

India formally invites Australia to Malabar drills

Quad appears to be gaining momentum in the face of China's assertiveness

Australia's Foreign Minister Marise Payne confirmed that Australia would participate in the Malabar naval exercises for the first time since 2007. Australia's participation in this year's Malabar exercises – bringing together the navies of **India, Japan** and the **US** – marks the first time that all four Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) members will be included in the exercises since the Quad was resurrected in 2017.

The host nation India has previously been reluctant to invite Australia for fear of 'militarising' the Quad and angering Beijing. In light of recent territorial disputes along the Indian-Sino border, such fears have less weight. In 2008 former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd decided to pull Australia from the Quad for fear of upsetting China. Rudd's decision has acted as a hindrance to Australia-India ties and with the benefit of hindsight, has done little if anything to moderate China's behaviour or improve Sino-Australian relations.

The Quad meetings have also been elevated to the ministerial level, becoming increasingly formalised – if not '[institutionalised](#)' as US Secretary Mike Pompeo has called for. Whether Australia's participation in Malabar will be permanent or just a one-off, remains to be seen.

China adopts export control law to rival US measures

The legislation will likely allow China to restrict exports of rare earths

China's National People's Congress passed a law on Saturday allowing for the restriction of sensitive exports to foreign companies included on its as yet unpublished Unreliable Entity List. The law – which will go into effect at the start of December – emulates arguments adopted by the **US** in justifying curbing exports of sensitive technology to Chinese companies. Using the Department of Commerce's Entity List, the US has restricted chip and other technology exports to high profile Chinese companies including SMIC and Huawei.

To give Beijing maximum flexibility, the details of the law are intentionally broad. Any company that poses a threat to China's "national security and interests" will be liable to face export restrictions. Although China is heavily reliant on imports of resources and technologies like oil, iron ore and semiconductors, rare earths is one area where it dominates the global supply chain – producing approximately 85% of rare earth oxides and 90% of metals. This – and the fact that resources is one area covered by the law's ambit – has raised [concerns](#) that China could restrict rare earth exports.

China has weaponised rare earths before, briefly cutting off exports to **Japan** in 2010 because of a territorial dispute. The net result of this action was not entirely favourable to Beijing, as Japan was able to build an [alternative](#) rare earths supply chain. Any export restrictions by Beijing would likely only amplify pre-existing efforts across the West, East Asia and **India** to build more 'resilient' – non-Chinese – rare earth supply chains.

Pakistan's opposition consolidates against Prime Minister Imran Khan

The opposition movement may increase Khan's reliance on the military for political survival

The newly established opposition alliance **Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM)** is likely to reinforce Prime Minister **Imran Khan's** mutually dependent relationship with the military. The PDM is a group of 11 opposition parties calling for Khan's resignation. Its establishment marks a turning point in Pakistan's political opposition, usually fragmented along religious and geographical lines. The PDM's direct critique of the military's role in Pakistan's governance, usually a political taboo, is another development. Tens of thousands turned out in protest in Karachi and Gujranwala (near Lahore) amidst worsening economic conditions and double-digit food inflation. Protestors allege that the Pakistani military rigged polls in 2018 to bring Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party to victory.

The military's role in governance has become increasingly overt under Khan. Its control over the economy has deepened. The military also formed the National Core Committee to direct Pakistan's COVID19 response, undermining Khan's power. Its actions have been described by some as a "[creeping coup](#)." Khan is dependent on the military for political survival. He requires the support of smaller parties and independents – who are propped up by the military – to form government. In the face of protests that demand Khan's resignation, the military will likely seek to safeguard their economic interests and protect Khan. If in the future, the military's influence over Pakistani politics continues to expand unabated, they may ultimately no longer need Khan to guarantee their interests.

China tightens the screws on Australian exports

Pressure on Australian producers continues

In what appears to be further retaliation for **Australia's** vocal advocacy for an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID19, **China** has taken further actions against Australian exports. Chinese authorities advised coal consumers to defer orders of Australian thermal and metallurgical coal, and cotton mills were warned by the National Development Reform Commission to avoid Australian exports. About 65% of Australia's A\$2 billion cotton exports go to China, while coal exports were worth \$A14.1 billion across 2018-19.

Chinese motives are various. Self-sufficiency is a key strategic goal of Chinese trade policy and moves against Australian producers appear to be also designed to give a leg-up to Chinese miners and cotton growers. As well as 'punishing' Australia and making an example out of it, China may be trying to induce Australia's business community and rural constituencies to advocate for a softer foreign policy approach. In any case, in substance, if not [always](#) in rhetoric, Australian policy on China only seems to have hardened since it was first subjected to punitive trade measures.

Australia will be hoping that China's threats are more bark than bite and in some affected sectors there are reasons to believe this may be the case. Chinese coking coal for example, is generally of [low quality](#), while inventories at major ports are at an 18 month low. Despite targeting individual abattoirs, China [continues](#) to buy significant quantities of cattle. Yet, with China continuing to rebuff attempts at diplomacy and Canberra unlikely to yield, it remains unclear how the relationship can return to an even keel.

Doubts rising about the legitimacy of Myanmar's upcoming polls

The Electoral Commission appears to be deliberately disenfranchising ethnic minorities

Ahead of November's general election, **Myanmar's** government-appointed Union Electoral Commission (UEC) has taken the controversial step of cancelling voting in 56 townships nationwide. The townships are mostly located in Rakhine, Kachin, Mon, Shan and Karen States – all areas with historic and ongoing ethnic insurgencies. Up to 1.5 million eligible voters have been disenfranchised by the UEC's move. This figure does not include the beleaguered Rohingya minority who have lacked citizenship rights since 1982.

Whilst the UEC has alluded to safety concerns in justifying its decision, the security situation is relatively stable in many of the listed townships – with the notable exception of Rakhine State. Curiously, voting will be allowed in Paletwa, an area of Chin State that has been particularly volatile. Instead of safety concerns, it seems that the UEC's motives may be entirely political. Despite promising much, State Counsellor **Daw Aung San Suu Kyi** has made little headway in the country's peace process, or on other key ethnic grievances like land rights. Although ethnic areas voted solidly for the Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) in 2015, this time around, ethnic parties were expected to draw a significant part of the vote in most areas except Shan state.

Because Myanmar's Constitution allocates the military 25% of seats, ethnic parties and the military-backed USDP party have a relatively low threshold to cross to deprive the NLD of its majority. While the NLD looks assured of winning the vote, its overall parliamentary majority has thus looked shaky. Once democracy in Asia's great white hope, Myanmar increasingly appears to be becoming a democracy only in the loose sense of the word.