**Forging Unity Amid South China Sea Strife**

[Saher Liaqat](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/saher-liaqat/%22%20%5Co%20%22More%20Articles%20by%20Saher%20Liaqat)

April 5, 2024

Australia and ASEAN concluded a three-day summit in Melbourne on 4-6 March, commemorating 50 years of official relations amidst increasing tensions in the South China Sea. The summit’s joint declaration resonated with a strong appeal for peace, stability, and collaboration in the region, particularly in light of previous conflicts between Chinese and Philippine warships. Given the increasing strategic significance of the South China Sea, the gathering emphasized the necessity of engaging in international conversation and collaboration.

Following recent clashes between China and the Philippines, politicians from Southeast Asia and Australia have issued cautionary statements regarding acts that threaten peace in the South China Sea. The ASEAN and Australia joint declaration underscored the need to refrain from unilateral measures that could disrupt the region’s stability. Although the proclamation did not explicitly reference China, it advocated for the peaceful resolution of conflicts and the observance of international legal principles. The meeting also expressed condemnation towards the current humanitarian catastrophe in Myanmar, highlighting concerns regarding its representation. The leaders from both sides urged adherence to a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, highlighting the significance of preserving the region as a zone of peace, stability, and development.

The South China Sea has been a subject of dispute between China and the Philippines due to China’s assertion of sovereignty.

The joint declaration emphasized the significance of a system of regulations in the Indo-Pacific region and cautioned against independent measures that could jeopardize peace in the area. China responded, affirming the maintenance of calm in the South China Sea, while the Philippines expressed its disapproval of purported aggressive acts carried out by Chinese naval forces. The statement additionally conveyed apprehension regarding the severe humanitarian circumstances in Gaza and advocated for an expeditious cessation of hostilities. The South China Sea, which encompasses the Scarborough Shoal, has been a subject of dispute between China and the Philippines since 2012 due to China’s assertion of sovereignty over the region despite its location within the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone. In 2016, an international tribunal in The Hague rendered a verdict contradicting China’s assertions, a ruling that Beijing has consistently declined to acknowledge. The accident that occurred recently between a ship from the Philippines and a vessel from China resulted in significant damage, leading to injuries sustained by four Filipino coast guards due to water cannons used by the Chinese Coast Guard ships. The occurrence occurred as Philippine vessels provided escort to civilian vessels transporting provisions and military personnel to a stationary warship near the Second Thomas Shoal, thereby establishing Philippine territorial rights in the region.

Nevertheless, Australia’s diplomatic interactions with neighboring countries and its strategic objectives in the South China Sea are additionally shaped by its strong alliances with the United States and its participation in the AUKUS security agreement. Wong cited Indonesian President Joko Widodo, underscoring the imperative to mitigate tensions and foster an environment conducive to constructive regional communication. Amid escalating tensions with Beijing, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr restated his nation’s commitment to maintaining territorial integrity in the South China Sea. Marcos’s statements elicited approval from certain Australian MPs, but Senator Janet Rice expressed apprehensions about his enduring impact and human rights violations, resulting in her expulsion from Parliament. Activists demonstrated outside Parliament to express their dissatisfaction with Australia’s apparent failure to thoroughly examine the human rights records of its allies and its endorsement of Israel’s conduct in Gaza. Wong (year) emphasized the allocation of Australian funds towards enhancing climate change resilience within the Mekong-Australia relationship in response to apprehensions of the escalating militarization in light of the climate catastrophe.

Enrique Manalo, the Foreign Minister of the Philippines, called on Beijing to immediately stop these acts at the beginning of the meeting. In response to alleged aggressive tactics during a resupply operation, which resulted in accidents with Chinese ships, the Philippines summoned China’s deputy head of mission in Manila. China’s Foreign Ministry expressed its dedication to successfully managing issues with ASEAN members in response. According to China, the United States has been accused of employing the Philippines as a “pawn” in order to incite unrest in the South China Sea. China has urged Manila to remain unaffected by American influence. The tense diplomatic ties between China and the Philippines have significant ramifications for the United States, particularly in light of their mutual defense treaty. Nevertheless, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. of the Philippines has stated that the recent crashes do not provide a valid basis for invoking the treaty, although he has expressed anxiety regarding these instances.

Australia’s Prime Minister Anthony Albanese emphasized the importance of the diverse and extensive area to Australia’s future when speaking to Southeast Asian leaders at the end of the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit. Australia’s ongoing endorsement of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific was reiterated, emphasizing the significance of upholding regional stability and peace.

Notwithstanding the difficulties, the summit produced noteworthy results. Australia’s Foreign Minister, Penny Wong, announced the allocation of 64 million Australian dollars ($41.8m) for marine security. This money includes establishing a fund of up to A$2 billion to enhance trade and investment in Southeast Asia. The primary objectives of this fund are to facilitate the transition to clean energy and promote infrastructure development in the region. Further pledges were made to enhance maritime security, infrastructure, and activities to bolster the relationship between ASEAN and Australia. She underscored the relevance of oceans, seas, and rivers for sustenance and trade, specifically emphasizing the need for unobstructed and unrestricted maritime routes in the South China Sea. Although the recipient countries were not explicitly mentioned, Wong expressed appreciation for the endeavors undertaken by Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines in delineating their maritime boundaries.

The summit, which has been successful in its structure and content, indicates advancement towards the Albanese government’s objective of enhancing diplomatic ties with Southeast Asia. Although there are still historical differences between the two areas, the summit has helped to close some of these gaps. However, both sides now have the task of maintaining this progress in the future. The leaders additionally deliberated on expediting negotiations with China to conclude a code of conduct for the South China Sea within three years, with the objective of mitigating hazardous conduct.

The ASEAN-Australia summit held in Melbourne was pivotal in facilitating regional communication and cooperation in the face of ongoing tensions in the South China Sea. Through reiterating their dedication to peace, stability, and collaboration, leaders effectively sent a compelling message of solidarity and determination. In order to establish a secure and prosperous future for all stakeholders engaged, it is imperative to maintain ongoing engagement and foster multilateral efforts as the region navigates intricate geopolitical forces.

*The writer is a freelance columnist.*