



Asia

North East Asia

➔ **China/Japan** Amid Chinese maritime presence in East China Sea, Japan lodged protests and resorted to new hotline; G7 expressed concern over region, while Tokyo strengthened defence ties to Europe.

Japan protested and used military hotline amid China's maritime activity. As of 28 May, Japan spotted 98 Chinese vessels in its contiguous zone and 12 ships inside its territorial sea. Notably, Japan 11 May lodged diplomatic protests with Beijing over Chinese intrusions around Japan-controlled and disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in East China Sea, as two Chinese coast guard ships passed within 12-mile limit and remained in waters for some 35 hours in 13th such incident in 2023; Chinese navy flotilla same day sailed through Miyako Strait and waters between Japan's Okinawa Islands. Japan 16 May for first time used military hotline established with China in March to discuss East China Sea. Tokyo 8 May announced that Japanese forces will deploy surface-to-air guided PAC-3 missiles at its base on Miyako Island in Okinawa Prefecture, citing North Korean ballistic missile threats (see Korean Peninsula); given proximity to Taiwan, however, observers questioned if deployment is also aimed at countering threat of China's missiles.

G7 voiced concerns over East China Sea, Japan courted ties with NATO and UK. During G7 summit in Japan, leaders in joint communique 20 May said they "remain seriously concerned about the situation in the East and South China Seas" and "strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion." After reports early month revealed NATO intended to open liaison office in Japan and pair will upgrade cooperation ahead of NATO summit in July, China 4 May said alliance's "eastward foray" will "inevitably undermine regional peace and stability". UK and Japan 18 May signed "Hiroshima Accord", described as "enhanced global strategic partnership" aimed at strengthening cooperation in broad range of areas, including defence.

➔ 🌐* **Korean Peninsula** North Korea began attempts to launch satellite as U.S. and South Korea started large-scale drills in run-up to alliance anniversary, raising tensions and risk of miscalculation in June.

Pyongyang attempted satellite launch, U.S. and South Korea began largest ever live drills. Pyongyang 28 May announced plans for launch of military reconnaissance satellite between 31 May and 11 June, one of leader Kim Jong-un's five military priorities announced in Jan 2021; Japan's defence ministry warned it would take "destructive measures" if ballistic or other missiles used for launch "land in our territory". In Pyongyang's first launch attempt 31 May, rocket crashed off west coast;

Pyongyang vowed second attempt. Concurrently, U.S. and South Korean forces 25 May began largest-ever live-fire drills close to North Korean border, commencing period of military exercises extending into June to mark 70th anniversary of alliance. Heightened activity on peninsula in June could lead to misconceptions about each side's intentions that raises risk of clashes, potentially in form of cross-border skirmishes or between vessels in West Sea.

South Korea and Japan strengthened rapprochement. South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and Japanese PM Fumio Kishida 7 May held summit in South Korean capital Seoul, reciprocating Yoon's ground-breaking trip to Japan in mid-March; Kishida remarked that his "heart aches" over treatment of Koreans during colonial period but stopped short of full apology. Pair subsequently advanced military plan in which radar and command-and-control systems used by Japanese and U.S. forces in Japan would be connected to South Korean military and U.S. Forces Korea via U.S. Indo-Pacific Command; goal of linkage is to provide more effective trilateral monitoring of regional military activities and eliminate surveillance blind spots.

South Korea agreed to supply Ukraine, North Korea inched toward reopening China border. *Wall Street Journal* 25 May reported South Korea had agreed to supply hundreds of thousands of artillery rounds to Ukraine via U.S. After Chinese companies with experience shipping cargo to North Korea by truck were issued so-called "river crossing passes" in April, May witnessed abnormal levels of maintenance of North Korean aircraft used for international routes, potentially signalling Pyongyang's intent to soon reopen Chinese border to human traffic for first time since pandemic.

➡ **Taiwan Strait China maintained military activities around Taiwan, G7 leaders expressed importance of stability in strait, and Taiwan's presidential candidates ruled out independence ahead of 2024 vote.**

China continued aerial and maritime presence, Taiwan held military exercises. As of 29 May, Taiwan detected 348 Chinese military aircraft in its Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), of which at least 124 crossed unofficial demarcation "median line" or entered south west region; Taiwan recorded 156 sightings of Chinese naval vessels in surrounding waters. Notably, Chinese reconnaissance drone accompanied by transport aircraft 3 May made round-island loop, several days after Chinese combat drone took similar path. Chinese aircraft carrier *Shandong* 27 May passed through Taiwan Strait. Taiwan's parliament 2 May passed law to allow officers of Coast Guard Administration to decide whether to fire cannons in emergency situations. Taiwan 15 May began annual series of tabletop military exercises, simulating responses to potential Chinese invasion.

G7 leaders acknowledged Taiwan, U.S. continued military support. During meeting in Japan, G7 leaders 20 May reaffirmed "the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait" and stated no change in members' positions on Taiwan, including "one China policies"; Beijing same day said G7 should oppose "Taiwan independence". U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee 16 May passed Taiwan International Solidarity Act, which aims to counter Chinese interference in Taiwan's participation in international organisations. Taiwan Defence Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng 7 May announced talks with U.S. on priority list of weapons under possible

\$500mn emergency grant; U.S. 16 May confirmed it will soon provide “significant additional security assistance”.

Taiwan’s main parties ruled out independence ahead of elections next year. Ahead of Jan 2024 elections, VP and ruling Democratic Progressive Party presidential candidate William Lai 16 May asserted there is no need to publicly declare Taiwan’s independence as island is implicitly not part of People’s Republic of China, and formal declaration could cause more cross-strait tension. Opposition Kuomintang party 17 May nominated Taipei City Mayor Hou You-yi as its presidential candidate; Hou 8 May said he opposes “one country, two systems” and will uphold Taiwan’s own democratic values, while emphasising Taiwan’s independence “has no legal basis under the Constitution”.

South Asia

➡ **Afghanistan Taliban claimed they killed deputy leader of Islamic State’s local branch, while border clashes erupted between Taliban and Iranian forces, killing at least three.**

Violence countrywide remained low despite Taliban crackdown on Islamic State. Hostilities remained at low ebb compared to past 18 months. Notably, Taliban 8 May announced that they had killed deputy head of Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) in recent operation; announcement followed U.S. statement 25 April that ISKP’s mastermind behind August 2021 attack at Kabul Airport had been killed, reportedly by Taliban. After suffering loss of several leaders in recent months, ISKP may go further underground to rebuild capabilities. Taliban suppressed other insurgents: reports 12 May emerged that former Afghan governor of Bamyan province (centre), Muhammad Tahir Zuhair, who had joined Mawlawi Mehdi’s rebellion against Taliban, had surrendered.

Taliban and Iran traded barbs over water dispute and exchanged fire at border. Amid water shortages on both sides of Iran-Afghan border, FMs 17 May discussed flow of Helmand river to Iran. Iran’s President Raisi next day urged Kabul to take seriously Iran’s concerns and abide by 1973 water agreement; in response, Taliban voiced commitment to 1973 deal and criticised Raisi’s statements as “harmful” to bilateral ties. Skirmishing with heavy weapons at border post between Nimroz province (south west) and Iran’s Sistan-Baluchistan province 27 May killed at least two Iranian border guards and one Taliban fighter; such fatalities along border are unusual, and no link with water dispute was confirmed.

Taliban’s emir reportedly met Qatar’s PM, UN criticised Taliban’s harsh justice. Reuters 31 May reported that Qatar’s PM held talks with Taliban’s Supreme Leader on 12 May in Kandahar city, which if confirmed marks first such meeting between Taliban emir and foreign leader. Taliban-run Supreme Court 4 May announced that courts had handed down 175 judgements of *qisas* (death penalty) and 37 stonings since returning to power. UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 7 May published report calling Taliban’s use of corporal punishment violation of peremptory norms of international law and urged death penalty moratorium. Meanwhile, Minister of Interior Siraj Haqqani 11 May stated that Taliban govt should not be so exclusive that only people from “one madrasah” see themselves being represented.

➡ **Bangladesh** **Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) vowed to step up protests to unseat govt, violence and cyclone struck Rohingya refugee camps, and armed attacks continued in Chittagong Hill Tracts.**

Tensions remained elevated between govt and opposition. After opposition BNP late April announced it would step up protests with aim of creating mass movement by Islamic holiday Eid-ul-Adha in late June/early July, BNP activists 17 May held march in capital Dhaka at which senior member declared “popular uprising to remove this government”; police arrested hundreds of BNP members following marches in major cities 23-28 May. Govt pressed ahead with 11 charges against BNP leader Khaleda Zia. Ahead of general election in Jan 2024, head of the Election Commission 15 May warned it would be difficult to hold “impartial election” if govt “lacks political will”. U.S. 24 May announced new policy to impose visa restrictions on individuals and family members “if they are responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the democratic election process in Bangladesh”.

Violence continued in Rohingya refugee camps, where cyclone made landfall. In Ukhiya camps, gunfight between Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and rival group 8 May injured three; armed assailant 11 May shot dead man; security forces 15 May shot dead Rohingya man during raid on “criminals”. Delegation of around 20 Rohingya and officials 5 May visited Myanmar’s Rakhine State aimed at facilitating voluntary repatriation; Myanmar delegation 25 May visited Cox’s Bazar to discuss repatriation with refugees. World Food Programme late month revealed plans to cut rations for second time this year, from \$10 to \$8 per day; govt said it would cause malnutrition and could force Rohingya into criminality to survive. Meanwhile, Cyclone Mocha 14 May made landfall in Cox’s Bazar, damaging or destroying estimated 10,000 Rohingya shelters as well as community facilities (see Myanmar).

Insecurity persisted in Chittagong Hill Tracts. Authorities 8 May found three members of Bawm minority group dead in Bandarban district, following reports of gunfire. Authorities 14 May found member of armed group United People’s Democratic Front (UPDF) shot dead in Rangamati. Militant ambush 16 May killed two army soldiers on boundary of Bandarban and Bilaichari districts near Myanmar border; security forces blamed Kuki-Chin National Army.

↓ **India** **Ethnic clashes in north east killed scores and displaced tens of thousands, stoking dormant separatist insurgency.**

Ethnic violence erupted in Manipur, killing at least 80. In Manipur state bordering Myanmar in India’s north east, thousands of members of Kuki-Zomi tribe 3 May protested in Churachandpur district against possible extension of their state-recognised identity-linked benefits to ethnic majority Hindu Meitei community, which demands tribal status in part to acquire land in hills populated by Kuki-Zomi tribes. Violence broke out between Kuki and Meitei people, which killed at least 80, displaced 35,000 (including hundreds that fled into Myanmar) and destroyed thousands of homes, properties and churches; unrest prompted govt to deploy thousands of troops. Fresh rounds of rioting and arson 21 May erupted, with govt extending internet ban until 26 May. In worrying sign, Kuki insurgent groups – which signed ceasefire agreement with govt in 2008 – demanded separate administrative entity within India, amid uptick in militant violence: suspected

militants 24 May shot dead resident in Bishnupur district; clashes late month continued between security forces and militants amid reports of several civilian deaths and claims from Manipur's chief minister that security forces had killed some 40 Kuki militants.

India-China relations remained tense amid G20 boycott. China 23 May boycotted G20 working group meeting on tourism hosted by govt in Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar, citing opposition to "holding any kind of G20 meetings in disputed territory" (see India-Pakistan). Indian FM S. Jaishankar 27 May stated India faced "very complicated challenge" from China, particularly in border regions.

Maoist violence persisted. In Chhattisgarh state (centre), Maoists 21 May shot and injured two security forces personnel during security operation in Dantewada district. In capital New Delhi, security forces same day arrested head of People's Liberation Front of India, Maoist outfit active in Jharkhand state (east). In Telangana state (south), security forces 22 May arrested five Maoist supporters and five Maoist militia members in Kothagudem district.

In other important developments. Ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) 13 May lost election in Karnataka state (south) to opposition Congress party, boosting latter's confidence ahead of national elections in 2024. Delhi High Court 22 May issued summons to BBC in defamation case for documentary made on PM Modi.

➡ India-Pakistan (Kashmir) Relations between New Delhi and Islamabad remained acrimonious as India hosted G20 meeting in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), where deadly violence persisted.

India and Pakistan exchanged criticism amid G20 meeting in Srinagar. In first visit by Pakistani FM since 2016, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari 4 May arrived in India for Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Council but did not hold bilateral meetings with his Indian counterpart S. Jaishankar. In their respective addresses to conference, Jaishankar said neglecting menace of terrorism would be "detrimental to our society and interests", while Bhutto-Zardari warned against "weaponising terrorism for diplomatic point scoring". Zardari-Bhutto 5 May stated Pakistan is open to dialogue but needs India to "create a conducive environment for talks", citing India's decision to revoke J&K's special autonomy status in 2019 as making engagement "difficult". In response, Jaishankar said only topic of discussion with Pakistan on Kashmir is about when they would "give up their occupation of Pakistan[-administered] Kashmir." India 22-24 May hosted G20 working group meeting on tourism in Srinagar, summer capital of Indian-administered Kashmir; Pakistan condemned meeting being held in disputed territory, accusing India of instrumentalising its G20 presidency for political purposes, while China, Türkiye, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Oman also skipped it.

Security operations and militant attacks continued in J&K. Notably, security forces 3 May killed two militants in alleged infiltration attempt in Kupwara district; 4 May killed two Lashkar-e-Tayyaba militants in Baramulla district and claimed to foil plot to attack G20 meeting. Gunfight during security operation near Kashmir's Line of Control against militants of People's Anti-Fascist Front (considered to be offshoot of Jaish-e-Mohammad) 5 May killed five Indian security personnel. Security forces 20 May shot dead alleged Pakistani intruder in Poonch district and alleged militant in

Mendhar sector. Govt 3 May expanded immunity against arrest to all “armed forces of the Union of India” deployed in J&K and Ladakh.

➡ **Nepal Refugee scandal embroiled mainstream parties, while PM Pushpa Kamal Dahal undertook first visit to India since taking office.**

Refugee scandal rocked major parties. Following arrests made by police, Kathmandu District Attorney’s Office 24 May filed charges against three senior politicians – former deputy PM, former home minister and former home secretary, all members of ruling Nepali Congress or opposition Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) – and 27 others for their alleged involvement in issuing fraudulent documents to Nepali nationals to enter U.S. as Bhutanese refugees. Speculation grew that Nepali Congress may threaten to quit ruling coalition after it had reportedly unsuccessfully lobbied against arrests of senior officials.

PM Dahal visited India. In his first foreign visit since becoming PM, Pushpa Kamal Dahal 31 May arrived in India’s capital New Delhi for four-day state visit, signalling continued importance of bilateral ties. U.S. State Department’s 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom issued 15 May claimed that religious groups associated with India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party had lobbied Nepali politicians in favour of restoring Hinduism as official state religion; Nepal’s foreign ministry 28 May sent “diplomatic note” to U.S. embassy regarding report.

↓ **Pakistan Arrest of former PM Imran Khan triggered deadly unrest, widening breach with govt and straining Khan’s relations with military; militant attacks continued in provinces bordering Afghanistan.**

Street clashes between Khan’s supporters and security forces killed nine and injured hundreds. Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) 3 May informed Supreme Court that dialogue with govt on election dates had failed. Khan 6 May announced mass protests and alleged Major General Faisal Naseer was responsible for two assassination attempts against him. While at Islamabad High Court, paramilitary rangers 9 May arrested Khan for failing to join investigation on corruption charges, prompting enraged Khan supporters to take to streets in several cities and attack police and paramilitary personnel, govt buildings and military sites, including corps commander’s house in Lahore and army headquarters in Rawalpindi. Govt deployed troops in Islamabad, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and military 10 May warned of severe retaliation against “group that wants to push Pakistan into a civil war”; police arrested most of PTI leadership. Violence – which killed nine and injured almost 300 – 11 May subsided as Supreme Court invalidated Khan’s arrest and Islamabad High Court granted him bail. PTI next day renewed calls for nationwide protests, as Khan blamed army chief Asim Munir for his “abduction” and “organised conspiracy” against PTI. Military 15 May decided to try civilians involved in attacks on its sites through military courts, prompting widespread opposition. Defence minister 24 May said govt may ban PTI.

Deadly militant attacks persisted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s North Waziristan, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) 4 May claimed attack that killed six soldiers; shooting at school in Kurram district same day killed six Shia Turi Bangash tribe members; TTP militants 23 May attacked energy facility in Hangu district, killing six security guards. In Balochistan province,

militants 12 May killed two soldiers in attack on police camp in Saifullah district; operation to clear site next day left six soldiers, six militants and civilian dead.

Relations with Afghan Taliban remained strained. After govt raised concerns about cross-border militancy, Afghan Taliban's FM 8 May said Islamabad and TTP should "find a solution to these problems on their own".

➡ **Sri Lanka Govt continued engagement with international lenders for economic recovery and promoted initiative to end ethnic conflict, as country marked 14 years since end of civil war.**

Dialogue with International Monetary Fund (IMF) and creditors continued. After parliament late April approved in non-binding resolution govt's agreement with IMF for \$3bn fund, senior IMF staff 15-23 May held meetings to review progress, praising govt for having "already started implementing many of the challenging policy actions" but forecasting 3% contraction in economy this year. Members of Paris Club of bilateral donors 9 May held their first formal debt-restructuring negotiations co-chaired by Japan, France and India, which was attended by 26 nations, including Chinese govt observer.

Amid widespread scepticism, govt pursued initiatives to address decades-old ethnic conflict. President Wickremesinghe 1 May reiterated his determination "to address the ethnic problem", adding, "I hope to reach a mutually agreeable solution by the end of this year". After meeting Wickremesinghe, Tamil leaders 15 May expressed disappointment at lack of progress on devolution of power and failure to call long-overdue elections for provincial councils, with one parliamentarian describing talks as "nothing but a time-wasting tactic". Cabinet 29 May approved proposal for Truth-Seeking Commission, drawing on experience of South Africa's truth commission. Following series of controversies – including arrest of prominent comedian – over statements allegedly insulting Buddhism, Wickremesinghe 29 May ordered police to establish special police unit to "investigate into and act on persons or groups that disrupt religious harmony".

Activists commemorated 14th anniversary of civil war's end. Organisers mid-May held events across north and east to mark end of civil war on 18 May and remember tens of thousands of Tamil civilians believed to have been killed in final months of conflict. Sinhala nationalist activists 18 May violently disrupted low-key, multi-ethnic and multi-religious ceremony in capital Colombo to commemorate all those killed in war. In response to Canadian PM Justin Trudeau's "Statement on Tamil Genocide Remembrance Day" on 18 May, foreign ministry summoned Canadian high commissioner to condemn Trudeau's "arbitrary and erroneous" remarks.

South East Asia

➡ **Indonesia Separatist fighters in Papua region threatened to kill kidnapped pilot.**

Members of West Papua National Liberation Army (TPNPB) – military wing of Free Papua Organisation – 26 May threatened to kill captured New Zealand pilot Philip Mehrstens unless outside powers engage in dialogue on Papua's independence within

two months; Mehrstens was taken hostage by group in Feb in remote, mountainous regency of Nduga, Papua province.

➡ **Myanmar Deadly clashes continued between military and resistance forces, regime released over 2,000 prisoners, and cyclone wreaked devastation and killed hundreds of Rohingya in coastal areas.**

Countrywide clashes continued between military and ethnic armed groups. In southern Shan State (east), military 5-6 May bombed Pekon township after Karenni Nationalities Defence Force and People's Defence Forces (PDFs) 26 April killed some 20 regime soldiers. Unidentified gunmen 7 May attacked regional bloc ASEAN's diplomatic convoy comprising Indonesian and Singaporean diplomats carrying supplies for Hsi Hseng township displacement camp. In Chin State (north west), Chin National Army 1 May clashed with military on Hakha-Gangaw road, Magway region, killing several soldiers. Chinland Defence Force in Matupi town 5 May ambushed military base, killing two officers; military 9 May launched airstrike on group's headquarters in Hakha township, killing two. In Kayin State (south east), Karen National Liberation Army Brigade 5 on 2 May attacked military post in War Thot Kho village, killing seven soldiers and guards.

Regime released prisoners, urged resistance fighters to disarm. Regime 3 May released 2,153 political prisoners and commuted 38 death sentences to life imprisonment, timed to coincide with Chinese FM Qin Gang's first visit to capital Nay Pyi Taw since Feb 2021 coup. Regime 9 May invited members of "terrorist groups" and "illegal organisations" to "return to the legal fold". Regime-controlled election commission continued to prepare for elections, approving re-registration of nine ethnic minority parties; no election date has been set.

ASEAN reasserted Five-Point Consensus to manage crisis. ASEAN leaders 11 May jointly stated Five-Point Consensus remained "main reference" and for first time backed Indonesia's approach of engaging all stakeholders. Statement also supported efforts to repatriate Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh: delegation of 20 Rohingya refugees 5 May held "go and see" visit to Rakhine State (see Bangladesh).

Severe cyclone made landfall, hundreds fled conflict in India's north east. Cyclone Mocha 14 May became strongest ever to make landfall on Myanmar-Bangladesh coast; hitting near Sittwe, it killed at least 400, primarily Rohingya, in coastal areas or camps, and devastated lowland areas and livelihoods of 1.6mn people. Meanwhile, ethnic conflict flared in India's Manipur state, killing scores and forcing some 300 Indians to flee into Sagaing region (see India).

➡ **Philippines Insecurity continued in south amid clan violence and militant surrenders, while deadly fighting persisted between military and Communist rebels.**

Insecurity persisted in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Gunfight 2 May erupted between two clans from different villages in Malabang town, Lanao del Sur province, injuring three civilians and one police officer. In Maguindanao del Sur, unidentified gunmen 15 May ambushed National Irrigation Administration employee and his daughter in Shariff Aguak town; gunman 29 May shot former village councillor of Damasulay in Paglat town. Meanwhile, militant surrenders continued. Six Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom

Fighters (BIFF) members 3 May surrendered in Sultan Kudarat town, Maguindanao del Norte province. Police 13 May formally received 50 BIFF members – including those who surrendered previously – in Parang town, Maguindanao del Norte. Two Abu Sayyaf group members 19 May surrendered to 18th Infantry Battalion in Al-Barka town, Basilan province.

Deadly clashes continued between military and communist rebels. 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 20 combatants and civilians. VP Sara Duterte 10 May assumed post as head of National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, interagency govt body tackling insurgency.

Marawi's rehabilitation continued. Department of Human Settlements and Urban Development 18 May said Task Force Bangon Marawi was set to complete all remaining rehabilitation projects by end of 2023; 500 permanent shelters are slated to be turned over to some of 15,000 displaced families. Marawi Compensation Board 23 May signed implementing guidelines on procedure for compensating war victims for loss of properties during Marawi conflict.

➡ **South China Sea Philippines strengthened ties with U.S. and Japan amid tensions among claimant states at various flashpoints in South China Sea (SCS).**

Philippines affirmed close cooperation with U.S. and Japan. Marking first visit by Philippine leader to U.S. in ten years, President Marcos, Jr. 1 May met U.S. President Biden in Washington; Biden affirmed “ironclad” commitment to defence of Philippines, including in disputed SCS, while Marcos, Jr. said it was “only natural” for Manila to be close to its sole treaty ally amid “most complicated geopolitical situation in the world”. Philippine military chief Andres Centino 18 May visited Balabac airbase, Palawan, to assure troops of provision of more resources and manpower; site is one of four granted to U.S. under bilateral Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement announced in April. Philippine FM Enrique Manalo and Japanese counterpart Hayashi Yoshimasa 16 May agreed to work together closely on SCS issues as well as against “economic coercion”. U.S. 30 May condemned China for “unnecessarily aggressive manoeuvre” against one of its aircraft operating in SCS.

Tensions surfaced among Philippines, Vietnam and China over competing claims. Philippines 14 May placed five navigational buoys bearing national flag within its Exclusive Economic Zone to assert sovereignty over disputed Spratly Islands; Vietnam, which also claims features, 18 May criticised move. China 24 May placed three buoys in Irving Reef, Whitsun Reef and Gaven Reef in Spratlys Islands. Vietnamese and Chinese vessels 14 May confronted each other at disputed Vanguard Bank area of SCS – claimed by China under its “nine-dash-line” – following Vietnamese notice of expanded oil-drilling operations in area. Meanwhile, on diplomatic front, Chinese and regional bloc ASEAN negotiating parties 17 May struck agreement to complete SCS Code of Conduct second reading this year. G7 leaders 20 May expressed “serious concerns” over situation in SCS, criticising “China’s expansive maritime claims” and its “militarisation activities in the region”.

➔ Thailand Progressive opposition Move Forward Party won resounding election victory and began uncertain process of forming govt, while deadly violence continued at high levels in deep south.

Move Forward set about forming next govt. Progressive Move Forward Party (MFP) 14 May won 151 seats – including 32 of 33 Bangkok constituencies – in general election; main opposition Pheu Thai Party won 141 seats, while outgoing PM Prayuth Chan-ocha’s United Thai Nation Party and Deputy PM Prawit Wongsuwon’s Palang Pracharat Party won 36 and 40 seats, respectively. MFP leader Pita Limjareonrat quickly assembled eight-party coalition comprising 313 MPs, short of 376 required in joint sitting of upper and lower houses for majority. MFP and partners 22 May released 23-point agenda, which includes drafting new constitution, ending military conscription and abolishing monopolies; MFP’s pledge to reform lèse-majesté law was absent, likely reflecting need to win over members of 250-member junta-appointed Senate in vote for next govt, likely to take place in Aug at earliest. In meantime, MFP faces hurdles to form govt, including 10 May petition of Election Commission to investigate Pita over alleged illegal holding of shares in media company and possibility that prospective coalition partner Pheu Thai could form its own coalition that includes parties from incumbent govt; prospect of establishment preventing Move Forward from forming govt raises likelihood of mass protests and potential conflict.

Militants in deep south continued violent attacks following escalation in April. In Pattani province, roadside IED 3 May targeted police vehicle in Thung Yang Daeng district, injuring four police officers. Militants 11 May carried out arson attacks in some 30 locations across Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat provinces, targeting mobile phone towers and electricity pylons. In Yala, IED 12 May killed one ranger and wounded three in Bannang Sata district; militants 16 May ambushed police vehicle in Muang district, wounding two police officers. Gunmen 22 May shot and killed Volunteer Defence Corps volunteer in Than To district, Yala. On political front, election winner MFP’s 22 May declaration included pledge to “collaborate on the process of building sustainable peace in the southern border provinces”.