism, Biden reaffirmed commitment to extended deterrence and agreed to deploy nuclear submarine to south, and sides pledged to expand training and exercises; Yoon reaffirmed country's commitment to nuclear non-proliferation following comments earlier this year suggesting interest in seeking nuclear weapons. In response to G7 statement on 18 April that called for North Korea to dismantle its nuclear capabilities, North Korean FM Choi Son Hui 21 April insisted on permanence and non-negotiability of country's nuclear deterrent.

South Korea responded to North Korean maritime incursion. South Korean navy vessel 15 April broadcast warnings and fired ten warning shots as North Korean patrol boat that crossed Northern Limit Line – de facto maritime border that Pyongyang refuses to recognise – near South Korea's Baengnyeong Island in Yellow Sea, before North's vessel retreated.

➔ **Taiwan Strait China launched three-day military drills in response to meeting between President Tsai and U.S. House Speaker, fuelling temporary uptick in tensions.**

China launched military drills as President Tsai met Speaker McCarthy. Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen 5 April met with U.S. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California, where both reaffirmed strong partnership between countries. In response, China 8-10 April held military exercises around Taiwan; notably, Taiwan 10 April recorded 91 Chinese military aircraft and 12 naval ships around island, with record high 54 aircraft crossing unofficial demarcation "median line". China's reaction was relatively muted in comparison to military drills held in response to Speaker Pelosi's visit in Aug 2022. Chinese military activity continued during month: as of 28 April, Taiwan detected 548 Chinese military aircraft in its air defence identification zone (ADIZ) and recorded 148 sightings of Chinese vessels in surrounding waters. French Navy frigate 8-10 April and U.S. guided missile destroyer 16 April transited Taiwan Strait; U.S. Navy P8-A Poseidon patrol plane 28 April flew through strait.

China protested U.S. support for Taiwan, Europe debated its role. China 14 April announced sanctions on U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee chair Michael McCaul for his recent visit to Taiwan. Beijing 19 April opposed Taiwan's purchase of 400 Harpoon missiles from U.S. Following his state visit to China 5-8 April, French President Macron triggered controversy with remarks that France and Europe

should not be drawn into conflict over Taiwan by U.S.; German FM Annalena Baerbock 13 April said conflict over Taiwan will have disastrous consequences and Europe cannot afford to be indifferent.

Former Taiwanese president concluded historic China visit, Taiwan's election campaigning picked up speed. Former Taiwanese President and opposition party Kuomintang member Ma Ying-Jeou 27 March-7 April visited China, becoming first former or current Taiwanese leader to visit mainland China since civil war; trip highlighted different approaches of Taiwan's two main political parties with regards to cross-strait relations ahead of presidential election slated for Jan 2024. Meanwhile, Foxconn founder Terry Gou 18 April announced bid to become Kuomintang's presidential candidate, while current Taiwan VP William Lai was officially confirmed as ruling Democratic Progressive Party's candidate.

South Asia

► **Afghanistan Taliban battled Islamic State's local branch and resistance groups, humanitarian appeal faced funding shortfall amid threat of famine, and Taliban pursued regional engagement.**

Taliban continued crackdown on Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and raids on resistance groups. After Taliban late March allegedly killed ISKP's number two and group conducted suicide bombing in capital Kabul, Taliban 1 April announced it had imprisoned approximately 1,700 ISKP fighters and killed over 1,100 since its takeover in 2021. U.S. officials 25 April announced that Taliban had killed ISKP mastermind behind 2021 Kabul airport bombing, which claimed lives of estimated 170 Afghans and 13 American troops. Taliban security forces 11 April announced killing of two top Afghanistan Freedom Front commanders in raid in Parwan province (north). National Resistance Front (NRF) spokesman 8 April announced his resignation, hinting at group's fragmentation. NRF leader Ahmad Massoud 24 April attended anti-Taliban leaders meeting in Austrian capital Vienna.

UN sounded alarm of famine amid serious lack of funding. World Food Programme during month reiterated warning that country is at highest risk of famine in quarter century and its food distributions will dramatically decrease in coming months before ceasing altogether in June unless new funds are pledged. Prospect of additional funding, however, diminished after Taliban authorities 5 April banned UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan from employing Afghan women, effectively extending NGO ban on female employment; UN warned that unless ban is lifted, it might be unable to continue operations, and UN Security Council 27 April unanimously condemned ban. Meanwhile, Ministry of Finance 9 April announced it had generated approximately \$2.2bn in revenue in last fiscal year, increase of 37% from previous year, likely due to rise in exports.

Taliban remained active on diplomatic front amid tensions with Pakistan. Russia 3 April reopened its consulate in Balkh province (north). Taliban 16 April claimed Kazakhstan was ready to accept Taliban diplomats following meeting with Kazakhstan's Deputy PM in Kabul. Taliban FM Amir Khan Muttaqi 13 April attended Fourth Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan's Neighbours in Uzbekistan's Samarkand city, where China, Iran, Pakistan and Russia expressed concern over

rising security threats in Afghanistan. Pakistani defence minister 13 April warned Pakistan would target Pakistani Taliban hideouts inside Afghanistan (see Pakistan).

➡ **Bangladesh** **Violent clashes continued between govt and opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) supporters, while insecurity persisted in Rohingya refugee camps and Chittagong Hill Tracts.**

Violence continued as BNP continued countrywide anti-govt campaign. BNP Sec-Gen 8 April urged Awami League govt to resign if it “wants to avoid conflicts”; in response, FM AK Abdul Momen ruled out dialogue ahead of Jan 2024 election. BNP continued anti-govt protests during month, notably staging sit-ins in 13 cities and around 650 other locations on 8 April to highlight ten-point demands, which include govt resignation and parliament’s dissolution; police and Awami League supporters same day clashed with protesters in Natore district, injuring scores. Suspected Awami League student supporters 7 April ransacked BNP office south of capital Dhaka. Assailants 13 April hacked to death BNP official in Chapainawabganj district in northwest. Dhaka court 13 April finalised corruption charges against BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman and his wife. Following series of fires in Dhaka markets, PM Sheikh Hasina 15 April requested authorities investigate potential BNP involvement in attempt to “cripple the economy”.

Insecurity and food aid concerns persisted in Rohingya refugee camps. Security forces 11 and 14 April killed two Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) local commanders in Ukhiya camps. Residents blamed ARSA for 15 April killing of camp leader in Ukhiya. Border Guards 25 April announced record 22kg seizure of crystal methamphetamine in Cox’s Bazar area from Myanmar. Myanmar authorities 3 April said only 56,000 of 87,000 Rohingya who Bangladesh had proposed for repatriation had previously lived in Myanmar, heightening concerns Naypyitaw is unwilling to take back significant proportion of estimated 1.2mn Rohingya in Bangladesh. Washington 11 April announced \$23.8mn in urgent aid to Rohingya refugees, amid World Food Programme’s funding shortfall.

Deadly clashes erupted between armed groups in Chittagong Hill Tracts. Authorities 7 April found bodies of eight members of Bawm ethnic minority – a Kuki-Chin subgroup – in Rawangchhari area; Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF) claimed seven were its members and blamed rival group for deaths, as police believed victims were killed in gunfight previous day that forced 250 people to flee. KNF and United People’s Democratic Front (UPDF) 25 April reportedly clashed in Bandarban district.

➡ **India (non-Kashmir)** **Tensions with China remained elevated over border dispute, while Maoists conducted deadly attack in centre.**

Border dispute with China remained prominent as Beijing named disputed areas. China’s civil affairs ministry 2 April issued list of “standardised” names for 11 locations in areas claimed and administered by India as part of Arunachal Pradesh state (north east), marking Beijing’s third attempt since 2017 to rename places under Indian administration and control; govt 4 April rejected move “outright”. Home Minister Amit Shah 10 April visited Arunachal Pradesh to launch \$585mn development scheme to bolster security of disputed border, in response to Chinese initiatives to develop villages along Line of Actual Control (LAC). After meeting Indian counterpart in New Delhi, Chinese defence minister 27 April remarked

border was “stable overall”, while Indian statement said Beijing had eroded “entire basis” of relations.

Maoist violence continued in centre. In Chhattisgarh state (centre), Maoists 18 April attacked Legislative Assembly member in Bijapur district, who escaped unhurt; earlier same day, security forces killed Maoist and captured two during operation in Bijapur forests. Maoist IED 26 April killed ten security forces personnel and one civilian in Chhattisgarh’s Dantewada district. In Jharkhand state (east), Maoists declared 14-15 April shutdown after security forces killed five Maoists in Chatra district 3 April. Police 18 April arrested member of pro-Maoist organisation People’s Liberation Front of India from Jharkhand.

In other important developments. At 17 April India-Russia business dialogue in capital New Delhi and amid bilateral free trade agreement talks, FM S. Jaishankar said relations with Russia remained steady and suggested ties could expand further, reiterating that “we share a commitment to a multi-polar world” and “multi-polar Asia”.

➔ **India-Pakistan (Kashmir) Pakistan protested India’s plans to host G20 meeting in May in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), while militants conducted deadliest attack since 2021, raising prospect of further attacks around summit.**

Tensions persisted between New Delhi and Islamabad ahead of G20 meeting. Pakistan 11 April expressed “strong indignation” over India’s plans to host G20 summit in J&K’s capital Srinagar on 10-12 May, claiming India hoped to divert attention from its suppression of Kashmiris and accusing India of “self-serving measures to perpetuate its illegal occupation of Jammu and Kashmir”; militants may seek to stage attacks before or during summit of tourism ministers to garner international attention and spoil govt’s ambition to demonstrate its claimed success in restoring peace and order in valley. In response to comments by former J&K governor Satya Pal Malik on 15 April that Feb 2019 Pulwama suicide attack was result of intelligence failures, Pakistani foreign ministry next day said “his disclosures demonstrate how the Indian leadership has habitually used the bogey of terrorism from Pakistan to advance false victimhood narrative and the Hindutva agenda clearly for domestic political gains”; remarks came as opposition lawmakers questioned status of inquiry into attack. Indian border security forces 9 April exchanged fire with Pakistani intruders, claiming to have killed one and arrested two in Poonch district near Line of Control.

Insecurity persisted in J&K as militants staged deadly attack. In deadliest attack since Oct 2021, militants 20 April assaulted army truck in southern Rajouri sector of Kashmir, killing five soldiers and wounding one; attack, for which militants appeared to use NATO ammunition left behind in Afghanistan, cast shadow over G20 meeting next month. Earlier, security forces claimed to have arrested Laskhar-e-Tayyaba sympathiser in Bandipore district on 5 April and two Laskhar-e-Tayyaba militants in Baramulla district on 11 April.

➔ **Pakistan Constitutional crisis over Punjab election dispute fuelled tensions between govt and Supreme Court, while security forces ramped up operations against militants in north west.**

Tensions mounted between govt and Supreme Court over Punjab polls. Supreme Court 4 April fixed Punjab provincial polls for 14 May, ruling that Election Commission's decision last month to delay vote until 8 Oct was "unconstitutional"; former PM Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party welcomed ruling, while PM Sharif called it "mockery" of constitution and rejected order to prepare for polls. National Assembly during month repeatedly rejected govt bill to allocate election funds. Compounding dispute, President Alvi (PTI member) 9 April rejected govt bill to limit Supreme Court chief justice's powers; parliament next day, however, adopted bill but before it was enacted into law on 21 April, Supreme Court headed by chief justice 13 April halted bill – marking first time in Pakistan's legislative history that court blocked law yet to be enacted. Parliament 14 April passed another bill granting right of appeal in specific cases. Further deepening controversy, defence ministry 18 April urged court to permit nationwide elections on 8 Oct; Supreme Court next day dismissed request and warned govt of "serious consequences" if funds and security were not provided. Court 20 April asked major parties to reach consensus within week on date for nationwide elections but backed down on deadline 27 April after National Assembly speaker 26 April denounced judicial interference. PM Sharif 27 April won vote of confidence, strengthening govt's position as negotiations same day began with PTI on election date.

Govt ramped up military operations against militants in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. National Security Council 7 April reportedly agreed to launch "all-out comprehensive operation" against "terrorism". Notably, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, two military operations 5 and 15 April killed 18 militants in South Waziristan, leaving three soldiers dead. Gun battle with militants 9 April killed soldier in North Waziristan. Militants 23 April killed senior ex-army officer in Lakki Marwat district.

Relations remained strained with Kabul. Defence minister 12 April criticised Kabul's failure in "stopping the use of their territory in attacks on Pakistan", warning of resorting to "some measures wherever [terrorists] are".

➔ **Sri Lanka Govt engaged international lenders on economic recovery amid strikes against austerity, while govt's new "anti-terrorism" powers provoked widespread opposition.**

Govt discussed plans for economic recovery with international stakeholders. International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank 10-16 April held annual meetings in Washington, U.S., where govt and Central Bank officials met wide range of international lenders and development agencies. Finance ministers of Japan, India and France 13 April announced formation of committee of bilateral creditor govts to pursue debt restructuring negotiations with Sri Lanka; Japan said negotiation platform was open to all creditors and expressed hope China – Sri Lanka's largest bilateral creditor – would join amid concern over its absence. Private bondholders met officials on reworking over \$12bn in outstanding bonds.

Parliament approved IMF recovery plans amid strike action. Parliament 26-28 April debated and approved non-binding resolution to support implementation of IMF's Extended Fund Facility; largest opposition party abstained. In response to possible strike action by teachers, President Wickremesinghe 19 April threatened to use emergency powers to declare education essential service, where strikes are

banned, and initiate legal action against teachers; Wickremesinghe 17 April declared power, fuel, postal and health as essential public services.

Govt paused controversial Anti-Terrorism Act, following strong domestic and international reaction. Govt postponed bill's introduction and promised consultation on legislation that would establish exceptionally broad definition of terrorism and grant executive and security agencies unprecedented powers of arrest and proscription; bill has been denounced as attack on democratic rights by international and national human rights groups and faced reported diplomatic backlash from Western govts. Tamil political parties 25 April organised one-day general strike in Tamil areas to protest bill as well as "Sinhalisation" of Muslim and Tamil-majority areas in north and east, amid increasing allegations of govt-supported land grabs.

In other important developments. U.S. State Dept 26 April sanctioned former navy commander W. Karannagoda for his alleged role in abduction and murder of 11 Tamil and Muslim men in final years of civil war. Country 21 April commemorated fourth anniversary of Easter Sunday suicide bombings amid widespread protests and senior Catholic officials criticising perceived lack of justice and proper investigation.

South East Asia

↓ Indonesia Separatist fighters in Papua region killed four Indonesian soldiers amid operation to liberate kidnapped New Zealand pilot.

Separatists launched deadly ambush on soldiers in Papua. Members of West Papua National Liberation Army (TPNPB) – military wing of Free Papua Organisation – 16 April claimed ambush killed nine soldiers in remote, mountainous regency of Nduga, Papua province, where group in Feb kidnapped New Zealand pilot Philip Mehrstens. Indonesian armed forces 20 April confirmed that separatist attack on 36 military personnel searching for Mehrstens had killed four soldiers and wounded five, with one unaccounted for. Amnesty International 18 April expressed concern that military had raised operational status in Nduga to "combat alert", citing heightened safety risks for civilians and pilot; Amnesty noted that "the potential for human rights violations with fatalities is also getting bigger". In video released by TPNPB in late April, Mehrstens confirmed "I'm still alive – I am healthy"; TPNPB urged New Zealand to mediate and demanded security forces cease operations in region.

Security forces killed suspected jihadists in shootout in Sumatra. Counter-terrorism police 12 April killed two suspected militants of outlawed al-Qaeda-linked group Jemaah Islamiyah in gunfire exchange in Lampung province in southern Sumatra Island, part of broader crackdown on group amid reports that it is training and recruiting new members.

➔ Myanmar Regime launched deadly airstrikes as ethnic armed groups and resistance forces staged ambushes in north and southeast; authorities agreed to possible small-scale Rohingya repatriation and sentenced activists.

In north, regime airstrikes killed scores amid resistance ambushes. Continuing series of deadly airstrikes in late March, military 10 April bombed school in Chin National Defence Force (CNDP)-controlled Falam township, killing at least 11. Military next day conducted devastating air attacks during resistance ceremony in Kanbalu township, Sagaing region, killing at least 170, mostly civilians; UN human rights chief Volker Türk reiterated regime violations “may constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes”. Meanwhile, armed groups in Chin state stepped up lethal ambushes on military convoys: notably, Chin National Front 2 April attacked convoy between Falam and Hakha townships, inflicting casualties.

In southeast, heavy fighting resurged along Asian Highway, displacing thousands. People’s Defence Forces (PDF) and allied groups, including Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), late March began ambushes on regime outposts and along highway connecting to Thailand, claiming to have killed dozens of regime forces. Notably, KNLA-PDF “Cobra Column” 3-4 April inflicted heavy casualties in ambush on military truck and police station in Myawaddy. Fighting spread northward, as KNLA and resistance 5 April destroyed two Kayin State Border Guard outposts near Shwe Kokko town; clashes over subsequent week inflicted heavy casualties and forced 4,000 people to flee into Thailand.

Regime agreed to possible small-scale Rohingya repatriation, courts sentenced activists. Following months of negotiations, State Administration Council 3 April declared Myanmar would accept 1,100 Rohingya Muslim refugees and 300 Hindu refugees from Bangladesh; regime confirmed only 56,000 out of 87,000 refugees on list sent by Bangladesh (see Bangladesh). Meanwhile, court 6 April sentenced activist Wai Moe Naing to 34 years imprisonment and next day sentenced Kachin National Consultative Assembly leader Reverend Hkalam Samson to six years in prison.

Regime cemented ties to China and Russia. Senior Chinese official Wang Ning 2 April oversaw signing of agriculture, health and energy agreements with regime in capital Naypyitaw. Regime leader Min Aung Hlaing 3 April conferred honorary Thiri Pyanchi title on Russia’s deputy defence minister.

➔ **Philippines Sporadic violence and militant surrenders continued in south, while fighting persisted between Communist militants and military.**

Insecurity persisted in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and adjacent areas. Police 12 April conducted law enforcement operation in Tulunan town, Cotabato province, killing five private militia members. In Sultan Kudarat province, IED 17 April wounded seven passengers in Isulan municipality bus terminal; armed forces same day said blast site evidence showed explosives were consistent with those used by Mindanao-based and Islamic State-inspired group Dawlah Islamiyah. Security forces 19 April killed one Dawlah Islamiyah member in Pagayawan town, Lanao del Sur province. Unidentified gunman 17 April killed Datu Salibo town councillor Demson Silongan. Two Moro Islamic Liberation Front commanders from 118 Base Command 19 April clashed in Dabenayan village, killing two civilians. Unidentified assailants same day killed Maguindanao Electric Cooperative manager in Datu Odin Sinsuat town, Maguindanao del Norte. Militant surrenders continued; notably, two Abu Sayyaf Group members 12 April surrendered to military in Zamboanga City.

Clashes continued between Communist rebels and military. 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 21 combatants and civilians; military in April claimed it had dismantled two of four remaining Communist fronts in Samar Island, rebels' last bastion. Communist Party of the Philippines 20 April confirmed deaths of party leaders Benito Tiamzon and Wilma Austria-Tiamzon in Aug 2022 in Samar Island, Visayas; party disputed military report that both were killed in boat explosion during encounter with military forces, alleging couple was tortured, killed, and dumped on boat that later detonated.

➡ South China Sea U.S. and Philippines expanded defence cooperation and conducted largest-ever joint military drills, while tensions continued between Manilla and Beijing.

U.S. and Philippines deepened defence ties amid large-scale exercises. Philippines 3 April announced location of four additional sites accessible to U.S. forces under Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement; three sites are situated in north, facing Taiwan. Announcement prompted local concern, as Cagayan provincial governor said U.S. presence could make areas a "magnet for an attack in case a war erupts". U.S. and Philippines 11-28 April held 38th annual Balikatan exercises in largest-ever iteration and 11 April agreed to complete roadmap on delivery of U.S. defence assistance over next 5-10 years, and to finalise plans for combined maritime activities, including joint sails in SCS; pair also expressed concern over China's land reclamation activities in Spratly Islands. USS Milius 10 April entered within 12 nautical miles of China-controlled Mischief Reef in Spratly Islands; U.S. Nimitz Carrier Strike Group 17 April operated in SCS en route to Thailand. Earlier, Japan 5 April revealed new guidelines to strengthen militaries of "like-minded countries", with Philippines set to be among first beneficiaries, amid reports of possible U.S.-Japan-Philippines security framework.

Tensions persisted between Manilla and Beijing amid regional diplomacy. China's ambassador to Philippines 14 April said Philippines should oppose "Taiwan independence" rather than expanding U.S. access; Marcos 22 April met Chinese FM Qin Gang and pledged to "establish more lines of communication". Philippine Coast Guard late month claimed more than 100 Chinese vessels were spotted nearby 18-24 April, and 28 April reported near collision between its patrol vessels and Chinese navy ship. Following his first official trip to China, Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim 3 April said Beijing expressed concern over Malaysian energy activities in SCS and next day stated Malaysia is prepared to negotiate with Beijing over dispute, prompting domestic political backlash. Malaysian foreign ministry 8 April clarified govt's commitment to its own "sovereign rights and interests" in SCS. U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken 15 April met Vietnamese leader Nguyen Phu Trong in Vietnamese capital Hanoi in visit aimed at bolstering ties.

↓ Thailand Militants in deep south stepped up attacks, casting shadow over dialogue process; meanwhile, country geared up for May general election that could oust establishment parties.

Security deteriorated in deep south amid surge in militant attacks. Militants escalated violence, including with platoon-strength assaults on defence outposts rarely attempted in recent years. In Yala province, some 20 insurgents 9 April

attacked security outpost in Muang district with pipe bombs, grenades and small arms. In Narathiwat province, motorcycle gunmen 9 April killed Muslim defence volunteer in Tak Bai district; militants 13 April attacked security outpost in Sungai Padi district with pipe bombs and assault rifles, wounding three police officers. In Pattani province, IED attack 19 April wounded eight police officers in two-vehicle patrol in Saiburi district. Militants 14 April conducted near-simultaneous attacks in six locations across Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala, including: IED explosion on bridge in Muang; assault on security outpost in Reusoh district, Narathiwat; drive-by shooting on security outpost at Wat Chang railway station in Khok Pho district, Pattani; pipe bomb strike on ranger outpost in Raman district, Yala; and small arms assault on police at Cho Airong railway station, Narathiwat. Escalation comes after main separatist group Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) had advised Malaysian facilitator, following sixth round of Peace Dialogue Process in Feb, that it was suspending participation in dialogue until new Thai govt enters office after May general election.

Preparation for May elections continued. Ahead of 14 May general election, main opposition party Pheu Thai and progressive Future Forward Party led public opinion polls, dampening prospects for establishment parties led by incumbent leaders PM Prayuth Chan-ocha and Deputy PM Prawit Wongsuwan; convincing victory for opposition parties will complicate efforts by establishment parties to form new govt to preserve political status quo.