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Asia in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to this week's issue of the Asia in Review (AiR) covering the latest events, developments and trends in domestic politics, international relations and geopolitics in East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

I wish you an informative read and extend special greetings to everyone who celebrates the Independence Day of Burkina Faso, Cuba and Tanzania, the Republic Day of Malta, and the Jamhuri Day of Kenya this week.

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in East Asia

China: New Military rules target political dissent and “fake combat capabilities”

(ms) China has introduced new disciplinary rules for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), effective 1 January 2026, further tightening political control and internal accountability. According to the PLA’s own Military news outlet *PLA Daily*, the revised supplementary regulations priorities “strict political discipline,” targeting “erroneous political views,” “inappropriate remarks,” and—most notably—“fake combat capabilities.” Violations now include criticism of Party directives, failure to comply with Central Military Commission (CMC) orders, and insufficient implementation of the CMC chairman responsibility system, which institutionalizes Xi Jinping’s authority as commander-in-chief. The new category addressing “fake combat capacities” (假战斗力) aims to curb

inflated readiness reports, manipulated training results, and falsified equipment performance—issues Beijing acknowledges have undermined military credibility.

This emphasis cannot be separated from the sweeping purges that have shaken the PLA since 2023. China's Rocket Force, central to the country's nuclear and missile posture, has been at the epicenter. Its former commander Li Yuchao, deputy commander Liu Guangbin, and political commissar Xu Zhongbo were removed or investigated, while Defense Minister and former equipment chief Li Shangfu also vanished from public view amid probes. Investigations reportedly uncovered severe capability gaps, such as poorly maintained missiles, substandard components, and launch systems misrepresented as combat-ready. These revelations exposed systemic falsification across chains of command.

Simultaneously, Beijing expanded its crackdown on corruption across the defense ecosystem. Universities, research institutions, and state-linked firms have been excluded from procurement programs, while inspection teams scrutinize the Equipment Development Department—long considered a locus of bribery and fraud. Notably, the Office for Equipment Development, which Li Shangfu previously oversaw, was identified as a center of entrenched corruption affecting testing, contracting, and certification processes.

The reforms also intersect with Xi Jinping's ambition for the PLA to develop by 2027 the capabilities necessary to *conceivably* conduct operations against Taiwan. Yet recurring reports—such as missile silos found filled with water rather than functional equipment, unrealistic training, and falsified readiness assessments—have raised doubts about the PLA's actual preparedness. The new rules aim to restore credibility by criminalizing deceptive practices while eliminating political dissent—objectives that may conflict in practice.

Ultimately, Xi seeks a force that is both politically unwavering and operationally reliable. But as disciplinary pressure intensifies, officers may become even less likely to report problems, deepening the risk that structural weaknesses remain hidden. Whether these measures produce genuine military improvement or simply a more tightly controlled but opaque, PLA remains an open question. [Business Standard] [PLA Daily] [South China Morning Post] [Yam News]

China: State media calls for end to naming-and-shaming of grassroots cadres, signaling shift in governance strategy

(ms) China's official media has called on disciplinary bodies to halt the practice of assigning derogatory nicknames to underperforming grassroots officials, warning that the tactic is counterproductive and risks undermining morale within local administrations. The commentary, published by the propaganda department of Zhejiang province and echoed by state outlets, criticized labels such as "refrigerator cadres," "treadmill types," and "lipstick officials," describing the trend as "sensationalist" and an obstacle to understanding the operational pressures faced by frontline staff. [Zhejiang News in Chinese]

The articles argue that many officials accused of "lying flat" may not be negligent but instead exhausted by heavy workloads or reluctant to take initiative due to fear of punishment if mistakes occur. The intervention marks the first time in recent months that state-affiliated media have publicly rebuked the name-and-shame campaigns that have appeared across several provinces, where lists of allegedly inactive cadres have been circulated to spur performance.

While the commentaries read as criticism of local disciplinary practices, their significance extends beyond the immediate issue. In China's political system, state media rarely challenge official campaigns without higher-level approval. Analysts note that such public guidance from propaganda organs is typically a sign of central authorities signaling a course correction, not spontaneous regional dissent. The tone of the Zhejiang commentary, which emphasizes management failures rather than individual shortcomings, aligns with a broader concern in Beijing about the growing risk of bureaucratic paralysis.

Over the past year, the central government has repeatedly warned that overzealous disciplinary pressure, excessive inspections, and punitive evaluation systems have discouraged initiative among grassroots cadres. The backlash to shaming campaigns suggests the leadership is seeking to restore confidence at the local level, where heavy administrative burdens and fear of missteps have contributed to officials "playing safe" rather than solving problems.

The latest media intervention is therefore best understood not as criticism directed upward, but as a centrally aligned message to local governments: rein in

performative disciplinary tactics, avoid public humiliation of officials, and stabilise administrative capacity. By framing the issue as a governance dilemma rather than cadre laziness, Beijing appears to be encouraging more calibrated management practices while maintaining overall political control. [South China Morning Post]

China: Three high-ranking officials receive capital penalties

(mis/ms) China has issued some of its harshest corruption penalties in years, sentencing three former senior officials — spanning provincial governance, state-linked finance and elite sports administration — to death with reprieve or, in one case, to execution, underscoring the continued severity of Beijing's anti-graft campaign.

On 5 December, the Ningbo Intermediate People's Court sentenced former Fujian provincial legislator Su Zengtian to death with a two-year reprieve for large-scale corruption and abuse of power. Su — a former vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the Fujian Provincial People's Congress — accepted more than CHY 165 million (USD 23.3 million) in bribes during his political career, used post-retirement influence to secure an additional CHY 33.56 million, and approved illegal land transfers that caused major state asset losses. The 71-year-old held key posts including Fujian vice-governor and mayor of Fuzhou. His sentence includes lifelong deprivation of political rights and full confiscation of personal assets, with all illicit gains recovered by the state. [China Daily 1]

On 9 December, authorities confirmed the execution of Bai Tianhui, former general manager of China Huarong International Holdings, for receiving CHY 1.1 billion (USD 156 million) in bribes. Bai exploited senior roles at Huarong's offshore and Hong Kong-based finance units from 2014 to 2018, according to CCTV. His conviction — upheld by the Supreme People's Court — marks one of the largest graft cases ever recorded in China's financial sector and follows the 2021 execution of former Huarong chairman Lai Xiaomin. [Reuters] [Xinhua]

A third major sentencing came on 8 December, when the Intermediate People's Court of Yancheng imposed a death sentence with two-year reprieve on Gou Zhongwen, former head of the General Administration of Sport and later a Standing Committee member of the CPPCC. Gou was found guilty of accepting over CHY 236 million (approx. USD 33 million) in bribes between

2009 and 2024 while serving as Beijing vice mayor, deputy party secretary, top sports regulator, and executive president of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics Organizing Committee. The court ruled that Gou leveraged his positions to secure project approvals and business advantages for companies and individuals. His sentence — which will convert to life imprisonment without parole or further reductions — also includes lifelong political disqualification and confiscation of all assets. Gou is the fifth minister- or provincial-level official to receive a reprieved death sentence in 2025. [China Daily 2] [Global Times]

China: Politburo outlines 2026 economic strategy as part of a broader governance consolidation

(mis) In a meeting on December 8 of China's Politburo signaled a dual priority for 2026. On the one hand, the leadership aims to stabilize the economy amid a challenging global environment. On the other, it seeks to further formalize the Party's authority over law-based governance. Taken together, the announcements reflect Beijing's effort to align economic planning, political control and long-term modernization goals ahead of the next Five-Year Plan cycle, which will begin in 2026.

For 2026, the Politburo called for full and faithful application of the new development philosophy, faster progress toward a new development pattern and continued prioritization of high-quality development. Policy direction for next year includes a more proactive fiscal stance, a moderately loose monetary environment and improved coordination between domestic economic objectives and international economic and trade efforts.

The leadership also identified several operational priorities. For instance, expanding domestic demand, improving supply structures, developing "new quality productive forces" suited to local conditions, and advancing the construction of a unified national market. Stabilizing employment, enterprise operations, market functioning and expectations was framed as essential to ensuring a strong start to the upcoming 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–2030). Additional measures highlighted by the Politburo include promoting coordinated urban–rural and regional development, deepening reforms, and driving a comprehensive green transition under China's carbon-peaking and carbon-neutrality goals.

Alongside economic work, the Politburo reviewed new regulations on the CPC's leadership over law-based governance. According to the State Council, the regulations are intended to strengthen the institutional foundations of socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics and to support China's development into a more advanced rule-of-law state.

Moreover, the leadership stressed the need to uphold and strengthen Party leadership across all aspects of governing according to the law, including legislation, law enforcement and the exercise of power. Officials were urged to build confidence in adhering to the socialist rule-of-law path and to advance law-based governance across all areas of state activity. [The State Council of the People's Republic of China]

China: Plan to seal records of minor offences

(ms) China's move to seal records of minor public-security offences – including drug use, soliciting prostitutes and minor brawls – has triggered a wave of public criticism ahead of the regulation's implementation on January 1. The amendment, part of the revised Public Security Administration Punishments Law, requires that such records no longer be linked to a person's identity information or disclosed publicly, except for authorized investigations or legally mandated background checks.

Supporters of the reform, including legal scholars, argue that sealing minor-offence records will reduce disproportionate long-term consequences for individuals, such as barriers to employment or social stigma. They note that violations covered under the law are administrative rather than criminal, typically resulting in fines or up to 15 days of detention. According to its proponents, the measure aligns with broader efforts to modernize social governance and improve rehabilitation pathways for low-risk offenders.

However, the public reaction has been markedly negative, particularly regarding drug-related offences. Commentators on social media have raised concerns about reduced transparency, questioning whether sealed records could obscure potential risks in areas such as hiring, childcare or marriage. Some have also expressed distrust about whether the policy may benefit celebrities or well-connected individuals more than the general population.

The strong response reflects China's historically fraught relationship with drugs. The country's national

memory remains shaped by the Opium Wars and the so-called “century of humiliation,” during which widespread addiction was associated with national weakness and foreign exploitation. As a result, drug use today carries a uniquely heavy social stigma, reinforced through education campaigns, strict enforcement, and severe criminal penalties for trafficking. Many Chinese citizens grow up with a deeply internalized fear of drugs and strong expectations of zero-tolerance policies.

Against this backdrop, proposals to limit public visibility of drug-use records have prompted particular unease. Critics argue that drug offences, even when classified as minor, touch upon core sensitivities linked to national identity, social stability and public morality. [Global Times] [Sixth Tone] [South China Morning Post]

China: Shipping giants unite to advance a cleaner marine fuel

(mis) China has formed a national industry alliance to accelerate the development of dimethyl ether (DME) as a cleaner marine fuel, announcing the initiative at the Marintec China exhibition in Shanghai (Dec 2–5). The coalition includes major state-owned players—China COSCO Shipping, China State Shipbuilding, Shanghai International Port Group, the China Classification Society, and Sinopec’s research arm—alongside Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

The group aims to push DME from laboratory trials toward commercial adoption by building an integrated supply chain covering production, engine systems, bunkering infrastructure and unified technical standards. DME is attracting interest for its clean combustion profile: it is non-toxic, produces almost no particulate emissions, and can be used in compression-ignition engines with relatively modest retrofitting compared with methanol or ammonia.

However, DME’s low energy density limits its suitability for long-haul routes, and further engineering advances are needed before it can match the performance of conventional fuels. Industry officials therefore see it complementing—not replacing—other low-carbon options.

The effort comes as China positions itself at the center of global maritime decarbonization. The country already leads in methanol and ammonia development, with nearly 150 methanol and about 100 ammonia projects under way, representing more than 70 million tons of planned annual output. Despite the IMO

delaying its vote on a 2050 net-zero framework to October 2026, Chinese shipowners and shipyards are moving ahead with multi-fuel strategies, with DME now added to the portfolio of emerging alternatives. [China.Table] [Caixin]

China: Government streamlines rare earth export licensing

(ms) China has begun issuing streamlined export licenses for rare earth products, state media said on November 4, marking the first concrete sign that Beijing is implementing commitments made during last month's meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and U.S. President Donald Trump. The move comes after months of volatility triggered by China's tightened rare earth controls, which disrupted global supply chains and forced several automakers to halt production.

Beijing introduced new export restrictions in April, adding several rare earth elements and magnets to its dual-use control list. Exports subsequently slumped in April and May, amplifying concerns in the U.S., Europe, Japan, and South Korea, all heavily dependent on Chinese supplies for electric vehicles, clean energy technologies, and semiconductor manufacturing.

According to a Commerce Ministry briefing authorities are now "actively using general licenses and other facilitation measures" to support compliant trade. All applications for civilian-use exports have been approved "in a timely manner," reaffirming that Beijing will not license shipments deemed linked to foreign military use.

Reuters reported earlier this week that at least three major Chinese rare-earth magnet producers had already secured the new general licenses, which allow year-long export approvals for vetted customers. The mechanism is not a replacement for China's dual-use licensing regime, but it offers large manufacturers faster processing and greater predictability.

The licensing shift reflects broader diplomatic dynamics. After escalating tit-for-tat export controls in early 2025, Beijing and Washington agreed in Kuala Lumpur to stabilize trade ties, including easing rare earth tensions. China has since suspended several measures announced in October and indicated willingness to refine licensing procedures. [Asia Financial] [Global Times] [Reuters]

China: Real estate downturn undermines recovery despite modest 2025 growth

(ms) China enters the end of 2025 with an economy still expanding but facing deep, persistent structural challenges, most notably a property downturn that continues to weigh on growth, household confidence, and financial stability.

The real estate sector remains the central pressure point. A new Reuters poll shows home prices are expected to fall 3.7 percent this year and another 2.8 percent in 2026, before leveling off in 2027 rather than recovering. Analysts cite demographic shifts, high inventory, weak labor-market confidence, and stretched household finances as factors limiting demand. Developers continue to struggle with liquidity constraints, and Vanke — long regarded as one of the sector's most stable firms — is now seeking to delay bond repayments. Its situation highlights policymakers' dilemma: providing extensive support to a major developer risks setting a precedent amid widespread distress, but allowing additional defaults could deepen the downturn and raise financial-sector risks. [Bloomberg] [Reuters 1]

Information management has tightened alongside deteriorating fundamentals. Authorities in Shanghai reported removing more than 40,000 online posts deemed to "distort" housing policies or create market pessimism, while penalizing tens of thousands of real estate–related accounts. At the same time, two private data providers have been instructed to halt publication of monthly home-sales figures that previously offered early signals of market conditions. These steps parallel earlier decisions to suspend certain economic indicators, such as youth unemployment data, during periods of heightened concern. [Reuters 2]

Beyond property, the broader recovery remains uneven. The private RatingDog/S&P Global services PMI fell to 52.1 in November — the slowest expansion in five months — with weaker new orders, continued job shedding, and softer business sentiment despite a mild improvement in export demand. Official indicators also show moderate expansion, but underlying momentum remains limited.

Policy responses have so far been incremental. While mortgage costs have been reduced for certain homebuyers and targeted reforms introduced, authorities have not deployed large-scale stimulus. Commerce Minister Wang Wentao said China will prioritize expanding imports, signing additional trade and investment agreements, and encouraging

domestic consumption as part of the 2026–2030 planning period.

In financial markets, the yuan has gained more than 3 percent this year, supported by firmer central parity settings. However, major state-owned banks have recently intervened to slow the pace of appreciation by purchasing dollars and limiting swap-market recycling, a move seen as aimed at stabilizing currency expectations. [Reuters 3]

Meanwhile, China is adjusting its regulatory approach in strategic sectors. After tightening export controls on rare earth elements earlier in the year, authorities now say they are issuing streamlined export licenses for compliant civilian use, signaling a calibrated easing intended to reassure trading partners without altering national-security priorities. [Reuters 4]

China-Hong Kong: University suspends student union amid fire-related messages as authorities further scrutinize public opposition

(ms) Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) has suspended its student union after messages mourning victims of the deadly Tai Po fire and calling for justice appeared on a union-run noticeboard, intensifying concerns over how authorities are responding to public grief and criticism following the city's worst residential blaze in decades.

The decision, announced in a letter delivered to the union on December 4, cited low membership levels, financial irregularities and insufficient welfare work. The union rejected the allegations as "unfounded and arbitrary", saying the timing suggested the suspension was linked to a condolence message posted on the campus "democracy wall". The unsigned note expressed sympathy for the at least 159 people killed and urged the government to "respond to public demands so justice can be done". Barriers were later erected to block access to the noticeboard.

The university did not respond to media requests for comment, but the move comes as Hong Kong authorities broaden their enforcement actions following the blaze. Police have arrested several individuals for alleged sedition, including a student who launched a petition questioning fire safety oversight, and a former district councillor who reposted commentary online. Officials have warned repeatedly against "exploiting the tragedy", drawing

criticism from residents and civil society groups who say legitimate calls for accountability are being treated as security threats.

The tightening environment mirrors broader patterns observed over the past week. Mainland and Hong Kong platforms have removed posts demanding investigations, while national security police have reportedly contacted activists and community organisers. Analysts note the rapid response resembles the coordinated narrative control seen during the 2019 protests, underscoring Beijing's priority of preventing renewed grassroots mobilisation.

As public mourning continues, questions about official responsibility remain unanswered. No government officials have resigned, while arrests so far involve construction and safety-equipment contractors. Critics warn that suppressing public expression risks further eroding trust at a moment of widespread grief and anger. [BBC] [Hong Kong Free Press] [South China Morning Post]

China-Hong Kong: Low-turnout 'patriots-only' election ushers in 40 new lawmakers amid grief and scrutiny after deadly Tai Po fire

(ms) Hong Kong has elected 40 first-time lawmakers to its 90-seat Legislative Council (LegCo). The December 7 election — the second held under Beijing's 2021 "patriots-only" overhaul — recorded a turnout of only 31.9 percent, slightly above 2021's record low but still the second weakest since the handover. Fewer voters participated overall, with 1.3 million ballots cast out of 4.1 million registered electors.

The vote took place under the shadow of the Tai Po fire on November 26, Hong Kong's deadliest blaze in more than 70 years, which killed nearly 160 people and prompted widespread anger over building safety and government oversight. Campaigning was briefly suspended during the mourning period, and although official events later resumed, authorities pressed ahead with the election despite public frustration and calls for accountability.

Chief Executive John Lee defended the decision, arguing that a functioning legislature is needed to approve relief funding and that Hong Kong must "move forward before we can turn grief into strength." The government mounted an extensive mobilisation effort — from citywide posters and extended polling

hours to “thank-you cards” redeemable for vouchers — in a bid to bolster turnout.

Eight newcomers won seats directly elected across the 10 geographical constituencies, which collectively return just 20 lawmakers. The remaining seats were filled by the functional constituencies (30) and the Election Committee (40), both dominated by pro-establishment groups. Among the Election Committee winners was retired Olympic fencing champion Vivian Kong becoming the youngest member at age 31, who secured the Tourism functional seat.

Despite the government’s efforts, turnout remained depressed amid a steep decline in registered voters and continuing distrust toward Hong Kong’s political system. Since 2021, only candidates screened as “patriots” may run, and the share of democratically elected seats has been significantly reduced. Much of the traditional opposition is jailed, in exile, or barred from running. Authorities have criminalized calls to boycott or cast blank ballots; 11 people were arrested during the election period for alleged incitement.

The Tai Po fire intensified public discomfort with the polls. Police cleared a makeshift memorial site on the eve of the vote, while arrests were made for alleged sedition linked to petitions demanding an independent inquiry. Residents criticized the proximity of election banners to the charred buildings, calling it disrespectful.

Still, Beijing and the Hong Kong government framed the election as evidence of stability under the revamped system. [BBC] [Hong Kong Free Press] [Reuters] [The Guardian]

China-Macao: Currency swap upgraded into long-term arrangement

(ms) China’s central bank has upgraded its bilateral currency swap agreement with the Monetary Authority of Macao into a long-term standing swap facility, deepening financial integration between the mainland and the special administrative region.

The People’s Bank of China (PBOC) announced late Friday that the swap line will be expanded from CNY 30 billion (USD 4.25 billion) to CNY 50 billion (USD7.1 billion), providing additional renminbi and pataca liquidity to support cross-border trade and financial stability. The agreement, previously renewed on fixed terms, will now operate as a permanent mechanism rather than a time-limited arrangement.

According to the PBOC, the enhanced facility will help "safeguard financial stability for both sides" and promote the continued development of Macao's offshore renminbi market. The city has become an increasingly important node in China's broader RMB internationalization strategy, particularly as Beijing seeks to expand the currency's regional usage in trade, tourism, and financial services.

Macao, whose economy relies heavily on tourism and gaming, has been working to diversify its financial sector and strengthen its role as a platform for renminbi settlement and wealth management. Standing swap lines offer a stable source of liquidity during periods of market stress and can reduce exchange-rate risk for businesses operating across the Pearl River Delta.

The move underscores Beijing's ongoing efforts to expand currency cooperation with strategic partners and reinforce the renminbi's position in regional financial architecture. [Reuters] [Xinhua]

China: Parallel naval and urban exercises reflect broadened PLA training cycle amid regional tensions

(mis) China has conducted an unusual combination of large-scale maritime operations and newly publicised urban warfare training, according to regional officials and Chinese state media reports. The activities, occurring against a backdrop of political frictions with Japan and Taiwan, point to a broadened and increasingly complex PLA training cycle across multiple domains.

Earlier this week, China mounted its largest maritime deployment on record, dispatching more than 100 naval and coast guard vessels across East Asian waters in an operation regional officials say exceeds previous end-of-year drills. The activity, documented in intelligence reports reviewed by Reuters, spans the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, South China Sea and into the western Pacific. [Reuters]

The maritime operations coincided with state broadcaster CCTV airing footage of PLA Ground Force units carrying out an urban offensive drill involving the clearing and seizure of a built-up area. The exercise, part of a live-fire training sequence, included reconnaissance elements, tactical movements through damaged infrastructure and the use of light protected vehicles. CCTV did not specify when or where the drill took place.

The dual set of activities follows a period of heightened political tension. China remains in a diplomatic dispute with Tokyo after Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi suggested that a conflict over Taiwan could involve Japan militarily. Beijing has also criticised Taipei's recently proposed USD 40 billion increase in defence spending, which Taiwan described as part of an effort to strengthen its "asymmetric capabilities." [SCMP]

Taiwan's National Security Bureau reported Chinese naval formations operating in the western Pacific this week, with Tsai Ming-yen, director-general of Taiwan's National Security Bureau, noting the presence of four Chinese naval formations during what it considers China's "most active exercise season". At the same time, Taiwan has been expanding its own training, including urban defence components introduced during recent Han Kuang exercises.

Taken together, the naval and urban drills highlight a continuation of China's broader pattern of expanding training across maritime, air and ground domains. While Beijing has not publicly commented on the recent exercises, regional officials view the operations as part of a wider PLA effort to diversify its readiness activities and to maintain a high operational tempo across multiple fronts. [Reuters] [SCMP]

Japan: Parliament opens debate on government's record extra budget

(dql) On December 8, the Diet opened debate on Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's JPY 18.3 trillion (USD 118 billion) supplementary budget, a stimulus plan that has alarmed markets and intensified scrutiny of the country's already fragile public finances.

More than 60 percent of the package would be funded through new government bonds—the highest reliance on debt since the pandemic—pushing long-term yields to their highest level since 2007 as investors price in greater fiscal risk.

The proposal, far larger than last year's JPY 13.9 trillion (USD 90 billion) extra budget, directs JPY 8.9 trillion (USD 57 billion) toward price-relief and livelihood support, including measures to counter rising food costs and promote wage hikes at small firms; JPY 6.4 trillion (USD 41 billion) for crisis-management and growth investment; and JPY 1.7 trillion (USD 11 billion) to bolster diplomatic and defense capabilities. Reserve funds will be increased by JPY 709.8 billion (USD 4.6

billion) to address future contingencies such as further price spikes or natural damage.

The government argues the spending is essential to blunt rising living costs, revive weak consumption and support sectors seen as critical to economic security, including semiconductors, shipbuilding and defense. The plan would accelerate Japan's military outlays to hit the 2-percent-of-GDP benchmark by fiscal 2025, two years earlier than originally scheduled.

Takaichi's supplementary budget faces pushback from opposition parties that are weighing alternative proposals that shift resources toward lower- and middle-income households.

The ruling coalition of Takaichi's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the center-right Japan Innovation Party nevertheless aims to pass the budget by December 17, reflecting the prime minister's determination to set an assertive fiscal and security agenda early in her tenure. Takaichi assumed office in October. [Kyodo News] [The Japan Times]

Japan: Government pushes contentious plan to shrink Lower House seats

(dql) The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its coalition partner, the center-right Japan Innovation Party (JIP), have introduced legislation to reduce the size of the Lower House by about 10 percent—over 45 seats. The proposal, a condition of the October LDP–JIP coalition agreement that helped secure LDP leader Sanae Takaichi's election as prime minister, is presented as a major political reform tied to demographic decline and demands for a leaner legislature.

However, the plan faces stiff resistance. The LDP–JIP coalition has only a narrow majority—233 out of 465 seats—in the Lower House and lacks control of the Upper House, meaning it must either attract opposition votes or secure a two-thirds majority in a potential second vote—both uncertain prospects.

The main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party and the former LDP ally Komeito criticize the bill's rationale and object to key elements being settled outside formal Diet debate.

Komeito's resistance is politically significant, reflecting the broader realignment in Japan's political party landscape, following Komeito's withdrawl from the 26-year-coalition with the LDP shortly after Takaichi was

elected LDP leader (see AiR No. 41, October/2025, 2). Komeito is the political arm of Soka Gakkai, Japan's largest lay Buddhist organization. A self-proclaimed party of "humanitarian socialism", Komeito is considered a centrist, pacifist, and socially conservative.

The draft law stipulates that, if no consensus on the specifics of the seat reduction is reached within a year, 25 single-member districts and 20 proportional representation seats will be eliminated by default. [The Mainichi] [The Japan News]

Japan: Prime minister, defense minister accused of breaching political donation limits

(dql) Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi and Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi have come under heightened scrutiny after a university professor filed criminal complaints accusing them of breaching Japan's political funding law. The complaints argue that their respective Liberal Democratic Party chapters accepted corporate donations that exceeded the legal ceilings.

In Takaichi's case, her Nara Prefecture chapter reportedly received a JPY 10 million donation (about USD 65,000) from a Tokyo firm—an amount above what is permitted for a donor of that category. Koizumi's chapter in Kanagawa acknowledged taking a contribution that surpassed the allowable limit.

Both chapters have since returned the excess funds, attributing the violations to misjudgments about the donor companies. [The Mainichi] [Asia Times]

Japan: Government to criminalize gene-edited babies

(dql) Japan is moving toward criminalizing the creation of gene-edited children. A government panel has endorsed a plan to enact binding legislation that would outlaw implanting genetically modified embryos into humans or animals, replacing today's non-binding guidelines with enforceable penalties. A draft law is expected in the 2026 Diet session.

The experts warned that scientific understanding of gene-edited embryos remains too limited to judge risks, and that unintended genetic changes could be inherited. To prevent the emergence of "designer

babies," the government is considering prison terms of up to 10 years or fines for illegal implantation.

Research using gene-edited embryos would still be allowed under strict reporting and record-keeping requirements, with future clinical use not ruled out. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Small-firm bankruptcies set to top 10,000 for second straight year

(dql) Japan is on track to record more than 10,000 corporate bankruptcies for a second year in a row, with 9,372 cases logged between January and November, according to Tokyo Shoko Research. Although November's total fell slightly year-on-year, small firms remain under heavy strain from higher costs and labor shortages.

Overall liabilities declined sharply in November due to fewer large-scale failures, but inflation-driven bankruptcies still climbed, reaching 700 cases so far this year. The yen's depreciation has further intensified the burden by raising import costs for food and energy.

The services sector accounted for the most failures in November, though the figure was lower than last year. [The Mainichi]

Japan: Ruling party weighs 2027 income tax hike to fund defence buildup

(dql) The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is weighing a plan to raise income tax in January 2027 to help finance the country's major expansion of defense spending.

Under the proposal, the government would introduce a dedicated income tax surcharge to support defense expenditures. Previously, Tokyo committed to earmarking JPY 43 trillion (USD 278 billion) over five years through 2028 to address raising security concerns, especially towards China. However, the timeline for an income tax increase has remained undecided so far. [The Mainichi]

Japan: Government moves to create new minister for intelligence affairs

(dql) Japan is preparing to establish a dedicated ministerial post for intelligence affairs as part of a broader overhaul aimed at strengthening national information-gathering and analysis capabilities. The new minister would oversee a national intelligence bureau to be created by mid-2026 through an upgrade of the current Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office.

The bureau would centralize intelligence from across the government and possess authority to direct major ministries and agencies—including Foreign Affairs, Defense, the National Police Agency and the Justice Ministry—to share relevant information.

Under the plan, the existing Cabinet Intelligence Committee would be reconstituted as a national intelligence council involving the prime minister and senior ministers, marking a significant elevation of intelligence coordination within Japan's security architecture.

Tokyo is also weighing the introduction of an anti-espionage law and the eventual creation of a foreign intelligence service. [The Japan Times] [Asia Nikkei]

Japan: Defense contractors expand capacity as government accelerates military spending

(ay) Japanese defense manufacturers are rapidly increasing production capacity and staffing to meet rising procurement demand, as Tokyo's multi-year military buildup reshapes the domestic defense sector.

Combined revenue from the defense divisions of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, Kawasaki Heavy Industries, and Ishikawajima-Harima Heavy Industries (IHI) for the fiscal year ending March 2026 is reportedly projected to reach JPY 2.68 trillion (USD 17.2 billion), more than double pre-2022 levels. IHI expects its defense-related revenue to rise fifty percent year-on-year to JPY 230 billion (USD 1.5 billion), though executives say staffing remains tight amid surging orders.

Companies such as NEC are expanding their defense workforce and production facilities, while major contractors are increasingly leaning on dual-use technologies to build more sustainable profit structures.

The government plans to abolish current rules limiting weapons exports to non-lethal categories in the first

half of 2026, aiming to support firms seeking overseas markets. [Nikkei Asia]

Mongolia: Government advances copper smelter project, strengthens disability governance

(fs) At its regular meeting on December 3, the Mongolian government adopted several policy decisions, including measures to advance the establishment of a copper concentrate smelting and processing plant, improve governance for persons with disabilities and address inflation risks.

The Cabinet instructed senior officials to prepare amendments to improve the legal framework for selecting a strategic investor and contractor for the planned copper smelter within the Erdenet-based industrial and technology park. Project information will be shared with leading global companies, with proposals accepted until 15 January 2026. The project is expected to be implemented under an investment agreement framework.

The Cabinet also supported a proposal to designate the General Agency for the Development of Persons with Disabilities as a Government-coordinating agency under the prime minister. This change aims to strengthen service delivery, ensure policy coherence, and expand local-level capacity, including the recruitment of 63 new officers nationwide. Amendments were approved to the operational procedures of the National Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, integrating proposals from civil society organizations.

The Cabinet further announced the creation of a Rapid Response Task Force, chaired by the deputy prime minister, to prevent artificial price increases. Authorities aim to reduce medium-term inflation to five percent, in line with the national fiscal framework. The government expects domestic food production initiatives to help moderate food price growth, while the central bank plans to lower its inflation target to five percent from 2027 onward. [Sonin, in Mongolian]

Mongolia: Ulaanbaatar approves 2026 budget

(fs) The government of Ulaanbaatar has approved the capital city's 2026 budget, outlining major investments

in infrastructure and urban development. The plan sets current expenditures at approximately USD 428 million and allocates around USD 565.8 million for investment projects, with an additional USD 3.9 million designated for district-level financial support.

The 2026 investment framework includes 265 projects, with spending directed primarily to the road sector (52.7 percent) and urban development and engineering infrastructure (32.3 percent). Some priorities include easing congestion and upgrading road networks through the construction of 50.4 km of new roads and structures and the renovation of 33.8 km of existing routes. Improvements to pedestrian overpasses and 31 km of street lighting are also planned.

29 engineering projects worth over USD 134.3 million will be implemented, including drainage system upgrades, new flood control lines, and electrical substation construction. The budget also allocates USD 12 million to the Local Development Fund for community-focused initiatives such as expanding surveillance systems, increasing green areas, and improving flood protection. [GoGo]

Mongolia: National Audit Office slams government over energy sector policy

(fs) The National Audit Office of Mongolia has concluded that the government has not integrated the indicators of the Sustainable Development 2030 program into key policy documents and is failing to meet its commitments under the Paris Agreement. It also noted that limited data availability makes it difficult to assess implementation progress.

Although the Sustainable Development 2030 framework outlines five goals and six indicators for the energy sector, these were not reflected in the long-term Vision 2050 policy document—the country's long-term development policy, whose main aim is to become a leading Asian nation in social development, economic growth, and quality of life by the year 2050 —, which does not take into account the program's 244 indicators. The Audit Office further highlighted that despite increases in human resources and structural reforms, the sector has made little progress in addressing longstanding challenges.

Based on 2024 outcomes, Mongolia ranked 99th among 167 countries in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The Audit Office emphasized the need for clearer, measurable energy policies and

warned that weak coordination among existing policy documents creates risks that certain projects and measures may fail to be implemented. [Bloomberg TV]

North Korea: New air-to-surface missile revealed

(sm) On November 30, North Korea unveiled a new long-range air-to-surface missile, releasing images that show the weapon mounted on a SU-25 fighter jet and described by state media as a domestically developed system.

Analysis of the images suggest that the missile's appearance resembles the South Korean-German Taurus precision-guided munition though Pyongyang did not specify its range or operational readiness.

The disclosure adds to a series of recent demonstrations aimed at showcasing advances in the North's strike capabilities as the country continues to prioritize weapons development. [The Chosun Daily]

South Korea: Parliament passes 2026 budget After last-minute bipartisan deal

(dql) The National Assembly approved on December 3 the first budget of the Lee Jae-myung administration, marking the first on-schedule passage in five years. The KRW 727.9 trillion (USD 495 billion) budget is roughly KRW 1 trillion (USD 680 million) smaller than the government's original KRW 728 trillion (USD 496 billion) proposal, reflecting KRW 9.3 trillion (USD 6.3 billion) in cuts and KRW 9.2 trillion (USD 6.25 billion) in additions made during parliamentary negotiations.

The breakthrough came after floor leaders of the ruling Democratic Party (DP) and the main opposition People Power Party (PPP) agreed to process the budget along with related bills on the final day of the statutory review period. The deal reduces spending by KRW 4.3 trillion (USD 2.9 billion) from the president's draft while allowing targeted increases within that cap, keeping total expenditure at or below the original level.

Cuts focus on AI-related programs, policy funds, and reserve funds, while new allocations strengthen disaster-recovery efforts—including rebuilding the state data center in Daejeon — expand distributed power grids, extend city gas pipelines, and increase scholarships and veterans' benefits.

Core Lee administration priorities remain intact, including funding for local spending vouchers, the National Growth Fund, and a multi-year KRW 150 trillion (USD 102 billion) industrial investment program covering AI, semiconductors, and biotechnology.

Lawmakers from both parties framed the final package as a compromise balancing fiscal discipline with urgent livelihood needs. [The Korea Herald 1]

Cabinet approves budget

In the latest development, the Cabinet approved budget on December 8. The budget, effective in January, marks the first on-time parliamentary approval in five years, with only minor adjustments from the administration's proposal.

President Lee Jae Myung framed the budget as a catalyst for high-performance sectors such as artificial intelligence and research and development, while emphasizing cross-party cooperation. The plan contrasts with the austerity measures under former President Yoon Suk Yeol but continues the liberal precedent of proactive fiscal expansion seen under Moon Jae-in.

The budget projects government debt reaching KRW 1,413.8 trillion (USD 962 billion) in 2026, pushing the debt-to-GDP ratio above 50 percent for the first time. With spending growth of 8.1 percent outpacing a 3.6 percent rise in revenue, the administration appears to prioritize investment in technology and strategic industries to bolster long-term economic competitiveness. [The Korea Herald 2]

South Korea: Cabinet faces cases of misconduct

(dql) President Lee Jae Myung's government has been hit by two parallel misconduct cases that underscore internal strains and intensifying scrutiny over personnel practices.

Vice Agriculture Minister Kang Hyoung-seok was dismissed after an internal inquiry concluded he had abused his authority, including allegedly attempting to stifle an earlier probe into workplace abuse while serving as the ministry's chief secretary.

His removal — the first of a vice-minister under Lee — has raised doubts about the administration's vetting process and highlighted frictions within the Agriculture Ministry, particularly between Kang and Minister Song

Mi-ryung, a holdover from the previous administration. [Korea JoongAng Daily]

At the same time, digital communications secretary Kim Nam-kuk resigned following disclosures that he entertained an improper request to influence the leadership selection of the Korea Automobile Manufacturers Association (KAMA). Leaked messages showed Kim agreeing to pass a personnel recommendation from legislator Moon Jin-seog, who belongs to President Lee Jae-myung's inner circle known as the "Group of Seven", to senior presidential aides involved in managing appointments. The "Group of Seven" refers to the original core group of lawmakers in the ruling Democratic Party (DP) who supported Lee since his first presidential bid in 2017.

The incident fueled accusations of political interference in a major industry body and added pressure on the administration after Kim initially received only a warning. The main opposition People Power Party labelled the incident evidence of behind-the-scenes power brokering and called for an independent counsel, while minor opposition Reform Party leader Lee Jun-seok demanded the revival of a special inspector for the presidential office, criticizing the governing party's dismissal of the affair as a simple recommendation.

The presidential office denied that senior aide Kim played any role in external personnel decisions, insisting the incident reflected an inappropriate message rather than systemic interference. [The Korea Herald] [The Korea Times]

South Korea: Ruling party pushes controversial special insurrection tribunal

(dql) The ruling Democratic Party (DP) advanced legislation to create a special tribunal dedicated to prosecuting cases linked to Yoon's failed martial-law attempt, pushing the bill through a key parliamentary committee despite a boycott by the main opposition People Power Party (PPP).

The proposal reflects the governing party's frustration with what it sees as slow or biased handling of the existing cases, but it has sparked constitutional concerns due to its exceptional judicial structure and the bill's extension of pre-trial detention in insurrection cases from six to twelve months.

The committee also endorsed amendments widening the scope of espionage offenses to include activities

benefiting any foreign state or comparable entity, a move that could significantly expand national-security prosecutions.

In addition, lawmakers backed the creation of a new criminal offense targeting judicial or prosecutorial abuse of the law, carrying penalties of up to ten years' imprisonment or professional suspension. [Yonhap News Agency 1]

The PPP denounced the DP's special tribunal plan as an attack on judicial independence, warning of politically motivated "kangaroo courts", while critics note that special tribunals could erode the separation of powers and deepen polarization. Still, public support remains high amid new testimony alleging that Yoon ordered security forces to block and arrest lawmakers during the martial-law confrontation—claims that contradict his continued denials and raise the political stakes of the ongoing trials. [SCMP]

The DP's initiative reflects growing anxiety that courts led by Yoon-appointed judges may ultimately absolve him or impose only mild penalties. Controversial rulings—including Yoon's early release on technical grounds, a Supreme Court decision viewed as meddling in the presidential election, and repeated refusals to issue arrest warrants for his former ministers—have intensified public doubts about judicial neutrality and fueled calls for reform.

On December 3, a Seoul court declined a request to arrest former Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Choo Kyung-ho and close ally of Yoon, ruling that he poses no clear risk of fleeing or tampering with evidence as the special prosecutor investigates Yoon's brief declaration of martial law. [Reuters]

However, Choo was indicted on December 7 for allegedly manipulating the location of an emergency party meeting on December 3, 2024, at Yoon's request. The venue changes resulted in only a small fraction of PPP lawmakers attending a key parliamentary vote, which ultimately allowed the Assembly to annul Yoon's martial law decree with the support of the 190 lawmakers present. Choo rejects the charges as politically driven and insists he never received instructions from Yoon.

The special counsel also indicted former Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn, accusing him of encouraging insurrection and obstructing public officials after he publicly urged action against perceived enemies of the state and called for the arrest of senior parliamentary leaders in response to Yoon's brief martial law order. Courts previously declined arrest warrants for both

Choo and Hwang, citing insufficient justification. [Yonhap News Agency 2] [Chosun Biz]

South Korea: Martial law anniversary remarks intensify internal rift within main opposition People Power Party

(dql) A year after the martial law crisis, former president Yoon Suk-yeol and People Power Party (PPP) leader Jang Dong-hyeok have reignited turmoil within the country's main oppositioj party and conservative camp through remarks that critics say revive discredited narratives and push the party further to the hard right.

Speaking from prison, Yoon portrayed his martial-law declaration on December 3, 2024, as a constitutional obligation—comments dismissed across the political spectrum as an attempt to justify extraordinary measures and deflect blame.

Jang—widely considered a protege of Yoon—has similarly drawn criticism for inflammatory claims linking a major data breach to "Chinese spies" and for opposing efforts to revise the National Security Act, alarming PPP lawmakers seeking to broaden the party's appeal before next June's local elections. His rhetoric has sharpened concerns that the party risks alienating moderates and cementing an identity tied too closely to Yoon's embattled faction. [The Korea Herald 1]

With more than two dozen conservative lawmakers calling for a decisive break from Yoon and warning that the party is drifting toward an unelectable hardline posture, internal pressure on Jang's leadership is rising. Many fear that without a strategic reset, the PPP could enter next year's local election weakened and internally fractured. [The Korea Times] [Korea JoongAng Daily]

Meanwhile, President Lee Jae-myung used a nationally televised address to praise citizens for their decisive role in overturning Yoon's lived attempt to impose military rule. He proposed designating December 3 as "People's Sovereignty Day," arguing that the peaceful mass resistance represented a "revolution of light" that could serve as a global model for democratic movements. Lee stressed that accountability for the insurrection remains unfinished, calling for thorough investigations and firm punishment of those who orchestrated or enabled the coup attempt—while also urging patience to ensure the process is credible and complete. [The Korea Herald 2]

South Korea: Growing alarm as Nazi analogies permeate political debate

(dql) References to Hitler and Nazism are surfacing with unusual frequency in South Korea's political arena, prompting concern among foreign residents and scholars who warn that such rhetoric trivializes the historical magnitude of Nazi crimes.

The latest clash erupted after the main opposition People Power Party (PPP) chair Jang Dong-hyeok compared President Lee Jae-myung to Adolf Hitler, accusing him of authoritarian ambitions. Jang's attack followed Lee's directive to remove the statute of limitations for state-violence crimes—a move widely seen as targeting those involved in former President Yoon Suk-yeol's failed martial law attempt—during which Lee said perpetrators should face accountability "like Nazi war criminals." [Anadolu Ajansı]

Nazi analogies have appeared elsewhere in South Korean politics as well. PPP lawmaker Na Kyung-won recently described a ruling Democratic Party (DP)-backed special court bill—designed to handle cases linked to Yoon's martial law attempt and extend pretrial detention—as reminiscent of a "Nazi-era tribunal."

South Korean scholars argue that while Nazi references are extreme, they reflect the gravity of the martial law case and South Korea's own experience with authoritarian rule, including the 1980 Gwangju crackdown. Others caution that the opposition's use of Nazi language highlights its shift toward harder-right politics after the martial law scandal. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Unification Church allegations trigger presidential push for stricter oversight of religious groups

(dql) President Lee Jae Myung has directed a fresh legal review to determine whether religious organizations that interfere in politics or engage in illegal activities can be formally dissolved, amid intensifying scrutiny of the Unification Church. He tasked the Minister of Government Legislation with examining dissolution procedures under the Civil Act, which permits revocation of a corporation's charter if it acts against its founding purpose or the public interest.

The initiative comes after testimony from former Unification Church leader Yun Young-ho, who alleged that the church illegally funneled money not only to opposition People Power Party lawmakers but also to certain ruling Democratic Party (DP) politicians. [The Korea Times]

This revelation has sparked political tension, with critics accusing the special counsel of focusing selectively on opposition figures while overlooking potential violations by ruling party members.

Responses from political parties have been sharply divided. Opposition leaders have denounced the government and special counsel for perceived bias, whereas DP representatives defended the administration's integrity and called for full transparency on any undue church influence. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: President Lee warns of Seoul overconcentration amid persisting housing pressures

(dql) President Lee Jae-myung has warned that the relentless rise in housing prices around Seoul has become a structural problem that cannot be fixed through policy adjustments alone, framing the capital-region's overconcentration as a national vulnerability that threatens the country's long-term competitiveness.

Speaking at a town hall meeting, he argued that population and economic imbalance—once considered a growth engine—now undermines sustainable development, making regional revitalization and administrative decentralization central to national strategy rather than matters of fairness.

Lee called for accelerating long-discussed measures such as relocating public institutions, dispersing government functions, and advancing megacity projects like a Sejong–Daejeon–South Chungcheong bloc to help regions pool resources. The Sejong–Daejeon–South Chungcheong bloc is envisioned as a regional megacity designed to accelerate growth outside Seoul and support broader decentralization efforts. [The Korea Herald]

His remarks come amid continuous price increases in Seoul's housing market despite cooling attempts, with speculation persisting in high-demand districts. Private apartment presale prices in South Korea hit record levels in November, with the national average

surpassing KRW million (USD 5,630) per square meter for the first time, marking a 3.6 percent month-on-month increase — the sharpest since 2021 — and nearly 7 percent higher than a year earlier.

The Seoul metropolitan area remained the most expensive, with the average unit price reaching KRW 1.14 billion (USD 778,000). Several cities outside Seoul — including Daejeon, Jeju, Chungnam, and Daegu — also recorded price growth above the national average, indicating that housing inflation is widening geographically.

A number of new developments posted extremely high figures above KRW 10 million/m^2 (USD 6,800/m^2), with top prices in the Seoul region reaching KRW 19.8 million/m^2 (US$13,400/$m^2$).

Although national supply stayed above 10,000 units for the sixth month, it remained highly uneven: some regions, including Seoul, had no new launches, while Gyeonggi Province alone supplied half of all new units. [Maeil Business Newspaper]

South Korea: 2026 defense budget jumps 7.5 percent

(dql) The parliament has approved a KRW 65.8642 trillion (USD 44.7 billion) defense budget for 2026, a 7.5 percent rise from this year and the largest annual increase since 2019. Lawmakers trimmed KRW 430.5 billion (USD 293 million) from the government's original proposal, mainly due to lower-than-expected personnel numbers and reduced capital project costs.

The budget allocates KRW 45.8989 trillion (USD 31.2 billion) for force operations and KRW 19.9653 trillion (USD 13.5 billion) for capability development. Funding for the Korea Three-Axis System — the centerpiece of Seoul's strategy against North Korea's missile and nuclear programs — climbed 21.3 percent to KRW 8.8387 trillion (USD 6 billion). This includes investments in Kill Chain strike assets such as KF-21 fighter production, missile defense systems (KAMD), retaliatory strike capabilities (KMPR), and expanded surveillance and command-and-control networks.

Defense R&D will grow 19.4 percent to KRW 5.8396 trillion (USD 3.9 billion), reflecting continued emphasis on domestic innovation.

A major expansion of the defense ministry's drone warfare training program increased its budget to KRW 33 billion (USD 22 million) to support large-scale

procurement of training drones and instruction for 500,000 personnel. [Defence Blog] [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Military probed over covert anti-North operations

(dql) The defense ministry has opened a formal investigation into its psychological operations unit over allegations that the unit secretly launched anti–North Korea leaflets more than ten times between October 2023 and early December 2024 without higher-level approval. The psychological operations unit, established in 1983, conducts psychological warfare against North Korea through broadcasts, loudspeakers, and leaflets.

Investigators conducted site inspections along the western front and questioned former and current colonel-level commanders after a former unit member told local media that unauthorized balloon launches had taken place—potentially predating Pyongyang's own trash-balloon campaign that began in May 2024. [The Korea Herald]

The issue has spilled into politics. President Lee Jae Myung said Seoul should apologize to North Korea if the allegations are verified, while warning that political actors could weaponize the controversy. He also posted the media report online, cautioning that "hidden acts of insurrection" must be confronted. [Al Jazeera]

Leaflet launches, mostly carried out by civic groups, were banned in 2020 but effectively resumed after a 2023 Constitutional Court decision struck down parts of the prohibition. State-led leaflet operations had been suspended since the 2000 inter-Korean summit.

The investigations comes shortly after on December 3, a criminal trial opened against former President Yoon Suk-yeol and ex-defense officials over allegations that they ordered military drones to penetrate North Korean airspace last year to trigger a hostile response that could justify emergency martial law.

Prosecutors say the drone crossed the border multiple times before crashing near Pyongyang, leaking sensitive data. A memo recovered from the phone of the former Defense Security Command chief urging that instability be "created or exploited" has become central evidence in the case (see AiR No. 48, December/2025, 1).

South Korea: Overseas draft-dodging cases rise while most offenders avoid punishment

(dql) South Korea has seen a steady increase in men violating the Military Service Act by staying abroad without permission, rising from 158 cases in 2021 to 197 in 2024, with 176 cases recorded as of October 2025.

Yet legal consequences remain rare. Of 912 violations since 2021, only six resulted in imprisonment and 17 in suspended sentences. Most cases— 780 —remain suspended because authorities cannot proceed without the violators' physical presence. By contrast, 61.2 percent of offenders who remained in South Korea received prison terms or suspended sentences.

South Korean men aged 25 or older must secure approval from the Military Manpower Administration to travel or remain abroad, with additional requirements for those who left before 24 and stay overseas past age 25. [The Korea Herald]

In a separate development, the armed forces are enrolling a fast-growing number of conscripts from mixed or foreign-background families, reflecting demographic shifts and a shrinking draft pool. Following a 2010 legal overhaul that allowed dual-heritage citizens to serve in active duty, their numbers rose from just 51 that year to more than 5,000 in 2025, with projections reaching about 9,700 by 2031 — roughly 5 percent of new draftees. Representation has expanded into higher ranks and sensitive operational roles, including noncommissioned officers and frontline deployments.

Yet this diversification has outpaced the military's ability to prevent discrimination. A recent case involving a conscript of Chinese and North Korean-defector heritage, who attempted suicide after sustained bullying, underscored persistent hostility and inadequate safeguards.

Experts warn that symbolic policies are insufficient, urging stronger disciplinary measures, tailored support systems, and proactive efforts to counter racist or xenophobic behavior within the ranks. [The Korea Herald 2]

South Korea: Army warns of personnel strain amid students' demand for higher officer pay

(dql) A new survey released by the Army shows that most university students would consider becoming officers only if starting salaries rose to KRW 40–50 million (USD 27,300–34,100) — far above current levels. The findings coincide with a record wave of voluntary resignations among junior officers and non-commissioned Officers (NCOs), with most citing inadequate pay. A separate survey of young officers reveals widespread dissatisfaction and a strong desire to move to the private sector.

These trends have raised serious concerns about the stability of the Army's personnel structure, as the majority of those leaving are mid-career officers and NCOs who form the backbone of frontline units. Despite modest pay increases and a government plan to raise compensation by 2027, current salaries remain far below both private-sector expectations and international military standards. [The Korea Herald]

Taiwan: Premier faces opposition backlash over central-local revenue law dispute

(dql) Taiwan's Premier Cho Jung-tai faces mounting opposition pressure after suggesting the Cabinet might not fully implement recent legislation on central-to-local government revenue allocation. Opposition parties, including the New Party and the Kuomintang (KMT), accuse Cho of defying the law and undermining democratic norms, filing a lawsuit and threatening a censure motion if he refuses to align the budget with the amendments.

The controversy centers on amendments passed by the opposition-controlled legislature in November, which would raise local government subsidies by around NTD 264.6 billion (USD 8.5 billion), on top of NTD 375.3 billion (USD 12.05 billion) already reallocated under 2024 changes. The Cabinet argues implementing new measures would exceed legal debt limits and disrupt the 2026 budget, citing financial and operational constraints. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Premier dismisses opposition's demand on presidential defense budget

briefing as unconstitutional

(yl) Premier Cho Jung-tai criticized the opposition parties for blocking the review of the special defense budget unless President Lai personally briefs and answers questions in the Legislature.

Cho said such a demand violates the Constitution, citing a 2024 Constitutional Court ruling that struck down opposition-backed amendments allowing lawmakers to question the president.

Cho noted that while Lai may brief lawmakers, he cannot be compelled to take questions. [Focus Taiwan 1]

Cho's remarks came after opposition lawmakers from the Kuomintang (KMT) and Taiwan People's Party (TPP) blocked a NTD 1.25 trillion (USD 40 billion) special defense budget from being placed on the parliament's agenda. The budget, approved by the Cabinet, is intended for major weapons procurement and joint development programs with the U.S. from 2026 to 2033.

The opposition demanded that President Lai Ching-te personally report to the Legislature. Ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) members accused the opposition of using procedural excuses to hinder Taiwan's defense strengthening amid growing Chinese military pressure.

The vote also stalled other legislative proposals, including amendments to revenue allocation laws and regulations on lawmakers' travel to China, highlighting ongoing political polarization in Taiwan. [Focus Taiwan 2]

Taiwan: Government to publish list of indigenous political victims under new justice initiative

(acl) Taiwan's government plans to publish a verified list of Indigenous people affected by postwar political cases by the end of the year, as part of a four-year transitional justice plan led by the Council of Indigenous Peoples (CIP).

The Cabinet stated that Indigenous peoples endured "dual oppression"—first under Japanese colonial rule until 1945 and later from state violence during the authoritarian era of 1945–1992—highlighting the need for a more complete historical record of their experiences.

The initiative aims to document ethnic identities, collect oral histories, investigate rights violations, and address both historical and postwar injustices. Future steps include community-led truth-finding, education, reassessment of past administrative actions, and comprehensive reports on transitional justice, including a focused study on Orchid Island scheduled for 2026–2027. The CIP will also produce a full postwar Indigenous transitional justice investigation report between 2027 and 2028 to guide future policy and education. [Focus Taiwan]

Orchid Island is a small island off the southeastern coast of Taiwan, home to the Tao (Yami) Indigenous people.

Taiwan: Cabinet approves new program to boost domestic drug production

(acl/dql) Taiwan has approved a USD 767 million program (2026–2029) to expand local manufacturing of at least 50 essential drugs, aiming to strengthen pharmaceutical autonomy amid increasingly concentrated global supply chains. The plan covers active ingredients, generics, biopharmaceuticals, and radiopharmaceuticals, alongside funding for R&D and a smart logistics hub to secure timely distribution.

Multiple agencies will coordinate. The health ministry will compile a list of critical medicines, while the Nuclear Safety Commission will supervise radiopharmaceutical production and storage. The economics ministry will support targeted-drug research, and the finance ministry will offer tax and rental incentives. Officials stress that despite the push for self-reliance, international cooperation mechanisms will remain necessary.

Industry groups note that Taiwan's national insurance system keeps prices low, limiting incentives for domestic manufacturing. Health Minister Shih Chung-Liang said potential tax reforms for drug makers—via amendments to the Biotech and Pharmaceutical Industry Act—are under discussion. [Focus Taiwan]

The program comes as Taiwan is tightening protection of its medical supply chains after reports that a local logistics firm faced covert influence attempts linked to China. The government plans to classify medical logistics as critical national infrastructure, triggering stricter security rules and limiting foreign—especially Chinese—investment.

The strategy includes expanding domestic manufacturing capacity, diversifying international partnerships, and reducing reliance on any single foreign supplier. Taipei's response reflects broader geopolitical concerns: analysts warn that Beijing's attempts to penetrate critical industries could give it political leverage, particularly in a crisis. [Impact]

Taiwan: Government's defense budget proposal targets drones and asymmetric capabilities

(dql) President Lai Ching-te has proposed a NTD 1.25 trillion (USD 40 billion) special defense budget focusing on drones, long-range missiles, and asymmetric capabilities, aiming to strengthen Taiwan's resilience and deepen cooperation with the U.S. The Cabinet approved the plan, which now faces scrutiny in a legislature dominated by opposition KMT lawmakers, who recently blocked its placement on the plenary agenda.

The budget, covering 2026–2033, seeks to modernize Taiwan's military to NATO standards, expand domestic production, support joint Taiwan-U.S. defense projects, and target 100,000 unmanned aerial vehicles. Analysts note it signals Taiwan's commitment to defense innovation and deterrence, reassuring Washington amid growing Chinese military pressure.

While U.S. officials and defense experts praised the initiative, the main opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT) criticized it as provocative, warning it could escalate cross-strait tensions. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: New law target damage to submarine cables and pipelines

(dql) In an attempt to strengthen the protection of critical infrastructure, the parliament has passed amendments to submarine cable and pipeline laws, imposing prison terms of up to seven years and allowing vessel confiscation for intentional damage. The revisions, approved by the Cabinet in September, harmonize penalties across undersea infrastructure sectors—including electricity, natural gas, and water supply—and require ships to use automatic identification systems.

The law also mandates publication of undersea cable and pipeline maps to prevent claims of ignorance and

calls for public outreach to support enforcement.

The move comes after repeated cable disruptions, including the February severing of the Taiwan-Penghu No. 3 cable by a Chinese-linked vessel. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Long-range attack drone to begin U.S. testing

(dql) The Chien Feng IV long-range attack drone is set for testing in the United States in January, a key step before moving to pre-production if it meets U.S. and Taiwanese military standards.

Co-developed by the National Chung-Shan Institute of Science and Technology, which is Taiwan's primary defense research and development organization, and U.S. defense firm Kratos, the drone is based on the MQM-178 design, with a range of up to 1,000 km and altitude capability above 10,000 meters.

The drone will carry a 30-kg warhead and is among the platforms slated for funding under Taiwan's proposed NTD 1.25 trillion (USD 40 billion) special defense budget. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: National Security Bureau warns of possible Chinese large-scale drill before year-end

(yl) National Security Bureau Director-General Tsai Ming-yen told lawmakers that China may consolidate its usual November-December military exercises into a larger drill targeting Taiwan, saying such a scenario is "not unlikely" and Taiwan must stay prepared.

He said four People's Liberation Army (PLA) naval fleets are currently operating in the West Pacific, with Taiwan's intelligence and military units jointly monitoring their movements and sharing information with international partners as needed.

Tsai also noted that warships from eight countries, the U.S., Japan, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Vietnam, the U.K., and France, have made 12 transits through the Taiwan Strait this year. This includes a rare transit by New Zealand's His Majesty's New Zealand Ship (HMNZS) Aotearoa, which was tracked by Chinese forces, according to Reuters. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Criminal Investigation Bureau defends one-year block of Chinese social media platform

(yl) The Criminal Investigation Bureau (CIB) announced that the one-year suspension of Xiaohongshu ("Little Red Book)— Chinese social media and e-commerce platform—was imposed after the platform repeatedly failed to address fraud and cybersecurity violations.

Authorities cited more than 1,700 fraud complaints tied to the app since 2024, with losses exceeding NTD 240 million (USD 7.67 million), and said the service failed all 15 cybersecurity indicators in a July NSB review, including excessive data collection and misuse of permissions.

The CIB rejected criticism that Xiaohongshu was being singled out, noting that other major platforms such as Meta, LINE, TikTok and Google have complied with regulatory requirements and maintain legal representation in Taiwan. By contrast, Xiaohongshu did not meet mandated anti-fraud obligations and posed national security risks, the bureau said. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Supreme Court finalizes sentences for ex-servicemen in China espionage case

(acl) On December 4, Taiwan's Supreme Court upheld the prison terms of three former servicemen convicted of leaking military information to China, concluding a high-profile espionage case involving personnel assigned to Presidential Office security.

Chen Wen-Hao, Li Yu-Erh, and Lai Chung-Yu received final sentences ranging from six years and five months to seven years for violating the National Security Act and Anti-Corruption Act. The fourth defendant, former military police officer Lin Yu-Kai, withdrew his appeal earlier and has already begun serving his five-year-and-ten-month term.

According to the verdict, the four accepted payments ranging from USD 8,500 to USD 21,200 between 2022 and 2024 to photograph and relay sensitive documents from the 211th Military Police Battalion, which guards the Presidential Office, and from the Ministry of National Defense's (MND) Information, Communications and Electronic Force Command. The information was relayed through a Taiwanese middleman surnamed Huang, who remains at large.

In the first trial, the Taipei District Court handed down the initial sentences, describing their actions as a serious breach of duty. The Taiwan High Court later reduced Li's sentence by one month for cooperating and returning illicit gains but upheld the other sentences. [Focus Taiwan][Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Environment ministry investigation traces water pollution to bus contractor

(acl) Taiwan's environment ministry has identified a maintenance depot for Kuo-Kuang Motor Transport's contractor as the source of the Keelung River oil spill, finding multiple major violations—including unlicensed wastewater discharge, lack of treatment facilities, and improper oil storage. The site was shut down, and an environmental task force continues to investigate additional suspected sources.

The spill triggered oil odors in tap water across Keelung and New Taipei, affecting over 150,000 households. Taiwan Water Corp. (TWC) halted river intake on November 27 and will resume only after the site is cleared, and water tests are safe. If pollution persists, TWC plans a 1.5 km temporary pipeline to bypass the contaminated section, a project requiring about 10 days. TWC says supply remains stable for roughly the same duration.

Authorities ordered stricter early-warning measures, including two-hourly raw-water checks and accelerated deployment of new oil-monitoring sensors. Keelung City announced subsidies for bottled water, medical costs, and tank cleaning, while TWC will offer bill reductions. Separately, the Keelung Environmental Protection Bureau fined TWC USD 15,905 after discovering a malfunctioning oil-film detector that delayed detection [Focus Taiwan 1] [Focus Taiwan 2] [Taipei Times]

Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in South Asia

Bangladesh: Police Commission Ordinance gets approved by the government

(mml) The Council of Advisors approved a series of major ordinances, most notably, the Police Commission Ordinance 2025, which establishes a five-member Police Commission tasked with modernizing the force, strengthening accountability, and making policing more people-centered. The commission will be led by a retired Supreme Court judge and include senior retired officials, academics, and a human rights expert.

The body will recommend reforms, investigate public complaints against police, address internal grievances, and conduct research on policing and legal reforms. A high-level search committee, including representatives from the Supreme Court, NHRC, BPSC and government ministries, will recommend appointees.

The Council also approved amendments to the Representation of the People Ordinance clarifying postal ballot rules, as well as drafts of the Forest and Tree Conservation Ordinance, the Wildlife Conservation Ordinance, and the Bangladesh Building Regulatory Authority Ordinance. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Preparations for February 2026 national polls and referendum nearly complete

(mml) Bangladesh's Election Commission (EC) has announced that it has finalized almost all preparations for holding both the national election and a parallel referendum in the first half of February — an unusual dual exercise in the country's electoral history. The election schedule is expected to be soon following customary consultations with the head of government and the president.

The EC confirmed that voting hours will be extended by one additional hour to accommodate two separate ballots and that additional secret booths will be arranged where space permits. The commission has already completed key logistical steps, including finalizing more than 42,000 polling centers, planning booth allocations, and setting procedures for delivering election materials — including ballot papers, which are scheduled to reach polling stations the day before voting. Officials emphasized that safeguards are in place to avoid the allegations of overnight ballot-stuffing that marred previous elections.

Preparations are also underway for expatriate voter ballots, which will be dispatched once party and independent symbols are confirmed. For the referendum, large sample ballots will be displayed at each polling center to ensure voter clarity.

The commission has prepared lists of presiding and polling officers drawn from government and semi-government institutions, although decisions on returning officers — currently a point of debate between the EC and political parties — remain pending. The EC reiterated that any party or candidate eligible under the law will be permitted to contest.

With the final voter roll published, constituency delimitation completed, new parties registered, and major administrative reshuffles nearly finished, the EC insists it is ready to conduct what the interim government has described as the country's "finest election in its history." However, questions persist over the political environment, including the health of key opposition figure Khaleda Zia, and calls from several actors to delay the schedule until conditions stabilize. [The Daily Star]

At the same time, the EC is rolling out a large-scale voting mechanism for expatriate Bangladeshis for the first time. Since the launch of its "Postal Vote Bd" mobile app on November 18, more than 156,000 overseas citizens have registered to vote in the February election and referendum. The largest numbers so far come from Saudi Arabia, the United States, Singapore, South Korea, the United Kingdom, Canada, Malaysia, Australia, Japan, and the United Arab Emirates. Registration will remain open until December 25. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Supreme Court begins appeal hearing on ruling that reinstated caretaker election system

(lm) Bangladesh's Appellate Division has continued hearings on the appeal against the High Court's major December 2024 ruling on the 15th Amendment, a judgment that invalidated several constitutional changes made under ousted ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and reinstated provisions connected to the country's earlier election-time framework. A six-judge bench had fixed December 9 as the next hearing date after completing the fourth day of arguments. During the hearings, the bench noted that if procedural errors were proven, the entire amendment could, in principle, be struck down.

The High Court ruling under review declared the abolition of the nonpartisan caretaker government system unconstitutional and void, finding that those provisions of the 15th Amendment undermined Bangladesh's constitutional structure. The judges held that democracy forms part of the Constitution's basic structure and that the elimination of the caretaker system had weakened essential safeguards after three successive parliamentary elections under partisan governments failed to reflect the people's will, a dynamic the court linked to the mass uprising of July 2024, which resulted in Hasina's ouster. The verdict also restored the referendum provision by reinstating Article 142 of the Twelfth Amendment and struck down Articles 7A, 7B and 44(2) of the 15th Amendment. While declaring several provisions invalid, the High Court did not repeal the amendment in full and left decisions on its remaining sections to the next parliament.

These hearings take place shortly after a separate Supreme Court ruling in November 2025, which fully reinstated the caretaker framework for future elections. That judgment overturned a 2011 precedent from the Hasina era and affirmed the caretaker mechanism as part of Bangladesh's constitutional order, although it will apply only after the next parliament is dissolved.

The current appeal therefore sits alongside this newer judgment, and the Supreme Court is now examining the High Court's earlier reasoning on constitutional structure, the integrity of electoral systems, and the limits of parliamentary amendment powers. Further arguments will continue after the court receives additional submissions from the parties involved. [Dhaka Tribune 1] [Dhaka Tribune 2]

Bangladesh: Supreme Court upholds legality of interim government

(lm) Bangladesh's Appellate Division has unanimously upheld a High Court ruling that validated both the formation and oath-taking of the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus, closing the last remaining legal avenue to challenge its constitutional standing. A seven-judge bench dismissed a petition seeking leave to appeal, confirming that the High Court had correctly ruled earlier this year that the administration was formed lawfully and in line with a Supreme Court reference issued on August 8, 2024. That reference had clarified that, following the resignation of the prime minister and dissolution of parliament two days earlier, the president was not bound by Article 48(3) to act on prime-ministerial advice and could therefore proceed with constituting an interim cabinet. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: High Court rejects petition seeking suspension of February 2026 election

(lm) Bangladesh's High Court has rejected a petition seeking suspension of all activities related to the country's 13th parliamentary election, scheduled for February 2026. The petition had been filed on December 3 by the secretary general of the Bangladesh Congress party.

According to the filing, the petition challenged the legality of appointing the Election Commission's secretary, as well as returning officers and assistant returning officers, through the Executive Division. The petitioner argued that this arrangement is inconsistent with the Constitution because it enables the executive branch to influence election administration. The writ also requested the formation of an independent "Electoral Service Commission" and asked the court to postpone the election until the matter was resolved. It further warned that ongoing coordination between the Election Commission and district commissioners (DCs) could allow executive influence over the polls, arguing that district and upazila election officers should instead manage election responsibilities.

At the hearing, the High Court rejected the petition, stating that it had not been properly placed before the bench. The judges also remarked that filing such a petition at this stage—when the nation is preparing for the election—was not appropriate. The petition was therefore dismissed on procedural grounds, leaving the election schedule unaffected. [Dhaka Tribune] [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Uncertainty within main opposition party deepens as key leader remains critically ill

(lm) Bangladesh's political landscape ahead of the 2026 national elections remains unsettled as Khaleda Zia — chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), former prime minister, and one of the country's most central opposition figures — continues to receive intensive care at Dhaka's Evercare Hospital with no improvement in her critical condition. Plans to airlift her to London have again stalled after the German-based operator withdrew its landing request for the aircraft chartered through the government of Qatar. Civil aviation officials note that even if the aircraft arrives, her departure depends on whether the medical board deems her stable enough to fly, a decision not yet taken. [Dhaka Tribune 1] [Dhaka Tribune 2] [The Daily Star 3] [The Daily Star 4]

Khaleda's prolonged medical crisis has shifted renewed attention onto her son, Tarique Rahman, the BNP's acting chairman and the party's dominant political figure abroad. While senior BNP leaders insist that all preparations for his homecoming have been completed and that he may return "anytime," Tarique remains in London, directing political messaging virtually. [AiR No. 48, December/2025, 1] [Dhaka Tribune 3]

In contrast, his wife, Dr Zubaida Rahman, has travelled to Dhaka, attends Evercare Hospital daily, and participates directly in medical board meetings — effectively taking on responsibilities that Tarique has repeatedly expressed a desire to fulfill but has not acted on. [Dhaka Tribune 4]

In two separate virtual addresses, Tarique warned that the BNP faces increasingly difficult conditions and linked these challenges to what he described as "conspiracies" that must be countered through democratic mobilization. He invoked two sensitive historical reference points. His remark that "people of this country already saw them in 1971" referred to the Islamist forces that collaborated with the Pakistani military during the Liberation War — a lineage associated today with Jamaat-e-Islami, the country's largest Islamist party and a former BNP ally, though he did not name the group. At another moment, his comments about actors who "killed thousands before the fascist government fled" echoed public narratives concerning the final days of the ousted Awami League government under Sheikh Hasina. He accused unnamed individuals of offering spiritual "tickets" or guarantees and warned that such actions constitute

“shirk,” urging party activists to caution the public. [The Daily Star 4] [The Daily Star 5] [Dhaka Tribune 5]

At the same time, the BNP’s alliance structure is under visible strain. The Bangladesh Labour Party ended its two-decade partnership with the BNP after the BNP nominated its own candidate in a constituency the Labour Party had been promised. Labour leaders accused the BNP of repeatedly breaking commitments, sidelining allies, and acting dishonestly during a moment when unity is considered crucial. [Dhaka Tribune 6]

The move followed rising frustration among a wider group of BNP-aligned parties after the BNP announced 272 candidates without substantive seat-sharing consultations. Several partners complained that BNP was behaving much like Hasina’s Awami League by reserving seats for itself, disregarding allied candidates, and ignoring previous assurances. BNP leadership has responded by saying that discussions with allies are ongoing, but the damage to trust appears significant. [The Daily Star 6]

Bangladesh: Islamist-leaning alliance accepts referendum timing but raises concerns over election conditions

(lm) An alliance of eight like-minded parties — including Jamaat-e-Islami, the country’s main Islamist party — announced that they will accept the government’s decision to hold a national referendum on the same day as the upcoming parliamentary election. The bloc had previously demanded that the referendum be held earlier but stated after a liaison committee meeting in Dhaka that they were accepting the decision “in the greater interest.” Alliance representatives said that some of their demands had been only partially met. They also announced a series of programs through December to campaign for a “Yes” vote and confirmed that only one jointly endorsed candidate would contest each constituency based on internal seat-sharing agreements. [The Daily Star 1]

Separately, Jamaat-e-Islami told the Election Commission (EC) that the current political and security situation does not ensure a level playing field ahead of the election and referendum. During a meeting at EC headquarters, the party said its local programs were being obstructed, activists were being targeted, and women involved in outreach were facing harassment and injury. Jamaat urged the EC to take immediate action to curb violence, ensure administrative

neutrality, and recover illegal weapons, and also requested deployment of Border Guard Bangladesh and the military at polling centers, installation of CCTV cameras, and simpler voter registration procedures for expatriates. [Dhaka Tribune]

A third development came as the National Citizen Party (NCP) issued a statement responding to Jamaat-e-Islami's criticism of remarks made by an NCP leader. The NCP said Jamaat was trying to emerge as a "new player" in what it described as an existing culture of violence and hegemonic politics. It cited a recent incident in Pabna district in which a man identified by local authorities as a Jamaat activist was arrested with arms. Jamaat had earlier rejected the NCP leader's comments as untrue and demanded their withdrawal. The NCP said its remarks were evidence-based and accused Jamaat of using religion as a political tool. [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: Newly registered student party positions itself at center of emerging reform bloc while challenging Election Commission integrity

(lm) Bangladesh's National Citizen Party (NCP), a student-led political party that emerged directly from the July 2024 uprising, has formally received its registration from the Election Commission and is rapidly moving to position itself as a key actor in a new reform-oriented political bloc ahead of the February 2026 parliamentary election. Founded in February 2025, the NCP presents itself as an anti-corruption, anti-discrimination, and institution-building force and has framed its entry into formal politics as a generational shift. [Dhaka Tribune]

Shortly after receiving its registration certificate, the party intensified its criticism of the Election Commission, warning that it would "resist" if officials allegedly linked to corruption under the previous government remained in their posts. NCP leaders argued that public trust in the Commission remains fragile and insisted that no election schedule should be announced until the overall political environment — including the ongoing political crisis and the deteriorating health of opposition figure Khaleda Zia — stabilizes. They also accused an unnamed major political actor of exerting pressure on the courts and attempting to draw smaller political groups into opportunistic alliances, framing such moves as threats to multiparty democracy. [Dhaka Tribune]

Against this backdrop, the NCP has taken the lead in launching a new reform-oriented alliance, the *Gonotantrik Songskar Jote* ("Democratic Reform Alliance"), aimed at consolidating parties associated with the July uprising into a unified electoral front. The bloc brings together three small groups: the NCP itself; the Amar Bangladesh Party (AB Party), a minor party with Islamist-leaning reformist roots; and Bangladesh Rastro Sangskar Andolan, a small organization advocating structural reforms of the state. The alliance seeks to present itself as a potential "third force" in a political landscape otherwise dominated by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the ousted Awami League, and Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: New 18-party opposition alliance launched as fragmentation within swing force deepens

(lm) Bangladesh's opposition landscape is undergoing further realignment as two senior political figures — Anisul Islam Mahmud and Anwar Hossain Manju — have launched a new 18-party coalition, the National Democratic Front (NDF). The development highlights a broader pattern of fragmentation among medium-sized parties that once played pivotal balancing roles in parliament.

The new alliance brings together six registered and twelve unregistered parties. Announcing the coalition in Dhaka, Anisul — now serving as NDF president — said the bloc aims to promote what he described as a "genuine democratic transformation," build consensus to address Bangladesh's ongoing political crisis, uphold the spirit of the country's 1971 Liberation War, and amplify constituencies that feel politically sidelined. The alliance issued a seven-point platform that calls for transforming the interim government into a neutral election-time administration within two months, for the withdrawal of politically motivated cases to ensure equal participation, for consensual national reform measures, for nonpartisan action against criminal networks, and for efforts to reduce essential-commodity prices.

At the center of this reshuffling stands the long-fragmented Jatiya Party — a party originally founded in 1986 by former military ruler HM Ershad, which for decades functioned as a "swing force" that alternated between government and opposition and often determined parliamentary coalitions. The party is now split into multiple rival factions, including groups led by GM Quader, Manju, Anisul, and successors to Kazi

Zafar, among others, many of whom contest control of the party's traditional electoral symbol.

Although several Jatiya Party factions briefly appeared together in July at a memorial event for HM Ershad, presenting the moment as the start of a reunification process, the détente proved short-lived. A new faction led by Anisul formally broke away on August 9 following its own council session, deepening longstanding internal divisions. Two of these splinter groups now form part of the newly launched NDF. [The Daily Star 1] [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: Tribunal moves toward charge framing in enforced disappearance case against ex-prime minister

(lm) Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal-1 (ICT-1) — the country's special court mandated to try crimes against humanity and other serious violations of international law — is advancing proceedings in a major case involving former prime minister Sheikh Hasina and 13 former and current army officers. The tribunal has set December 9 as the next hearing date, during which it will consider defense responses before deciding whether to formally frame charges.

Prosecutors have submitted five charges accusing the group of directing or enabling a pattern of enforced disappearances between 2015 and 2024, during which 26 individuals were allegedly abducted and detained inside *Aynaghar*, a clandestine facility operated by the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI). According to the prosecution, detainees were held in isolation, deprived of basic necessities, and subjected to severe physical and psychological abuse. The indictment includes senior figures such as a former national security adviser and multiple DGFI officers, whom prosecutors argue bear responsibility under both command authority and direct involvement.

Three accused officers currently in custody appeared before the tribunal under tight security. The remaining ten defendants, including Hasina, are not in custody and have been declared absconding, with public notices previously issued. [The Daily Star] [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Government extends mandate of inquiry into 2009 border-force mutiny

(lm) Bangladesh's interim government has extended until December 7 the mandate of the National Independent Investigation Commission reinvestigating the 2009 mutiny at the former headquarters of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) in Dhaka — a compound commonly known as *Pilkhana*, where 74 people, mostly army officers, were killed in one of the country's most serious internal security breakdowns. [Dhaka Tribune]

The extension, issued shortly before the mandate expired, follows the commission's submission of its report to Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus on November 30. Formed in December 2024, the commission was tasked with establishing the full sequence of events of the February 25–26, 2009, uprising and identifying all involved parties, including perpetrators, accomplices, instigators, intelligence actors, and any domestic or foreign links.

As previously reported, its 11-month inquiry sharply questions decisions made under the now-ousted Awami League government, concluding that political instructions during the crisis weakened the military's ability to respond and contributed to what it describes as a deliberate command vacuum. The report names several political and security figures from the time and cites alleged political interference, intelligence failures, the exploitation of long-standing institutional grievances, and unexplained cross-border movements by Indian nationals. [AiR No. 48, December/2025, 1]

Bangladesh: Supreme Court Secretariat approves creation of 489 new posts

(lm) The Supreme Court Secretariat has approved the creation of 489 new positions to strengthen its administrative capacity following the first meeting of the Post Creation Committee, which was established on December 1 under the Supreme Court Secretariat Ordinance, 2025. Of the new positions, 107 are officer posts and 382 are support staff roles. Among the officer posts, 105 will be filled by members of the judicial service in administrative functions, while one post is designated for a chief accounting officer and another for a system analyst. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Justice sector advances toward operationalizing commercial courts

(lm) Bangladesh's judiciary has taken a significant step toward launching specialized commercial courts, a key reform aimed at reducing chronic delays in business litigation and improving the country's investment climate.

At a Supreme Court–UNDP seminar in Chattogram, senior judges and legal experts outlined the implementation path for the Commercial Courts Ordinance 2025. Technical discussions focused on staffing needs, procedural rules, digital case-management systems, and coordination with broader judicial reforms. Experts also highlighted persistent weaknesses—fragmented commercial laws, uneven enforcement, and limited access for smaller firms—that will need to be addressed for the courts to function effectively.

The judiciary signaled that it intends to proceed quickly. The Supreme Court's Registrar General said commercial courts are an immediate institutional priority and will be rolled out in phases, with early pilots expected in major commercial centers such as Chattogram. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Anti-Corruption Commission faces deep internal crisis as watchdog warns entrenched graft persists despite political transition

(lm) Bangladesh's institutional integrity landscape is under renewed strain amid escalating revelations of misconduct inside the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), at the same time that Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) warns that corruption remains embedded across the state even after last year's political upheaval.

The ACC — the national body legally mandated to investigate corruption — is confronting significant credibility erosion following multiple internal scandals. In 2025 alone, six officials were dismissed, including one senior officer accused of accepting financial benefits from an individual under ACC investigation. Other cases involve an official who allegedly extorted roughly BDT 100 million (about USD 910,000) from school administrators and sought payments amounting to BDT 1 billion (about USD 9.1 million) from a state-owned pharmaceuticals executive. Another official reportedly received illicit housing benefits from a business figure linked to a corruption probe. Additional disciplinary actions this year include dismissals for negligence in investigations, document

fabrication, participation in a forged-document syndicate, and, in one instance, domestic abuse tied to dowry demands.

These incidents add to a long-standing record: over the past 17 years, the ACC has disciplined 245 staff members for corruption-related misconduct. Thirty-four were dismissed, while others received penalties such as forced retirement, demotion, or salary reductions. More than ten additional officials currently face internal proceedings. Anti-corruption campaigners stress that internal disciplinary action is insufficient, arguing that failure to prosecute corrupt ACC officers undermines public trust and erodes the institution's legitimacy.

The crisis now extends to former leadership. On December 1, the ACC opened an inquiry into a former chairman — the first such investigation in the institution's history — after interrogations of his brother revealed alleged financial ties to a well-known health-sector contractor long associated with large-scale graft. Investigators allege that the former chairman accepted two luxury apartments as illicit benefits and may have used his influence to shield the contractor from scrutiny. The inquiry focuses on possible money laundering, abuse of office, and unlawful wealth accumulation. Days later, the ACC approved a corruption case against a former commissioner and former head of Bangladesh's telecommunications regulator for decisions that reduced state revenue from international call termination. According to ACC estimates, the rate changes produced losses equivalent to approximately BDT 2.94 billion (about USD 26.7 million) in reduced call-rate revenue and an additional foreign-currency shortfall valued at approximately BDT 56.85 billion (about USD 516 million). [The Daily Star 1]

These developments have intensified broader concerns that Bangladesh's political transition following the fall of the previous authoritarian government on August 5 has not produced a decisive shift toward accountability. At a public event in Dhaka, TIB's executive director said early signs of misconduct were visible "from the first day" of the transition and that many actors who exploited institutional weaknesses under the former administration remain active within state structures. While comparative data are still being consolidated, TIB argued that opportunities created by the July 2025 uprising — which demanded structural reform and political accountability — have not yet translated into a sustained anti-corruption strategy.

TIB urged political parties preparing election manifestos for the 13th parliamentary polls to align commitments with the July National Charter 2025 and to adopt clear timelines for implementing recommendations issued by reform commissions on constitutional revision, the electoral system, the ACC, the civil service, policing, the judiciary, local government, media governance, women's rights, health, and labor. The organization also emphasized that findings from external assessments — including a UN human-rights fact-finding report and the draft Economic White Paper — should guide future reforms.

A central theme of TIB's message is accountability for past abuses. It argued that investigations into killings, rights violations, and systemic corruption under the former government and during the uprising are essential to preventing reform backsliding. It also stressed that no institutional restructuring will endure without credible anti-corruption safeguards, including implementation of recommendations from the ACC reform commission, stronger anti–money laundering legislation, expanded cooperation with jurisdictions where illicit assets are held, and reinforced oversight functions within bodies such as the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit and the Attorney General's Office. [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: Severe safety risks for journalists ahead of 2026 election; senior media figure jailed

(lm) Bangladesh is entering a pre-election period marked by sharply elevated risks for journalists, according to new nationwide research that coincides with the arrest and detention of a high-profile media figure under the Anti-Terrorism Act.

A comprehensive study by the media-rights group Digitally Right and Swedish partners warns that journalists expect unprecedented levels of violence and intimidation during the coming election cycle. Surveying 201 reporters across 19 districts, the study finds that nearly nine in ten anticipate physical assault while covering campaign activities, 76 percent expect verbal harassment, and 71 percent foresee intimidation. The outlook is especially severe for women journalists: half fear sexual harassment on assignment and 40 percent fear sexual assault.

Digital threats are also expected to surge. Three-quarters of respondents anticipate disinformation campaigns targeting them or their newsrooms, and 65 percent fear hacking attempts. Political actors were

identified as the primary source of risk, followed by law enforcement and extremist religious groups. Despite this, institutional safeguards remain extremely limited: most newsrooms lack basic safety protocols, 77 percent have no digital-security systems, and fewer than one in four journalists have received safety equipment or training. A notable gender gap persists, with male journalists nearly three times more likely than women to have a personal safety plan. [The Daily Star 1] [Dhaka Tribune 1]

These warnings arrive at a moment when press-freedom concerns are already intensifying. Dhaka authorities have arrested senior journalist and political figure Shaukat Mahmood, who now serves as secretary general of *Janata Party Bangladesh*, a small political party formed earlier this year. Mahmood, a former president of the Jatiya Press Club and once a vice-chairman of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) before his expulsion in 2023, was taken into custody in Dhaka and subsequently ordered to jail by a metropolitan magistrate.

He is accused alongside Enayet Karim Chowdhury, a US citizen of Bangladeshi origin arrested in September, in a case alleging a conspiracy to overthrow the interim government. According to police submissions, investigators claim that the two coordinated efforts to incite public unrest, held undisclosed meetings with political actors and influential individuals, and engaged in activities intended to destabilize the state. Authorities say digital evidence supports elements of the case, though no details have been publicly disclosed. [The Daily Star 2] [The Daily Star 3] [Dhaka Tribune 2]

In separate but related developments, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has called on Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus to secure the release of four other journalists currently jailed on murder charges that CPJ says lack credible evidence and appear retaliatory. In a letter sent ahead of International Human Rights Day, CPJ recalled Yunus's earlier public remarks that murder cases had sometimes been filed "hastily" against journalists, and expressed concern that the detainees continue to face new charges and repeated denials of bail. The group also noted that their lawyer was recently accused in a murder case. [The Daily Star 3]

Bangladesh: Civil society coalition urges parties to prioritize women's and children's rights in election manifestos

(lm) A coalition of seven national and international organizations has launched a coordinated campaign to ensure that the rights, protection and well-being of women and children are prominently reflected in political party manifestos ahead of the 2026 election. The group is conducting regional consultations, evidence reviews and community-level listening sessions across urban, rural and climate-vulnerable areas to identify priority needs.

The coalition argues that despite women representing just over half of the population and children accounting for one-third, their concerns remain insufficiently addressed in national policymaking. It highlights persistent vulnerabilities, including gender-based violence, early marriage, learning gaps, malnutrition, unsafe migration and climate-related risks.

Findings will be consolidated into concrete policy recommendations to be presented to political parties at a dialogue in Dhaka on December 14. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Country remains locked into costly power contracts from ousted ex-government

(lm) Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has warned that Bangladesh is structurally unable to exit long-term power sector contracts signed under the former Awami League government of ousted ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, leaving the state and consumers to bear the financial consequences for years.

Presenting findings from the national review committee on power deals, TIB's executive director said the contracts amounted to "organized wrongdoing," alleging that state institutions were used to push through agreements that heavily favored private companies. Because these deals were concluded at the state-to-state or state-to-corporate level, he said, the current government has little realistic scope to challenge or withdraw from them in international arbitration.

The warning comes as Bangladesh faces mounting pressure to shift away from fossil fuels. TIB noted that lobbying networks tied to the old system remain influential, slowing progress toward a credible energy-transition strategy.

Energy specialists at the same conference called for an immediate revision of the Integrated Energy and Power Master Plan, arguing that earlier renewable-energy targets have repeatedly failed and that Bangladesh needs an enforceable, realistic roadmap. Analysts also stressed the need to build domestic technical capacity and reduce dependence on foreign consultants.

Bangladesh currently spends around BDT 400 billion (USD 3.28 billion) each year on electricity subsidies—funds that experts say could dramatically accelerate the country's renewable shift if redirected. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Government approves USD 93 million plan to drill three new gas wells as shortages intensify

(lm) Bangladesh has approved a BDT 11.36 billion (USD 93.15 million) exploration program to drill three deep gas wells, aiming to slow the decline in domestic production and reduce exposure to costly LNG imports. The project will be carried out by the state-owned Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration and Production Company (BAPEX) between October 2025 and December 2027.

The decision comes as the country confronts a daily gas shortfall of 400–500 million cubic feet, causing disruptions to household cooking, industrial output, and power generation. Large parts of Dhaka and major industrial hubs have reported unusually low pressure for days, with some neighborhoods receiving almost no supply during peak hours.

To manage shortages, the government has approved the purchase of 15 LNG cargoes since August 2024, valued at roughly BDT 75 billion (USD 615 million). Officials note that while spot-market LNG provides short-term relief, dependence on international suppliers exposes Bangladesh to sharp global price fluctuations.

BAPEX is simultaneously preparing to drill an additional 20 wells as part of a broader strategy to rebuild domestic output. Planning officials said the new wells will not deliver immediate relief but are necessary to prevent the crisis from worsening in the coming years. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Deepening banking crisis forces multi-year clean-up as defaults surge and corporate rescheduling accelerates

(mml/lm) Bangladesh's banking system is entering what regulators describe as a long, costly, and unavoidable recovery process as the scale of bad loans and liquidity stress becomes fully visible. At recent industry events in Dhaka, Bangladesh Bank Governor Ahsan H. Mansur delivered one of the starkest assessments to date, estimating that stabilizing the sector may require up to USD 5.7 billion and as long as a decade of sustained intervention. The central bank has already injected USD 2.9 billion into five distressed institutions and expects to deploy a similar amount for other banks facing acute strain.

New figures underscore how serious the deterioration has become. Non-performing loans have risen to USD 52.7 billion, equivalent to roughly 36 percent of all outstanding credit — more than double the level a year ago and the highest ratio in two decades. Net NPLs stand at 26.4 percent, and although the central bank aims to reduce the overall NPL ratio to 10 percent by early 2026, regulators acknowledge that returning to a more normal level of 4–5 percent could take five to ten years.

The financial pressure is also reflected in an unprecedented wave of loan-rescheduling requests. In the first nine months of the year, around 300 large corporate borrowers — including many of the country's most influential conglomerates across energy, textiles, construction, food processing, steel, and real estate — sought rescheduling or restructuring of BDT 2 trillion (USD 16.4 billion). Many companies requested repayment windows of five to fifteen years, down payments as low as 1 to 2 percent, and grace periods of up to three years. The central bank approved BDT 261.14 billion (USD 2.14 billion) in rescheduling out of BDT 1.96 trillion (USD 16.1 billion) in applications, including BDT 137.47 billion (USD 1.13 billion) in already-defaulted loans. A central bank committee reviewed the cases in 43 meetings and resolved about 900 out of 1,516 submissions.

This surge follows the introduction of a special rescheduling policy in September designed to support borrowers described as having defaulted due to external factors and to limit disruptions to investment and employment. Senior bankers, however, warn that repeatedly accommodating major borrowers — especially those with political links — risks reinforcing a culture of non-payment and weakening lending

discipline. They argue that the volume and scale of rescheduling requests reflect deeper structural problems in credit supervision and enforcement.

Industry leaders have also questioned whether the crisis has reached its peak. With elevated interest rates and subdued domestic demand, many firms face worsening repayment capacity. Business groups argue that high commercial lending rates are choking private-sector borrowing, while banks increasingly prefer investing in government treasury bonds that offer safer, double-digit returns. They contend that lending rates must fall below bond yields to revive investment, but the governor maintains that monetary easing will only be possible once inflation, currently at 8.2 percent, shows a sustained decline.

The stress within banks is further compounded by a heavy judicial backlog. As of June, more than BDT 4.07 trillion (USD 33.4 billion) in defaulted loans were tied up in 222,341 recovery cases. Between April and June, courts resolved 11,944 cases and recovered BDT 29.1 billion (USD 238 million), but 14,652 new cases involving BDT 969.04 billion (USD 7.94 billion) were filed.

Despite the banking sector's severe difficulties, regulators report some improvement in foreign-exchange liquidity ahead of Ramadan. Banks are able to open letters of credit for essential imports without delay, and the exchange rate is considered stable for now. [The Daily Star 1] [The Daily Star 2] [The Daily Star 3]

Bangladesh: Government initiates major nationwide police reshuffle ahead of elections

(lm) Bangladesh has carried out one of its most extensive law-enforcement reshuffles in recent months, reassigning senior leadership across multiple metropolitan areas while simultaneously rotating station-level commanders in the capital. The Home Ministry issued directives transferring 22 senior officers nationwide, including leadership changes in Khulna Metropolitan Police and Gazipur Metropolitan Police. The rotation covers several deputy inspector general–level positions and more than a dozen district superintendents, affecting command structures across key regions. [The Daily Star 1] [The Daily Star 2]

In Dhaka, the police headquarters ordered a major overhaul of the city's frontline leadership, transferring or reassigning officers-in-charge at 50 police stations

under the Dhaka Metropolitan Police. This is among the largest capital-area rotations this year and reflects an effort to recalibrate operational control across the city's precincts. [Dhaka Tribune]

No detailed justification was provided, but the scale and timing of the reshuffle—spanning both high-level metropolitan commands and grassroots station leadership—suggest a move to reposition law-enforcement structures ahead of the national elections.

Bangladesh: Government says all heavy weapons looted during unrest have been recovered

(lm) Bangladesh's interim government announced that all heavy weapons stolen from law enforcement agencies during the 2024 mass uprising culminating in the ouster of longtime Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina have now been recovered. Home Affairs Adviser Lt Gen (ret.) Jahangir Alam Chowdhury stated that authorities faced "no failure" in retrieving the weapons and that recovery efforts are ongoing, though he did not provide precise figures on how many items were looted or remain outstanding. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bhutan: Parliamentary upper house ratifies BIMSTEC maritime transport agreement

(lm) Bhutan's upper house of Parliament, the National Council (NC), has ratified the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation, marking a further step in the country's effort to strengthen regional connectivity. The decision follows earlier endorsement by the lower house, the National Assembly, and completes Bhutan's internal approval process ahead of the agreement's formal adoption in mid-December.

The agreement, which brings together Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, establishes a framework to expand trade links, logistics, and access to maritime facilities across the Bay of Bengal region—an important development for a landlocked state such as Bhutan. It sets out cooperation on maritime transport services, port access, assistance to vessels in distress, and mechanisms for dispute resolution and amendments.

Lawmakers noted that the arrangement aligns with Bhutan's broader economic strategy, including the planned Gelephu Mindfulness City — a flagship cross-border development zone near the southern border intended to attract international investment and promote sustainable, innovation-driven economic activity. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Parliamentary review highlights structural barriers to export-led growth

(lm) Bhutan's upper house of Parliament, the National Council (NC), reports that persistent structural and cross-border constraints continue to limit the country's ability to expand exports, strengthen manufacturing, and diversify trade. The findings come from a sectoral review intended to identify policy obstacles affecting Bhutan's competitiveness within the regional market.

Despite non-hydropower export earnings increasing from BTN 23 billion (USD 288 million) in 2015 to BTN 43.3 billion (USD 542 million) in 2024, Bhutan's export profile remains highly concentrated. A small group of commodities, led by ferro-silicon, dominates export revenue, and market dependence on India (72 percent of exports) and Bangladesh (14.6 percent) remains largely unchanged. The review notes that newer transport routes have not translated into easier market access due to infrastructure gaps, inconsistent transit rules, and limited direct connectivity to Bangladeshi ports.

Structural disadvantages in overland transport continue to weigh heavily on export competitiveness. Bhutanese trucks are restricted to 10 tons while Indian counterparts move more than 40 tons, creating cost differentials the private sector cannot absorb. Additional costs stem from newly imposed Suvidha service charges in West Bengal, with exporters reporting fees of INR 10,000 (USD 155) per truck at key transit points.

Manufacturing — which holds 13.5 percent of industrial licenses but contributes only 8 percent of GDP — is constrained by raw-material shortages, especially in wood-based industries, where domestic supply remains insufficient and imports exceed BTN 3.8 billion (USD 48 million) annually. Regulatory and structural issues further limit productivity: electricity tariff reforms have increased power costs for high-voltage industries, and retrospective billing of BTN 880 million (USD 11 million) has added volatility to cost structures. Skills shortages, restrictions on foreign

workers, and limited certification capacity impede technological upgrading.

Retail and wholesale activities show uneven recovery, particularly in border towns affected by competition from Indian markets. Trade infrastructure remains a systemic bottleneck: delays at Integrated Check Posts, gaps in cold-chain facilities, and the inability of Bhutanese vehicles to use India's FASTag system continue to slow cross-border movement.

The NC was scheduled to take up the recommendations on December 8. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Parliamentary upper house highlights structural weaknesses in disaster management and water governance

(lm) Bhutan's National Council has raised concerns that the country's core disaster-management and water-governance systems are not keeping pace with escalating climate pressures. Lawmakers argued that the flooding linked to Cyclone Montha in October—one of the most damaging climate-related events in recent years—exposed fundamental shortcomings in early-warning systems, inter-agency coordination and public communication. The government acknowledged severe capacity constraints, noting that disaster management still operates with minimal staff, limited infrastructure and fragmented responsibilities across multiple agencies.

At the same time, the Council questioned whether Bhutan's water-governance arrangements are structurally suited to rising climate variability. Watershed degradation, declining spring flows and uneven rainfall patterns are increasing pressure on water security, while institutional mandates remain split across ministries and local administrations. A number of proposed reforms were sent back for revision due to insufficient clarity on authority, financing and human-resource requirements.

The overarching concern in Parliament is that Bhutan's current institutional frameworks—both for disaster response and water management—require significant strengthening to address mounting climate-related risks and safeguard critical infrastructure, rural livelihoods and long-term resource security. [Kuensel 1] [Kuensel 2]

India: Government retreats on mandatory cybersecurity app

(dql) The telecom ministry has scrapped its directive requiring all smartphone manufacturers to ship devices with the “Sanchar Saathi” cybersecurity app pre-installed, retreating in the face of strong public and political resistance.

Sanchar Saathi is a cybersecurity and telecom-safety application developed by the Department of Telecommunications to help users identify fraudulent calls and messages, monitor mobile numbers registered in their name, verify handset authenticity, and block lost or stolen devices. What was presented as a measure to combat cyberfraud quickly escalated into a wider dispute over digital rights and the limits of state authority.

The government justified its reversal by pointing to a sharp rise in voluntary downloads, arguing that mandatory installation was no longer necessary.

However, opposition parties and civil-liberties advocates accused the government of attempting to quietly expand its surveillance capabilities, noting contradictions between official assurances and the original written order, which appeared to make the app non-removable. [The Tribune] [BBC]

Amnesty International sounds alarm over proposal for permanent phone location tracking

Meanwhile, Amnesty International has warned that a proposal of mandatory, always-on satellite location tracking for all smartphones poses serious risks to journalists, activists, and others whose movements could reveal sensitive networks. The group argues that, at a time of escalating global surveillance concerns, India should be strengthening protections rather than expanding state access to personal data.

The proposal—driven by the government’s push for more precise location information in investigations and supported by telecom operators—faces strong resistance from major smartphone makers such as Apple, Google, and Samsung, who cite significant privacy and security threats.

Opposition politicians and digital rights advocates accuse the government of edging India toward a “surveillance state,” with critics on social media likening the measures to turning mobile phones into “digital ankle monitors.” [Reuters] [Modern Diplomacy]

India: Lawmaker moves to criminalize marital rape

(dql) Opposition Congress Party MP Shashi Tharoor has introduced a bill in the Lower House seeking to amend the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) 2023 to remove the marital rape exception in Section 63, which currently exempts husbands from prosecution for non-consensual sex with wives above 18.

The bill highlights that married women are legally vulnerable under the current law, citing government data showing 83 percent of sexual violence against women occurs within marriage. [The Tribune]

The BNS is a proposed criminal code for India intended to replace the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which was originally drafted in 1860 during British colonial rule. The BNS is part of a broader initiative to modernize and Indianize the country's criminal laws, making them more in line with contemporary Indian society, values, and constitutional principles.

India: Supreme Court orders 30 percent women's representation in state Bar councils

(dql) India's Supreme Court has instructed state Bar councils that have not yet begun their election process to ensure that women hold 30 percent of council seats this year, combining elected positions (20%) with co-opted members (10 percent) where necessary. The Court declined to interfere in states where elections are already underway, instead urging voters to consciously support women candidates.

The directive responds to petitions seeking one-third female representation and at least one rotating leadership role for women in every state Bar council, echoing an earlier Supreme Court order mandating similar quotas in the Supreme Court Bar Association.

The Bar Council of India signaled support for a minimum 30 percent quota but noted that some states have very few practicing women advocates, making co-option essential to meet the target. [The Tribune]

India: Coal-dominated power mix sparks concern over growth, sustainability

(dql) The power ministry has unveiled that no decision has been taken on whether to expand the country's coal fleet after 2035, despite recent reports suggesting authorities may consider building new plants well into the 2040s. Power Secretary Pankaj Agarwal stated that India expects to have 307 GW of coal capacity by 2035 but stressed that any commitments beyond that timeline would be premature. [Reuters]

This clarification comes amid speculation that India could pursue a major coal buildout stretching to 2047, potentially raising capacity to around 420 GW—almost double current levels. Coal remains central to India's electricity system, supplying roughly 60 percent of power generation, and annual additions have recently climbed back to multi-year highs.

Although renewable installations are accelerating, coal is still viewed as indispensable for managing peak demand and preventing blackouts during extreme weather events. Policymakers continue to argue that coal will remain part of the energy mix for at least two more decades, with the focus shifting to how it can be used more sustainably. [Oilprice.com]

Parliamentary panel warns against coal dependence

Meanwhile, a parliamentary committee has cautioned that the country's continued dependence on coal for electricity risks undermining economic growth, raising power costs, and weakening climate ambitions. The panel stressed that affordable and reliable energy is essential for India's goal of becoming a developed economy by 2047, but coal's dominance has driven up tariffs, contributed to pollution, strained state finances, and hurt industrial competitiveness.

The committee found major government solar schemes, including a program aimed at expanding solar in agriculture, are progressing slowly. Ground-mounted projects lag far behind targets, off-grid pumps show uneven results, and grid-connected solar uptake remains limited. Farmers also face high costs for connecting their solar systems to the grid.

India's rooftop solar initiative has attracted strong interest but lags in actual installations, with several states performing poorly due to approvals bottlenecks, subsidy delays, and vendor shortages. The committee urged the ministry to address these gaps and to replicate successful state models.

The report also highlighted the mismatch between India's rapidly rising solar demand and its limited domestic manufacturing capability. Despite sizable module production capacity, imports remain high. The

committee called for expanded manufacturing incentives, the development of “Model Solar Cities,” and better integration of rooftop solar with housing schemes. [The Week]

India: Rupee depreciates to record low amid capital outflows and US tariffs

(ppms) The Indian rupee (INR) breached the critical 90-to-the-US-dollar psychological threshold on December 3 hitting a new all-time low and signaling intensified pressure on India’s external accounts. The currency's rapid decline—slipping 5 percent this year and making it the worst-performing Asian currency—stems from a convergence of external headwinds and significant capital outflows, despite India's domestic economy displaying strong real GDP growth.

Foreign Portfolio Outflows (FPIs)

Foreign investors have been persistent net sellers of Indian equities, withdrawing a massive net amount of approximately USD 17 billion so far in 2025. This sell-off, which included a heavy exodus from equities in July, August, and September, has created chronic dollar demand in the market. Analysts attribute the accelerated selling in December primarily to currency concerns, as a falling rupee erodes dollar-denominated returns for foreign investors, leading them to reallocate capital to developed markets or other emerging economies.

US trade standoff and tariff blows

The lack of progress on a bilateral trade deal with the US, combined with the imposition of steep US tariffs—up to 50 percent—on Indian merchandise exports, has severely impacted export earnings. Merchandise exports contracted by 11.8 percent year-on-year in October 2025, while imports surged, driven by a 188 percent jump in gold imports for the festive season. This combination pushed the trade deficit to a record high of over USD 41 billion, significantly increasing the demand for dollars and putting persistent downward pressure on the rupee.

Reserve Bank of India policy stance

Unlike previous episodes, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has shown reluctance to aggressively intervene and spend its foreign exchange reserves to defend the 90-mark. Instead, the central bank appears to be allowing a "calibrated" or "orderly depreciation," focusing on preventing disorderly market volatility

rather than defending a specific exchange rate. This strategic decision permits the rupee to act as a "shock absorber" to maintain the price competitiveness of Indian exports against the disadvantage posed by the new US tariffs.

The depreciation risks a surge in imported inflation as the landed cost of key commodities like crude oil, edible oils, and electronics increases. Manufacturers of consumer goods have already signaled price hikes of 3-7 percent starting in December/January to compensate for the cost of imported components and memory chips, potentially negating the consumer benefit of recent Goods and Services Tax (GST) rate reductions.

While policymakers have indicated the government is "not losing sleep" over the decline, the currency slide highlights a fundamental tension between robust domestic growth and underlying external vulnerabilities. [Reuters] [Times of India] [Economic Times]

India: Aviation ministry moves to penalize IndiGo airline over nationwide travel disruptions

(dql) The Civil Aviation Ministry has vowed to impose tough penalties on IndiGo, the country's largest airline, after the abrupt cancellation of more than 2,000 flights in December due to a crew shortage caused by poor planning for new pilot rest rules which came into force last month.

The mass disruptions left hundreds of thousands of travelers stranded and triggered widespread anger, including complaints about lost baggage. Regulators have already issued notices to the carrier's top executives, warning that sanctions could include fines or suspensions.

The airline has effectively admitted a major strategic breakdown. It severely underestimated the operational impact of the new safety rules, failed to overhaul its complex crew rostering system in advance, and did not bolster staffing to match increased requirements. Instead of treating the regulatory shift as a structural safety reform, IndiGo approached it as a routine compliance exercise. [NDTV]

The crisis has shaken investor confidence: IndiGo's share price has fallen sharply, erasing billions in market value, while ratings agencies warn of potentially severe financial fallout. Analysts estimate a notable earnings hit if the turmoil continues. [CNBC]

With IndiGo commanding roughly two-thirds of the domestic aviation market, the meltdown has intensified concerns about over-reliance on a single dominant airline. [Reuters]

India: Extradited syndicate member Anmol Bishnoi held in custody in high-profile cases

(dql) The Delhi Special National Investigation Agency (NIA) court has extended the custody of Anmol Bishnoi, brother of gangster Lawrence Bishnoi, by seven days, until December 12. Anmol, a central figure in Bishnoi's transnational criminal network, was extradited from the U.S. in November 2024 and is being interrogated for involvement in multiple high-profile crimes, including the killings of opposition Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader Siddique.

Previously on the NIA's most-wanted list, Anmol had been evading capture since 2022, directing gang operations from abroad, providing logistics and weapons, and facilitating terrorist activities for Lawrence Bishnoi and Goldy Brar—a leader of the syndicate linked to Lawrence Bishnoi. [ETV Bharat] [ANI News]

In a separate case, a Delhi court has extended by 10 days the NIA's custody of Soyab, who is accused of sheltering Red Fort bomber Umar-un Nabi. Soyab appeared before the court on December 4 under heavy security after completing an earlier 10-day custodial period granted on November 26. Media coverage of the proceedings was barred.

The NIA told the court it needed additional time to question Soyab, who is the seventh person arrested in connection with the case. According to the agency, he allegedly provided logistical support to Umar-un Nabi ahead of the Delhi bombing.

The investigation is linked to a "white-collar" terror network first uncovered by the Jammu and Kashmir Police. The NIA says it is still pursuing multiple leads, conducting searches in several states to identify other individuals involved in the attack. [Business Standard]

The charges against Soyab arise in the wake of the November 10 Red Fort car-blast, when a vehicle laden with explosives detonated near the historic Red Fort in Delhi, killing at least 13 people and injuring more than 20 (see AiR No. 45, November/2025, 2). Investigators later confirmed through DNA tests that the driver was

Umar Un Nabi, a doctor linked to a larger “white-collar terror module.”

India: Maoist insurgents surrender amid major anti-militant push

(dql) Ten senior Naxal fighters, collectively carrying bounties worth USD 285,000, have surrendered to Madhya Pradesh state authorities.

The group, linked to the Communist Party of India’s (Maoist’s) Bhorsadev area committee and active across forested zones spanning the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Chhattisgarh, handed over weapons including AK-47 and INSAS rifles. The Bhorsadev has long served as a Maoist operational pocket.

Chief Minister Yadav declared that Madhya Pradesh’s Dindori and Mandla districts are now free of Naxal influence and announced a full-scale push to eradicate remaining Maoist activity in Balaghat district from January. Balaghat is strategically sensitive because it connects Maoist-affected regions of three states and has been one of the last active Maoist zones in Madhya Pradesh. [The Tribune]

India: Military aircraft maintenance facility launched

(dql) U.S. Lockheed Martin and Indian Tata Advanced Systems Limited (TASL) inaugurated a new maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO) facility for C-130J military transport aircraft in Bengaluru, scheduled for completion by the end of 2026, with operations starting in early 2027. The C-130J is used for tactical airlift, humanitarian missions, and special operations.

The facility will provide comprehensive depot-level maintenance, component repair, avionics upgrades, structural checks, and training for Indian engineers, while creating opportunities for local suppliers.

The move aligns with India’s plans to expand its medium transport aircraft fleet, as the Air Force considers acquiring up to 80 aircraft and Lockheed Martin has proposed the C-130J. The project builds on the existing Tata-Lockheed Martin joint venture in Hyderabad and strengthens India’s domestic aerospace ecosystem. [The Tribune]

India: Space agency eyes seven missions through 2026

(dql) The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has outlined seven missions through March 2026, including six satellite launches and the first uncrewed Gaganyaan mission. The Gaganyaan test flight will carry the humanoid robot Vyomamitra to demonstrate key mission operations, from launch and orbit to re-entry, paving the way for a crewed mission with three Indian astronauts planned in 2027.

Key upcoming launches include the US BlueBird Block-2 satellite and PSLV-C62, which will deploy the earth observation satellite EOS-N1 alongside 18 smaller satellites. Strategic and technological goals are also highlighted, with missions such as TDS-01 testing high-thrust electric propulsion, an indigenous travelling-wave tube amplifier, and quantum key distribution.

Additionally, NewSpace India Limited (NSIL)— a central government-owned company under the Department of Space—, in partnership with Indian industry, will produce and launch the first fully domestically manufactured PSLV for oceanographic and joint international satellite missions. NSIL plans to expand commercial satellite deployment, including at least three more communication satellites over the next three to four years. [The Tribunes]

Maldives: Parliament closes 2025 session after passing key structural and governance amendments

(ya) Parliament has adjourned for its year-end recess after completing what Speaker Abdul Raheem Abdulla described as 82 percent of its scheduled work for 2025. The final session included 28 sittings totaling 64 hours, during which lawmakers passed 18 bills—several of them carrying long-term structural implications for the political system [see articles below]. [The Sun]

Maldives: Deadline for national fiscal responsibility charter extended to two years

(lm) President Mohamed Muizzu has ratified an amendment to the National Fiscal Responsibility Act that extends the deadline for drafting the country's fiscal responsibility charter from six months to two years. The amendment, passed by Parliament on

December 1, stipulates that the charter must be drafted, approved, and published in the Government Gazette within 24 months of the Act's entry into force.

During this extended period, the amendment suspends two key obligations: the implementation of measures arising from the fiscal responsibility charter, and the requirement to conduct feasibility studies before adding Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP) projects to the annual State Budget.

The new timeline means the fiscal responsibility charter must be completed and published by December 3, 2026. [The Sun]

Maldives: President ratifies amendment allowing state-owned companies to develop tourist resorts

(ya) President Mohamed Muizzu has ratified the 16th Amendment to the Maldives Tourism Act, enabling state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to be allocated islands, land, or lagoons for developing tourist resorts and related facilities. The amendment, passed during Parliament's 28th sitting, authorizes SOEs to construct tourist resorts, tourism-training resorts, integrated resorts, and yacht ports.

The law introduces several procedural changes, including the ability to extend lease and development periods, determine the size of rural lagoons leased for tourism, and defer rent and penalties during redevelopment closures. Tourism-training resorts are formally recognized as service facilities, with defined procedures for leasing and operation. Guesthouses and hotels may now be developed within residential islands or cities, with associated revenue directed to local councils.

The amendment also tightens licensing rules for tourism-planning services, requiring both domestic and foreign operators to obtain proper license; unlicensed provision of services may result in fines of up to MVR 1 million (USD 65,000). The government has already been assigning projects outside traditional SOE mandates, and the amendment now establishes a legal basis for SOEs to operate within the tourism sector. The Act further empowers the President to allocate islands, land, or lagoons for resort development, including areas under local council jurisdiction. [The Sun 1]

Former Tourism Minister Abdulla Mausoom sharply criticized the shift, arguing that SOEs lack the

operational and financial capacity for large-scale resort development. He cited earlier state-backed tourism ventures that stalled due to funding and execution shortfalls—referencing the unfinished hotel project of the State Trading Organization (STO), a major state-owned conglomerate—as evidence that public companies have not been able to deliver in this sector. He warned that moving SOEs into core tourism operations risks displacing private investors and creating opportunities for misuse of public resources.

Mausoom also linked the risk to the legacy of the Maldives Marketing and Public Relations Corporation (MMPRC) corruption scandal, a large-scale diversion of state funds uncovered in the mid-2010s that involved senior officials and widespread misuse of tourism leases. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) reported in late 2025 that it is still investigating 37 MMPRC-related cases, with 15 under duty prosecution, and has ordered the recovery of MVR 123.7 million (USD 8 million). Earlier updates stated that 115 cases had been concluded with recovery directives totaling MVR 640 million (USD 41.6 million), though progress has been slowed by disputes over which authority should file civil claims and by challenges in obtaining bank records. [The Sun 2]

Maldives: Government abolishes monthly office allowance for former presidents

(lm) President Mohamed Muizzu has ratified legislation eliminating the MVR 175,000 (USD 11,375) monthly office-expense allowance previously granted to former presidents under a perks package introduced in 2009. The amendment was passed unanimously by Parliament with 68 votes, including from opposition lawmakers, following a bill submitted in November.

The new law removes the office-expense allowance and further bars former presidents from receiving any financial perks during periods in which they serve a second presidential term or hold another state position. It also states that former presidents will not be entitled to state-provided security if they reside abroad.

While the financial package for former presidents is reduced, the amendment expands benefits for former vice presidents by introducing a monthly allowance of MVR 30,000 (USD 1,950) and providing coverage for medical treatment in the Maldives and overseas. These benefits likewise do not apply when a former vice president holds another state role.

The legislation also includes a provision allowing the government to adjust allowances for former presidents and former vice presidents without parliamentary approval during periods of economic crisis. President Muizzu had signaled the intention to cut such perks in September. Existing allowances—established in 2009—include MVR 50,000 (USD 3,250) in monthly entitlement for former presidents who served one term, MVR 75,000 (USD 4,875) for those who served two terms, MVR 50,000 (USD 3,250) as a living allowance, and the now-abolished MVR 175,000 (USD 11,375) office-expense allocation. These benefits have been widely criticized as wasteful. [The Sun]

Maldives: EC confirms April 2026 local elections as party financing landscape narrows ahead of vote

(ya) The Elections Commission (EC) has scheduled the local council elections and Women's Development Committee (WDC) elections for April 4, 2026, with representatives to be elected from 226 constituencies nationwide. The WDCs operate as community-level bodies in every island or city, mandated to advance women's participation in local development, welfare initiatives, and community decision-making. Political parties have begun preparing for the vote, with the ruling People's National Congress (PNC)—the Maldives' largest party—opening candidacy submissions earlier this week.

The election timetable follows a series of constitutional and legislative changes passed by Parliament, where the government holds a majority. These amendments abolished atoll councils and reduced councillor numbers on sparsely populated islands, reshaping the local governance structure ahead of the 2026 polls. [The Sun 1]

Separately, the EC confirmed that four political parties qualify for state funding in 2026 under the Political Parties Act, which allocates financing to parties with at least 10,000 registered members. The formula provides funding equal to 0.1 percent of projected government revenue, based on the MVR 64.2 billion (USD 4.17 billion) revenue estimate in the 2026 budget.

The ruling PNC, led by President Mohamed Muizzu and currently the country's largest political organization with 68,665 members, qualifies for funding. The main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), historically one of the Maldives' most influential parties and now counting 43,765 members, also meets the

threshold. Two additional parties—the Maldives Development Alliance (MDA), a long-standing partner in multiple governing coalitions, and the Jumhoory Party (JP), a centrist party with a history of pivotal roles in coalition governments—likewise exceed the membership requirement.

By comparison, five parties received state funding this year, totaling MVR 27.9 million (USD 1.81 million), indicating that the party system has narrowed going into the 2026 local elections. [The Sun 2]

Maldives: Main opposition party stabilizes leadership, but factional conflict shifts to Malé mayoral primary

(ya/lm) The main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) has temporarily resolved its leadership vacuum, but factional tensions remain pronounced as the party prepares for nationwide local council and Women's Development Committee elections scheduled for April 4, 2026.

The National Assembly elected Hanimaadhoo MP Abdul Ghafoor Moosa (Gapo) as interim chair on December 8, with 65 members supporting his appointment. The position became vacant after Fayyaz Ismail resigned on November 23, citing internal unrest and wanting to give party leaders more space to manage affairs. Two earlier attempts to elect an interim chair collapsed amid disputes between the factions aligned with former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih and former President Mohamed Nasheed, including a contested count involving Nasheed-backed candidate Abdulla Waheed, who later resigned.

Before the final vote, Fayyaz publicly endorsed Ghafoor, who subsequently assured members he would act independently and not under any individual's influence. The party has decided to elect a permanent chair only after the April 2026 elections. [The Sun 1] [The Sun 2] [The Sun 3] [The Sun 4]

Separately, the Malé City mayoral primary has become a second arena of intra-party tension. Former Defence Minister Mariya Ahmed Didi, a senior MDP figure, publicly criticized incumbent Mayor Adam Azim after remarks in which he appeared to suggest he had revived the party following its electoral defeats. Mariya argued that no individual could claim such credit, highlighting the longstanding mobilization of the party's activist base. The mayoral contest has pitted Adam Azim against former MP Ali Azim, with senior

party members backing opposing candidates. Supporters of Adam Azim have accused Ali Azim of distancing himself from the party during difficult periods, while presenting Adam Azim as having consistently contributed to the party and to past MDP administrations. [The Sun 5] [The Sun 6]

Maldives: Former Chief Justice challenges President's interpretation of party-based MP removal

(lm) Former Chief Justice Ahmed Abdulla Didi has publicly rejected President Mohamed Muizzu's claim that political parties have the authority to remove sitting MPs, arguing that the Constitution provides no such power. His intervention responds to remarks Muizzu made during a community meeting in Malé, where the President defended the Sixth Constitutional Amendment—ratified in November 2024—which introduced automatic seat loss for MPs who leave, are expelled from, or join a political party during their term.

Didi stressed that the Maldives elects MPs through a single-member district system, not a party-list system, and that voters choose individuals rather than parties. He argued that interpreting MPs as "party-elected" has no legal grounding and contradicts comparative democratic practice, where parties cannot unseat members elected in constituency-based systems.

The amendment, passed by a parliamentary supermajority, remains highly contested among legal experts and opposition figures, who warn it places MPs "under lock and key." A petition seeking to nullify the provision is currently pending before the Supreme Court, with no recent procedural movement. [The Sun]

Maldives: Parliament dismisses Criminal Court judge over release of suspected drug-trafficking ringleader

(lm) Parliament has dismissed Criminal Court Judge Hussain Faiz Rashad following a request from the Judicial Service Commission (JSC), which concluded that the judge violated the Constitution and relevant laws when he ordered the release of a man identified by police as a leading figure in a major drug-trafficking case. Faiz had been under a 60-day suspension when the vote was taken. Parliament approved his removal with a 56–8 majority.

The JSC opened its inquiry after Faiz ordered the release of Ali Anwar Mohamed, a Maldivian national arrested in 2019 during a large-scale drug-interdiction operation involving an Iranian vessel. Police identified Anwar as one of three ringleaders of the smuggling operation. After his release—issued once his initial five-day remand expired—Anwar fled to Sri Lanka, was denied entry, and was deported back to the Maldives.

Faiz cited alleged procedural violations by police, including the execution of a search warrant after the arrest and the failure to recover evidence from that search. The JSC, after reviewing the case, found constitutional and legal breaches and submitted its dismissal request to Parliament. The Judiciary Committee reviewed the JSC's documentation and reported no procedural irregularities or records of any complaint filed by Faiz against the Commission's decision, clearing the matter for a full floor vote.

Faiz had previously been suspended in November 2021 over leaked audio purportedly connected to former President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom's money-laundering trial, although the JSC lifted that suspension the following month after determining the audio did not match his voice. Faiz has served in the judiciary since his transfer from the Civil Court to the Criminal Court in 2019; before that, he was president of the Employment Tribunal. [The Sun 1] [The Sun 2]

Maldives: Dispute over land-lease document reignites scrutiny of decisions from President Muizzu's mayoral tenure

(lm) A controversy within the Male' City Council has resurfaced over a land-lease agreement originating from the period when Mohamed Muizzu—now President of the Maldives—served as Mayor of Male'. The issue gained new prominence after current Mayor Adam Azim accused Villimale' Councillor Nahula Ali of destroying a council document related to that agreement and reported the matter to the police and the Local Government Authority (LGA).

Councillor Nahula denies destroying any official records and says she tore only a duplicate copy. She contends that the real issue is the validity of a land-lease agreement signed under Muizzu's mayoralty, when nine development projects were approved but only three were later formally published by the incoming administration. One of the unpublished agreements concerned the allocation of land in Villimale', an island district of the capital, to a private party for the development of an outdoor gym.

Nahula alleges that the agreement was later back-dated, raising questions about its legality and its omission from the publicly released Villimale' land register. She says she brought these concerns to light during Azim's campaign, which she believes triggered the current accusations against her. [The Sun]

Maldives: Prosecutors drop data-tampering case against former state housing executives

(lm) The Prosecutor General's Office has decided not to file charges against Ibrahim Fazul Rasheed, former Managing Director of the Housing Development Corporation (HDC), and Abdulla Shuhood, HDC's former head of IT, after determining that there is insufficient evidence to prove allegations that they deleted digital records to obstruct an investigation. HDC is the state-owned company responsible for urban development on Hulhumalé, a major reclaimed island near Malé.

The allegations surfaced after leaked documents circulated on social media in December 2023, appearing to show that several individuals—including Fazul's brother, at the time a deputy managing director at the Malé Water and Sewerage Company, another state-owned enterprise—had been allocated land under the government's "Binveriya" housing scheme, despite not appearing on the official list of approved beneficiaries. The Binveriya program is a national land-allocation initiative designed to distribute plots to Maldivian citizens who lack housing.

Fazul denied wrongdoing, arguing that HDC was not responsible for issuing plots under Binveriya and that the appearance of his brother's name was coincidental. After the leaks, Fazul and Shuhood were accused of tampering with or deleting HDC server records that might reveal irregularities. However, both HDC's internal IT unit and the police reported that they found no evidence of deleted or altered data, leading prosecutors to conclude that a criminal case could not be pursued.

Fazul resigned from HDC on December 21, 2023, following a second set of leaked documents suggesting that some individuals had obtained apartments in the Vinares housing project—a state-led apartment initiative—using forged payment slips tied to the compensation process for the failed SeaLife Global housing development. He stated that he stepped down "to make way for the investigation," while maintaining his innocence. The government later appointed former

construction minister Mohamed Mauroof Jameel as HDC's new managing director.

The controversy unfolded amid widespread public frustration over delays and perceived irregularities in both Binveriya and Gedhoruveriya, the administration's two flagship housing programs intended to address chronic shortages in Greater Malé. Despite the unresolved political fallout, Fazul remains active within the ruling People's National Congress (PNC), the party of President Mohamed Muizzu. [The Sun]

Maldives: Island council president suspended over financial and administrative rule breaches

(lm) The Local Government Authority (LGA) has suspended Hoarafushi Council President Mohamed Waheed for three months without pay after an inquiry found repeated breaches of financial and administrative rules. The cases reviewed by the LGA included improper spending, irregular land-allocation decisions, failures in procurement oversight, and non-compliance with information-disclosure obligations.

The LGA concluded that Waheed, as council president, failed to ensure basic governance standards, and it has recommended further action against senior administrative staff. The decision follows similar recent LGA interventions across other island councils. [The Sun]

Maldives: Death penalty introduced for high-volume drug trafficking

(ya) The Maldives has enacted major amendments to the Drugs Act after President Mohamed Muizzu ratified a bill passed by Parliament introducing the death penalty for trafficking certain quantities of *Schedule-I* drugs—the category in Maldivian law reserved for the most strictly controlled narcotic substances. The amendments take effect in three months and apply when trafficking exceeds defined thresholds: more than 350 grams of cannabis, more than 250 grams of diamorphine (heroin), or more than 100 grams of other Schedule-I drugs. Any death sentence must be unanimously upheld by the full bench of the Supreme Court before implementation.

The previous penalty for trafficking—25 years to life imprisonment and fines of MVR 100,000 (USD 6,500) to MVR 10 million (USD 650,000)—has been replaced with "natural-life" imprisonment for cases not meeting the new death-penalty thresholds.

The amendments also expand the country's anti-drug framework by creating additional offences, including facilitation services and financing activity; granting police authority to seize vehicles, vessels, and premises used for trafficking; strengthening regulation of newly emerging substances; and updating the Drug Court's operational rules and treatment mechanisms. Offences that carry life imprisonment or the death penalty are no longer eligible for clemency, parole, or plea agreements, and law-enforcement agencies receive expanded investigative powers. [The Sun 1] [The Sun 2]

Former Islamic Minister Ahmed Ziyad Bagir warned that the new legal framework could lead to innocent individuals being convicted and executed. He questioned whether consultations were held with the Fiqh Council—the national Islamic advisory body that issues religious legal opinions (fatwas) and provides guidance on matters of Sharia—or with the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. [The Sun 3]

The legislative overhaul coincides with a nationwide crackdown. Police announced that mid-last week they arrested the ringleaders of one of Addu City's largest drug-trafficking networks as part of Operation Alimagu, a national counter-narcotics campaign targeting senior figures within trafficking organizations. Although identities were not released, investigators reported that the group—active since 2017—had moved more than MVR 19 million (USD 1.24 million) through accounts linked to four senior members over the past five years. [The Sun 4]

Maldives: President says he has no authority to release detainees accused of serious crimes amid debate over pre-trial detention

(ya) President Mohamed Muizzu has stated that he has no constitutional authority to release individuals held in pre-trial detention on serious criminal charges, responding to public criticism that his campaign pledge to reform pre-trial detention has not yet materialized. Speaking to residents of Maafannu, a ward of Malé City, he acknowledged long-standing delays in criminal

proceedings but stressed that releases cannot be ordered by the executive.

Muizzu said that delays had persisted because the Criminal Court and Drug Court previously lacked sufficient space and resources, and that relocating both institutions had allowed hearings for detainees to begin moving again. He rejected the suggestion that detainees could be released immediately, emphasizing that 347 individuals remain in custody pending trial, including defendants accused of murder, terrorism, child sexual abuse, fighting, drug trafficking, and other serious offences. He argued that releasing such suspects without judicial proceedings would be inappropriate and beyond his authority.

The President reiterated that his administration will not interfere with the judiciary and aims to "liberalize" the courts while still pursuing reforms to eventually lift the ban on pre-trial detention. His remarks come as civil society groups have launched the "End Vaanuva" campaign, which seeks to draw attention to prolonged pre-trial detention and the need for faster case processing in the Maldivian justice system. [The Sun]

Maldives: Former agriculture minister appointed to Human Rights Commission

(lm) Former Agriculture Minister Dr. Aishath Rameela has been appointed as a member of the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives (HRCM), following her nomination by President Mohamed Muizzu. Parliament had already approved her candidacy in October with unanimous support from all 64 lawmakers present. She replaces Mariyam Muna, whose term as president of the HRCM concluded on November 30. [The Sun]

Maldives: Concerns grow over unpaid government electricity bills and undisclosed costs for President's Office media facility

(ya/lm) Maldives' national electricity provider, the State Electric Company (STELCO)—the state-owned utility responsible for public electricity supply—has refused to disclose the outstanding electricity bills owed to it by state-owned enterprises, government authorities, and independent institutions. A request submitted under the Right to Information Act for arrears as of late October was denied, with STELCO stating that releasing the information could negatively affect the

company's interests. Journalists have learned that several agencies owe large amounts, but these figures cannot be verified due to the company's decision to withhold the information. STELCO is reported to be facing financial difficulties linked to the unpaid dues. [The Sun 1]

Former President Abdulla Yameen commented publicly on the situation, stating at a People's National Front (PNF) rally that the mounting unpaid bills by government agencies could leave the company unable to purchase turbine fuel. He said that while households face electricity disconnections for non-payment, ministries and state institutions with large arrears do not face similar action. Yameen also referred to unpaid bills owed to STELCO by some companies, and he claimed that withholding information prevents public scrutiny of the company's financial position. [The Sun 2]

Separately, the President's Office has not disclosed the cost of establishing the "Media Fenda," a small grandstand built opposite the President's Office earlier this year and shut down a few months after its inauguration after journalists staged repeated protests there against proposed media legislation.

A request submitted under the Right to Information Act sought details on the cost of constructing the Media Fenda, the contracting process, the rationale for creating the facility, and the complaints that led to its closure. Although the President's Office initially requested more time and received a 14-day extension, it has not provided the requested information, nor any explanation for the continued delay, more than 48 days after the extension expired. [The Sun 3]

Maldives: President signals possible easing of capital residency rule as fiscal update shows 90 percent of housing funds unused

(lm) President Mohamed Muizzu has indicated that his administration may revise—or potentially remove—the five-year registered residency requirement in Malé that determines eligibility for land allocations under state housing schemes in the capital. He made the remarks during a community meeting with residents of Henveiru, one of Malé's central districts.

The current policy differentiates between individuals registered in Malé and residents of Malé whose official registration remains in another island, with the former

subject to a five-year minimum requirement and the latter to 15 years. Muizzu said these criteria are now under consideration as part of ongoing housing-policy adjustments. [The Sun 1]

His remarks come against the backdrop of a fiscal update showing that 90 percent of the housing budget remains unused this year. Although Muizzu announced an intention to earmark MVR 3 billion (USD 195 million) for housing—with MVR 1.5 billion (USD 97.5 million) worth of projects expected to proceed—the supermajority budget approved by Parliament allocated MVR 1.8 billion (USD 117 million). By November 27, only MVR 183.9 million (USD 11.95 million) had been spent, representing just 10 percent of the allocation and marking a steep year-on-year decline in capital spending.

The broader capital budget is also underutilized: out of MVR 12.6 billion (USD 819 million) allocated for development, only MVR 5.2 billion (USD 338 million) has been spent, compared with MVR 11.2 billion during the same period last year. Critics argue that significant projects have been diverted to government-owned companies, while spending on loss-making state-owned enterprises has risen sharply to MVR 1.96 billion (USD 127 million) despite an allocation of just MVR 378 million (USD 24.6 million).

Muizzu—who previously served as Housing Minister and as Mayor of Malé—has pledged to provide housing for every Maldivian over the age of 18 within five years, but many projects promised under the previous administration remain delayed. Looking ahead, he has approved a MVR 64 billion (USD 4.16 billion) budget for 2026 and has pledged to prioritize the health sector while creating fiscal space for his housing commitments. [The Sun 2]

Maldives: Food prices continue rising — sugar, coffee among hardest hits

(ya) Food prices in the Maldives — including staples such as sugar and coffee — rose again in November, continuing an upward trend in essential-commodity inflation. According to the latest Essential Commodities Price Index (ECPI) from the national statistics bureau, year-on-year inflation for essential goods increased by 0.73 percent, even as month-on-month prices dipped slightly by 0.69 percent overall. Notably, beverages — especially coffee and coffee substitutes — saw a sharp rise: November prices jumped nearly 9 percent compared to the same period last year. Prices for personal-care items and confectioneries also rose,

adding to broader cost-of-living pressures across the capital and beyond. [The Sun]

Maldives: Central bank designated manager of national Zakat Fund under new law

(ya) President Mohamed Muizzu has ratified legislation designating the Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA)—the country's central bank—as the official custodian of the national Zakat Fund, with the law taking effect on January 1, 2026. The bill passed Parliament unanimously.

Zakat is a compulsory form of almsgiving in Islam, collected for charitable and social-welfare purposes. In the Maldives, it has traditionally been managed by the state under the broader public-finance system. The new law removes Zakat administration from the general treasury and requires that all Zakat collections be placed in a dedicated account maintained by the central bank, ensuring clear separation from other government funds.

The current Maldives Zakat House—the entity responsible for administering Zakat—will be reorganized as an agency under the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. [The Sun]

Nepal: Mounting pressure for accountability as Gen Z accord stalls and rights bodies intensify scrutiny of protest killings

(ec/lm) Nepal is facing growing pressure to deliver credible accountability for the September Gen Z protests, during which 76 people were killed, including 19 unarmed youths shot near Parliament on the first day. Nearly three months after the youth-led anti-corruption uprising toppled the coalition government of former prime minister KP Sharma Oli, the interim administration under Prime Minister Sushila Karki is struggling to demonstrate that state institutions can address one of the gravest episodes of state violence since the 1996–2006 civil war between Maoist insurgents and the state that resulted in over 13,000 deaths before a peace agreement ended the fighting.

Two parallel developments now shape public perceptions of accountability. First, a long-promised political accord between the government and Gen Z

representatives—intended to formalize commitments on truth-seeking, legal safeguards, and the handling of arrests—remains delayed. Despite instructions from the prime minister, officials have failed to finalize the agreement, heightening suspicion among youth groups that bureaucratic resistance is slowing the process or attempting to reshape its content. The core dispute concerns whether the killings should fall under transitional justice principles. Gen Z insists they should, while senior officials resist—fearing such classification could implicate former political leaders of the dissolved coalition. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Second, the high-level investigation commission led by former Special Court chair Gauri Bahadur Karki is nearing the end of its three-month mandate without questioning either Oli or former home minister Ramesh Lekhak, who oversaw internal security during the protests. Both have avoided appearing, citing preparations for their parties' general conventions. The commission, having already taken statements from dozens of police officers, now plans to summon them —seen as a direct test of the state's willingness to examine command responsibility. Former inspector general of police Chandra Kuber Khapung has meanwhile told the Supreme Court that police actions were lawful and directed by district authorities, arguing against disciplinary measures. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

These political uncertainties intersect with sharper assessments from human-rights bodies. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)—which has interviewed 154 individuals—is finalizing a report concluding that the previous government failed to anticipate the scale of the protests and that declining morale within security agencies contributed to lethal escalation. The NHRC's preliminary findings describe peaceful demonstrations turning deadly after police shootings triggered widespread arson and vandalism. The commission also highlights chronic institutional weaknesses, noting that only 13.29 percent of its recommendations were fully implemented last year. [The Kathmandu Post 3]

A new briefing by Amnesty International goes further, documenting unlawful killings, excessive and unnecessary force, and systemic failures in policing assemblies. Based on verified eyewitness accounts and medical evidence, Amnesty describes the dangerous use of tear gas—including inside hospital areas—rubber-coated metal bullets fired into crowds containing minors, and the deployment of live ammunition in circumstances where no imminent threat to life existed. These actions violated Nepal's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil

and Political Rights and contravened UN standards on the use of force. [The Kathmandu Post 4]

Nepal: Mounting legal battles, security mobilization, and political pressure reshape a fraught pre-election landscape

(ec/lm) Nepal's approach to the March 5, 2026 parliamentary elections is unfolding under a convergence of constitutional disputes, security anxieties, and escalating political demands that together define the most complex pre-poll environment since the end of the Maoist conflict, the decade-long insurgency (1996–2006) that transformed Nepal's political system. The interim administration of Prime Minister Sushila Karki, appointed after the September Gen Z uprising toppled the previous coalition, is being forced to manage simultaneous challenges to its authority, legitimacy, and logistical capacity.

A central pressure point is the Supreme Court's decision to advance a constitutional petition filed by the Communist Party of Nepal–Unified Marxist–Leninist (CPN-UML), which argues that President Ramchandra Paudel acted unconstitutionally when he dissolved the House of Representatives in September and appointed Karki as an interim prime minister despite her not being a sitting lawmaker. The Court's constitutional bench has sought written explanations from the Office of the President and relevant state bodies but declined to halt preparations for the March vote. The petitioners contend that Article 76 of the constitution requires any prime minister to be a member of the lower house and demand that all presidential actions from September 12 onward—including the dissolution of the House—be invalidated. If upheld, the case could retroactively call into question the legal foundation of the interim government itself, further complicating the election calendar. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

This judicial contest intensified further when seven former lawmakers from the Nepali Congress, including the party's chief whip and whip, filed an additional petition seeking restoration of the dissolved House. The petition, submitted individually rather than on behalf of the party, is still under review because required documentation was incomplete. 17 writs challenging the dissolution are now before the Court, most of which have already had initial hearings. All cases will be heard together, elevating the stakes of a single consolidated ruling that could determine

whether the interim government's legal foundation remains intact. [The Himalayan Times]

Against this judicial backdrop, the government faces intense pressure over its attempt to introduce an ordinance enabling overseas voting, a right the Supreme Court recognized in principle in 2017 but which no administration has implemented. Gen Z groups and the Rastriya Swatantra Party insist that the Karki government must finally operationalize diaspora voting, framing it as a test of political will and institutional responsiveness. The Election Commission, however, warns that implementation is physically impossible within the remaining timeframe, citing the need to reopen voter registration, secure agreements with foreign governments that often prohibit electoral activities on their soil, and build mechanisms that normally require years of preparation. Election officials argue that institutional failure lies with successive governments, not the Commission, which drafted the necessary legislation long ago. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

These disputes have sharpened the stakes of the all-party consultations convened by the prime minister, where major political forces warned that responsibility for a credible and fear-free vote lies squarely with the government. Delegates again raised the unresolved question of diaspora voting and concerns over judicial proceedings involving the Rastriya Swatantra Party's leader. Karki responded by pledging full commitment to timely elections and stressing that with 126 registered parties now in the electoral field, political unity is essential to prevent disruptions. Security agencies briefed party leaders on preparations, and the Election Commission reported that logistical arrangements remain on schedule. [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Yet the broader security climate remains unsettled. After the Gen Z uprising triggered mass prison escapes and the looting of weapons—more than 14,000 inmates fled and hundreds of firearms were taken from state control—the government has begun phased mobilization of the Nepali Army, Nepal Police, the Armed Police Force, the National Intelligence Department and the soon-to-be-recruited Election Security Police. Authorities expect roughly 300,000 personnel to be involved in securing the elections. Despite these steps, political parties continue to warn that the environment is not yet fully conducive to campaigning or voting, leaving open the question of whether the poll timetable can be maintained. [The Kathmandu Post 4]

Complicating the political atmosphere further, royalist activist Durga Prasain has issued an ultimatum demanding a national referendum on overturning Nepal's republican and secular constitutional order. Prasain, who has built a nationwide following through mobilizations, confrontational speeches, and repeated detentions, insists that elections cannot proceed unless the government commits by December 17 to a vote on restoring the Hindu monarchy abolished in 2008, replacing the constitution, introducing a directly elected executive, and re-establishing Nepal as a Hindu state. He argues that Nepal has strayed from the "original mandate" of the 2006 People's Movement, the mass mobilization that ended autocratic monarchy and anchored Nepal's transition to a republic. His demands overlap with several socioeconomic grievances voiced during the Gen Z uprising, including debt burdens and corruption.

Prasain's meeting with the prime minister and key ministers was unusually conciliatory in tone. He apologized for earlier insults, offered the prime minister a religious statue, and pledged support if the government met his demands. Karki urged restraint and respect for political institutions while acknowledging that some of his socioeconomic concerns are under review. Officials said both sides agreed to continue discussions, though Prasain reiterated that "there will be no election" without a government response. [The Kathmandu Post 5]

Nepal: Political reshuffle installs new chief minister in Madhesh province after court-mandated power shift

(ec/lm) Madhesh Province has experienced another abrupt government transition after the Supreme Court ordered Chief Minister Saroj Kumar Yadav of the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML) to seek a vote of confidence within 24 hours or face replacement under Article 168(2) of Nepal's Constitution.

Yadav, who had been appointed on November 10 under Article 168(3) as leader of the largest party in the Provincial Assembly, resigned during December 3 assembly meeting when it became clear that he could not secure majority support. His appointment had already been politically contested because it was made early in the morning at a hotel by the then-Province Head, Sumitra Subedi Bhandari—an action that triggered legal challenges, the removal of both the province head and the assembly speaker, and sustained resistance from opposition parties. [The

Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Following the resignation, the new Province Head, Surendra Labh Karna, issued a call for government formation under Article 168(2), inviting any Provincial Assembly member able to demonstrate majority backing from at least two parties to stake a claim by December 5. A seven-party bloc—comprising the Nepali Congress, Janata Samajbadi Party Nepal (JSP-N), Janamat Party, Loktantrik Samajbadi Party (LSP), CPN (Maoist Centre), CPN (Unified Socialist), and the Nagarik Unmukti Party—entered negotiations to form the next government.

Talks initially stalled. The Nepali Congress argued that all other parties had already led the Madhesh government and that it was now its turn. The LSP insisted that its previous chief minister, Jitendra Prasad Sonal, had lost office prematurely, and therefore the party should lead again. Negotiations continued into December 3 before the LSP withdrew its claim, allowing the alliance to consolidate behind Nepali Congress provincial parliamentary party leader Krishna Prasad Yadav. [The Kathmandu Post 4] [The Kathmandu Post 5] [The Kathmandu Post 6]

Yadav presented support from 77 of the 104 Provincial Assembly members and was appointed chief minister on December 5 by Province Head Karna. His government includes support from all seven parties in the alliance, though the CPN (Maoist Centre) and CPN (Unified Socialist)—recently merged nationally into the "Nepali Communist Party"—remain listed separately in the Provincial Assembly as their merger has not yet been formally updated.

On December 7, Yadav and three ministers were sworn in. Further cabinet expansion is planned after Yadav –the sixth chief minister of Madhesh Province – secures his required vote of confidence. [The Kathmandu Post 7] [The Kathmandu Post 8]

Nepal: National Assembly election schedule advances, with major shifts expected if parties contest without alliances

(lm) Nepal has formally entered the countdown to its January 25, 2026, National Assembly election, with candidates required to file nominations on January 7 and the voters' list scheduled for publication on January 3. The election will fill 18 of the 19 upper-

house seats set to fall vacant on March 4, 2026, as part of the chamber's staggered rotation in which one-third of its 59 members retire every two years. Although the lower house was dissolved on September 12 following the Gen Z uprising, the National Assembly remains in full operation as Nepal's permanent parliamentary chamber.

The Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML) of ex-Prime Minister Oli faces the largest turnover, with eight of its members completing their terms, followed by seven retiring members from the CPN (Maoist Centre), which has recently merged with the CPN (Unified Socialist) to form the Nepali Communist Party. Additional seats are expiring for individual members of smaller parties, and the term of nominated member Bamdev Gautam will also end, with his replacement to be appointed by the president upon the government's recommendation. Notably, the Nepali Congress—the second-largest force in the upper house—will see no members retire this cycle.

Under Nepal's federal system, upper-house members are chosen by an electoral college composed of provincial assembly members and the heads and deputy heads of local governments. These voters carry weighted ballots: provincial assembly members hold a weight of 53, while local executives carry a weight of 19. In total, 2,047 voters are eligible.

The Maoist Centre – the main opposition party in the now-dissolved parliamentary lower house – currently holds the most seats in the upper house, followed by the Nepali Congress, the CPN-UML, and the Unified Socialist. However, these dynamics could shift sharply if parties compete without alliances. Because the Maoist Centre holds the strongest voting weight only in Karnali Province, it is expected to lose most of its expiring seats unless it partners with larger parties. By contrast, the CPN-UML controls the highest weighted votes in Koshi, Bagmati and Gandaki, while the Nepali Congress leads in Madhesh, Lumbini and Sudurpaschim—positions that would place both parties in far stronger territory in a non-allied contest. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Former coalition parties enter election cycle with strategic uncertainty and deepening internal fractures

(ec/lm) Both major parties that led the governing coalition when Nepal's House of Representatives was dissolved in September 2025 amid nationwide Gen Z protests—the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified

Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML) and the Nepali Congress —are entering the March 2026 election cycle with deep internal fractures and unresolved leadership battles.

The CPN-UML, which headed the dissolved coalition government under former prime minister KP Sharma Oli until early September, is pursuing an ambiguous two-track approach. Publicly, Oli insists that elections cannot be held on March 5, 2026, due to security concerns, while simultaneously declaring that the CPN-UML will return to power whenever voting eventually takes place. Behind the scenes, the party has begun campaign preparations even as it petitions the Supreme Court to restore the dissolved House of Representatives—a tactic insiders describe as intended to pressure the interim government, Gen Z groups and security agencies at a moment of institutional fragility. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

On top of that, inside the CPN-UML, the most serious leadership rupture in years is emerging. Senior vice-chair Ishwar Pokhrel is directly challenging Oli ahead of the party's December 13–15 General Convention. His faction has formally rejected Oli's depiction of the Gen Z uprising as a "regression," arguing instead that it reflected widespread public anger at state dysfunction. The Pokhrel camp accuses Oli of suppressing internal democracy, centralizing authority and manipulating or cancelling local delegate elections in multiple districts —including Okhaldhunga, Dhankuta and Dang—to marginalize rivals. Tensions have deepened after former president Bidya Devi Bhandari, historically aligned with Oli, shifted away from him and is now widely perceived as supporting Pokhrel, adding symbolic weight to the challenge. [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3] [The Kathmandu Post 4]

The Nepali Congress is confronting parallel internal crises. The party leadership's decision to hold its general convention on January 10–12 has triggered a backlash from more than half of its elected convention representatives, who argue the schedule is unrealistic and designed to delay meaningful leadership renewal. Supporters of the party's two general secretaries, Gagan Thapa and Bishwa Prakash Sharma—key figures of the younger generation—insist that if the regular convention cannot be completed by mid-January, a special convention must automatically follow under party rules. Senior leaders warn that the process risks collapsing entirely just as Nepal enters the election period. [The Kathmandu Post 5]

Nepal: New reformist party enters politics but ‘alternative forces’ remain unable to unite

(lm) Nepal’s political landscape is witnessing the emergence of a new reformist party at the same time that the broader constellation of “alternative forces” born from the September Gen Z uprising continues to struggle with fragmentation ahead of the March 5, 2026 parliamentary elections.

A major development came with the formal launch of Ujyalo Nepal, a party associated with one of the country’s most widely recognized technocrats. Kulman Ghising, who is known for ending Nepal’s chronic 18-hour electricity blackouts during his tenure as head of the Nepal Electricity Authority in 2016 and who currently serves as a minister in the non-partisan interim government, attended the party’s launch only as chief guest to avoid a conflict with his official duties. Leadership has therefore been handed temporarily to former energy secretary Anup Kumar Upadhyay, who will direct the party until Ghising leaves government.

Ujyalo Nepal presents itself as a systemic-reform movement shaped by public frustration with Nepal’s long-standing political instability. Its manifesto openly questions whether the current federal and parliamentary design—introduced in 2015 after a decade-long peace process—can deliver a stable, reform-oriented government. The party argues that Nepal’s federal structures have produced fragmented coalitions, weak execution capacity and entrenched patronage networks, and that the political system should be restructured to strengthen accountability and improve the quality of governance. It calls for significant constitutional and electoral reforms, including a new provincial governance model, streamlined executive appointments, and a restructured Judicial Council intended to reduce political influence over judicial appointments. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

The arrival of Ujyalo Nepal coincides with continued efforts by the country’s various “alternative forces” to unite in the aftermath of the September Gen Z uprising. That movement, driven largely by young Nepalis demanding an end to corruption and better governance, helped topple the previous coalition of the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist). However, the momentum has not translated into a unified political front. No broad coalition of new or non-traditional actors has emerged, despite widespread expectations that they

could jointly challenge the established parties in the March election.

Several new groups have registered with the Election Commission, but unity efforts have faltered. Negotiations involving Ujyalo Nepal, the Rastriya Swatantra Party, Kathmandu Mayor Balendra Shah and figures associated with the Gen Z movement repeatedly broke down over disagreements concerning leadership roles, party identity and internal power-sharing. Ujyalo Nepal's request for a substantial share of a unified party's central committee became a point of contention, while the Rastriya Swatantra Party argued that substantive discussions should take place directly between its chair, Rabi Lamichhane, and Ghising. Lamichhane's continued judicial custody in a cooperative fraud case has further complicated attempts at coordination.

Gen Z organiser Sudan Gurung has tried to expand the conversation by reaching out to a wider circle, including former education minister Sumana Shrestha, local mayors such as Gopi Hamal of Dhangadhi and Harka Sampang of Dharan, and independent activists including Sagar Dhakal and Ashika Tamang. He has said that Lamichhane is open to building a unified alternative platform, but these discussions also remain inconclusive. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Government moves to remove prime minister and education minister from top university posts

(lm) Nepal's interim government is advancing a higher-education reform bill that would strip the prime minister and education minister of their longstanding roles as chancellor and pro-chancellor of most public universities—a major structural change aimed at curbing decades of political interference in university governance.

A taskforce led by University Grants Commission Chair Dev Raj Adhikari is finalizing the draft, expected to be submitted this week. The reform focuses on two core shifts: replacing political appointments with academic leadership in university governance, and creating a single commission for recruitment of academic and non-academic staff.

The significance lies in the attempt to unwind one of Nepal's most entrenched patronage systems: Under the existing legal framework—where each university is governed by its own act—the prime minister serves as chancellor for nearly all national universities, while the

education minister holds the pro-chancellor role. These positions give political leaders decisive influence over the appointment of vice-chancellors, rectors and registrars, which major parties have historically distributed through partisan bargaining.

Past reform efforts stalled because no sitting government was willing to relinquish this power. A 2024 bill proposed removing the prime minister as chancellor but simply shifted authority to other political officeholders, prompting strong criticism from academic stakeholders and ultimately failing to reach parliament. The 2019 High-Level Education Commission had already recommended replacing political chancellors with a board of trustees—aligned with global governance models—to safeguard academic autonomy, but the advice was ignored.

The current non-political caretaker government, however, appears committed to breaking with precedent. Education Minister Mahabir Pun and Prime Minister Sushila Karki have both publicly supported removing themselves from university roles. Karki recently remarked that she was not even aware of the number of universities where she formally served as chancellor, arguing the arrangement itself undermines institutional autonomy.

Two legislative paths are under consideration: issuing the reform via ordinance for immediate effect or registering a bill in the National Assembly, which would allow the government to claim political credit even if parliamentary endorsement occurs after its tenure ends. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Anti-graft probe intensifies as aviation regulator's chief faces detention over alleged helipad corruption

(lm) Nepal's anti-corruption agency has launched a major case against the leadership of the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN), arresting Director General Pradeep Adhikari and former director Murari Bhandari over alleged irregularities in the construction of a publicly funded helipad project. The Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) has charged six individuals and is seeking to recover NPR 135.74 million (USD 0.99 million), alleging misuse of state resources and violations of mandatory procedures.

The CIAA contends that the helipad was approved and built without the required environmental assessment or adequate justification for the investment—issues

that have become recurring triggers for corruption inquiries into Nepal's infrastructure sector. The project was inaugurated in mid-2024 by the tourism minister and Adhikari, a sequence that later drew complaints over decision-making, oversight and possible conflicts of interest.

As the case moved to the Special Court, judges began taking statements last week, but the detention hearing was delayed after the court's chair recused himself due to prior involvement in a separate case against Adhikari. A new hearing was scheduled for December 7.

The helipad inquiry is part of a broader set of allegations facing Adhikari, who is also under scrutiny for suspected irregularities in other major aviation projects, including airport construction and procurement. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Nepal: Supreme Court blocks government reshuffle at electricity authority

(lm) The Supreme Court has overturned the government's attempt to remove Hitendra Dev Shakya as managing director of the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA), ruling that the transfer decision was arbitrary and appeared motivated by retaliation. The bench held that shifting Shakya to a newly created "energy expert" post at the Water and Energy Commission Secretariat lacked fairness and violated principles of due process, allowing him to resume leadership of the NEA.

The case reflects a deeper contest over political influence in Nepal's power sector. Shakya was appointed in March 2025 after the administration of then-Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli unexpectedly removed Kulman Ghising, who had been widely credited with ending chronic electricity shortages. That dismissal triggered significant public criticism and became a rallying point in the youth-led Gen Z protests that later in September helped bring down the Oli government. After the transition, Ghising returned as energy minister in the Sushila Karki–led interim government, and the Cabinet soon created a special post to sideline Shakya, prompting the legal challenge. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: UN minority-rights rapporteur begins assessment mission ahead of 2026

Human Rights Council report

(ec) UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues Nicolas Levrat has begun a 10-day fact-finding mission in Nepal, marking the first comprehensive international assessment of the country's minority-rights landscape since the adoption of the 2015 constitution. His visit, conducted at the Nepali government's invitation, will examine how national legislation and state practice affect ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities—an area of longstanding sensitivity in Nepal's federal and political transition.

Levrat will meet federal and provincial authorities, minority representatives, civil society actors and religious leaders, and will travel beyond Kathmandu to regions where rights concerns have historically been more pronounced. His findings will feed into a formal report to the UN Human Rights Council in March 2026, which will shape Nepal's profile in Geneva at a time when the country is seeking to project stability during its transition under a caretaker government. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Internal dispute at the National Human Rights Commission escalates

(lm) A long-running power struggle inside Nepal's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has intensified, with commissioner Lily Thapa threatening to resign over what she describes as persistent overreach by the commission's secretary, Murari Kharel. Thapa, the NHRC's only female commissioner, has accused Kharel—the head of the institution's bureaucracy—of repeatedly obstructing her initiatives, most recently a proposed study on child marriage and minimum marriage age. According to multiple officials, a confrontation late last week prompted Thapa to warn that she would resign and publicly expose Kharel's conduct if his "interventionist" approach did not stop.

According to NHRC staff, Kharel, backed by Chairperson Top Bahadur Magar, has increasingly enforced unilateral decisions on both staff and commissioners. Concerns about his conduct are longstanding: his promotion to secretary was challenged internally and at the Supreme Court, with critics accusing him of misusing resources and protecting an official accused of sexual harassment.

A follow-up meeting has been scheduled to attempt to resolve the breakdown, but sources close to Thapa say she is prepared to resign within days if the situation does not change. The NHRC, currently operating with

four commissioners after Surya Dhungel resigned in September following the Gen Z uprising, has a history of internal rivalries that have periodically undermined its functioning. [The Kathmandu Post]

Pakistan: Field Marshal Munir becomes first chief of defense forces as unified command structure takes effect

(as/lm) Pakistan has enacted a major overhaul of its military leadership structure with the appointment of Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir as the country's first Chief of Defense Forces (CDF). The new position—created under Pakistan's 27th constitutional amendment, which abolished the long-standing office of the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCSC)—places the army, navy, and air force under a single integrated command for the first time.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif forwarded Munir's nomination to President Asif Ali Zardari on December 4, and the president approved it the same day. Munir will hold the CDF position concurrently with his existing role as Chief of Army Staff (COAS). His tenure restarts under the amended Army Act, extending his service until 2030, with the possibility of a further five-year extension. The amendment also grants lifetime immunity from criminal prosecution to both the field marshal and the president.

As part of the broader restructuring, Air Chief Marshal Zaheer Ahmad Babar Sidhu received a two-year extension from March 2026. One key post remains unfilled: the future commander of the National Strategic Command, a new four-star position that will assume nuclear command responsibilities previously held by the CJCSC.

The reform introduces a centralized CDF Headquarters, designed to unify operational planning, modernization, joint doctrine, and multi-domain coordination across land, air, maritime, cyber, and space domains. Analysts view the shift as moving Pakistan closer to integrated command models used in the United States and the United Kingdom.

At a tri-services ceremony in Rawalpindi marking his formal assumption of office, Munir emphasized that modern conflict now spans cyber operations, the electromagnetic spectrum, space-based platforms, artificial intelligence, information warfare, and quantum technologies. He said the new command structure is intended to provide the "integration and coherence" needed to manage future threats.

The ceremony also honored personnel from the May 2025 conflict between Pakistan and India, known in Pakistan as *Marka-e-Haq*, which the military describes as a demonstration of integrated land, air, maritime, cyber, and electronic warfare.

The restructuring has prompted concerns from opposition parties and rights advocates, who argue that combining expanded powers with extended tenure and immunity reduces accountability. The government maintains that parliament has full constitutional authority to redesign Pakistan's higher defense architecture. [DAWN] [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

Pakistan: Confrontation between camp of jailed ex-prime minister and military establishment intensifies

(lm) Pakistan's long-running confrontation between supporters of former prime minister Imran Khan and the country's military establishment intensified after the armed forces, through its chief spokesperson, publicly declared that Khan's political narrative had become a "national security threat." Pakistan's defense minister, Khawaja Asif, backed the military spokesperson's remarks, arguing that Khan and PTI had repeatedly attacked state institutions and that a forceful response was therefore "a natural outcome." [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

The statement was issued in response to comments posted from Khan's account on X accusing Field Marshal Asim Munir, Pakistan's chief of defense forces and the country's most senior military officer, of undermining the constitution and the rule of law. Khan, who was removed from office through a parliamentary no-confidence vote in April 2022, has been in prison since August 2023 on multiple charges he denies. His party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), claims the cases are politically motivated and accuses the military of orchestrating his removal and subsequent detention; the military strongly rejects these allegations.

PTI leaders rejected the military's designation of Khan as a national security threat. In a news conference, senior figures said Khan continues to command broad public support and criticized the wording used by the military spokesperson as inappropriate. They argued that Khan's political message rejects sectarian or ethnic polarization and therefore cannot be classified as anti-state. [Arab News 3]

The competing narratives were further highlighted at a PTI-led rally in Peshawar, capital of the northwestern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where party leaders called Khan "the genuinely elected prime minister" and demanded the release of all political prisoners, including Khan and his wife. They also criticized Pakistan's broader security strategy in the northwest and called for "civilian supremacy." Government officials dismissed the rally as poorly attended and said PTI was damaging its own political standing by confronting the military. [Arab News 4]

Separately, political tensions increased after the government barred Khan's sister Uzma Khanum from further visits at Adiala Jail in Rawalpindi, where Khan is held. Information Minister Attaullah Tarar said the ban followed alleged violations of prison rules, claiming political discussions occurred during visits. PTI had earlier complained that access to Khan was being restricted despite court orders. After a recent visit, Khanum said her brother was in good health, countering rumors about his condition. [Arab News 5] [Arab News 6]

PTI supporters began organizing caravans toward Islamabad to protest perceived attempts to isolate Khan. In response, authorities imposed Section 144, a public-order regulation that bans gatherings, across Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The interior ministry said the measure was necessary due to recent security incidents, including a suicide bombing outside a district court. [Arab News 7]

In a separate development, Pakistan formally asked the United Kingdom to extradite two prominent pro-Khan figures now living in Britain: Shehzad Akbar, a former accountability adviser to Imran Khan during his premiership, and Adil Raja, a UK-based political commentator and former Pakistani army officer. Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi handed British High Commissioner Jane Marriott extradition papers, saying the two men were wanted in Pakistan on allegations of "anti-state propaganda." Both Akbar and Raja have previously denied wrongdoing, describing the cases as politically motivated.

Pakistan and the UK do not have a bilateral extradition treaty, meaning any transfer would require a special arrangement and could face judicial scrutiny in Britain, particularly given the political character of the allegations. Both men have large online followings and frequently criticize the Pakistani government and military on platforms such as YouTube and X. [Arab News 8]

Pakistan: New leaks deepen concerns over abuse of spyware

(lm) A major cross-border investigation known as the "Intellexa Leaks" has revealed new evidence about the internal operations of Intellexa, a mercenary surveillance firm embedded into the broader Israeli spyware ecosystem whose Predator spyware has been repeatedly linked to human rights violations.

According to Amnesty International's Security Lab, the leaked files suggest that Intellexa retained technical access to customer surveillance logs, raising questions about the company's human-rights due-diligence processes and potential liability when its tools are misused. Amnesty also notes that Predator has been implicated in unlawful surveillance in multiple countries, including earlier attacks on journalists in Greece.

The new disclosures add further weight to concerns about ongoing global misuse. Amnesty reports that an attempted spyware attack in Pakistan's Balochistan province during the summer of 2025 bore the technical signatures of Predator, indicating the tool remains in active deployment and continues to threaten rights to privacy and freedom of expression. The leaks also describe Aladdin, a newly developed Intellexa spyware capability that can infect devices through online advertising. [Amnesty International]

In response to the report, the government categorically rejected the implication that Predator was being used by the Pakistani state or that Islamabad had any technological cooperation with Israel, whose firms have been linked to the spyware ecosystem. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Human rights ministry demands accountability after woman burned alive in Punjab

(lm) Pakistan's Human Rights Minister Azam Nazeer Tarar has urged the Punjab provincial authorities to take strict legal action after a woman was burned alive in Bahawalnagar, a district in southern Punjab.

The case, which police are treating as premeditated murder involving multiple suspects, has renewed scrutiny of Pakistan's persistent levels of gender-based violence. The government has recently reiterated commitments to expand support mechanisms for women—including specialized police desks, hotlines

and legal assistance—but observers note that progress remains uneven across provinces, with rural districts such as Bahawalnagar facing significant enforcement and capacity gaps. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Final 2025 nationwide anti-polio campaign to vaccinate 45 million children begins next week

(lm) Pakistan will launch its final nationwide anti-polio vaccination drive of the year from December 15–21, aiming to immunize 45 million children, according to the National Emergencies Operation Center (NEOC). More than 400,000 frontline health workers will participate in the campaign, which follows another nationwide immunization drive conducted in late November.

Pakistan remains one of only two countries worldwide, alongside Afghanistan, where wild poliovirus continues to be endemic, making repeated vaccination essential to interrupt transmission. Eradication efforts face persistent obstacles, including misinformation, parental refusals, and militant attacks on vaccination teams. In several high-risk and remote districts, polio workers operate under police protection; however, security personnel themselves have been targeted in previous attacks, underscoring the ongoing operational risks surrounding the campaign. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Government to sell excess LNG on international markets to curb mounting losses

(lm) Pakistan will begin selling surplus liquefied natural gas (LNG) on international markets from January 1, 2026, according to Petroleum Minister Ali Pervaiz Malik, who said the measure is intended to contain the country's expanding gas-sector losses. Malik explained that Pakistan has imported more LNG than it can currently use, particularly as power generation has shifted away from natural gas, leaving the government with excess cargoes originally sourced from Qatar. This oversupply has contributed significantly to the accumulation of circular debt in the gas sector, which the minister placed at PKR 1,000 billion (USD 3.5 billion) since 2018–19.

Malik said selling excess LNG abroad will allow Pakistan to reduce these losses and ease pressure on

state-owned companies operating in the gas sector, enabling them to return to full capacity and improve financial stability. Earlier reports indicated that the glut had already been generating USD 378 million in annual losses for domestic producers due to limited domestic demand.

In addition to the LNG decision, Malik said the government expects renewed foreign investment in the energy sector. Turkish Petroleum, the state-owned Turkish energy company, plans to begin onshore and offshore drilling in Pakistan following a recent ministerial visit and will open an office in Islamabad staffed by Turkish technical personnel. He also confirmed that the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) is sending a delegation to Pakistan and is preparing to establish its own local presence. SOCAR is expected to partner with Pakistan State Oil (PSO) and the Frontier Works Organization (FWO) on the construction of an oil pipeline from Machike to Thalian. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Government opens talks on new national revenue-sharing formula amid debate over provincial autonomy

(lm) Pakistan has launched negotiations for a new National Finance Commission award, beginning a constitutionally mandated process that determines how revenue collected by the federal government is shared with the provinces. The talks come at a politically sensitive moment, as debate intensifies over a proposed constitutional amendment that some observers believe could strengthen federal control and reduce provincial authority. Under Article 160, provinces cannot receive a smaller share than in the previous award, turning each round of negotiations into a key test of center–province relations.

The new formula is needed because the last award expired in July 2025, leaving the country in a transitional fiscal phase while inflation, debt servicing obligations, and IMF-linked reforms place additional pressure on the national budget. Provinces argue that they require predictable transfers to finance sectors such as health, education, policing, and local development, responsibilities that expanded significantly after the 2010 devolution reforms. The government has emphasized that the process should move forward without delay and that transparency is essential to counter speculation over possible changes to the distribution structure.

Negotiations will continue in the coming months and will address revenue targets, expenditure responsibilities, development priorities, and how the financial burden of crises such as floods, security challenges, and commodity shocks should be shared between Islamabad and the provinces. [Arab News]

Pakistan: IMF clears key loan reviews despite lingering macroeconomic fragility

(lm) Pakistan has secured a major injection of external financing after the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved the latest reviews of both its USD 7 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF) and its USD 1.4 billion Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF), unlocking USD 1.2–1.3 billion in new disbursements. The Executive Board's decision follows an October staff-level agreement reached after two weeks of review discussions in Karachi, Islamabad, and Washington led by IMF mission chief Iva Petrova. Economists view this tranche as essential for Pakistan's near-term external stability, given the country's continued exposure to balance-of-payments pressures, thin reserves, and persistent climate-linked shocks.

The IMF said Pakistan's reform implementation under the EFF had helped preserve macroeconomic stability despite floods and a challenging global environment. It highlighted improved fiscal outcomes—including a primary surplus of 1.3 percent of GDP—a rebound in foreign-exchange reserves from USD 9.4 billion to USD 14.5 billion over FY24–FY25, anchored inflation expectations, and moderate growth recovery. Under the RSF, the Fund emphasized Pakistan's efforts to integrate climate-risk considerations into public budgeting, strengthen disaster-response financing, and improve climate-risk disclosure for banks and investors.

At the same time, Fund officials stressed the need for sustained policy discipline. The IMF reiterated that tight monetary conditions and exchange-rate flexibility remain necessary, and placed particular weight on accelerating energy-sector restructuring to contain circular debt, reduce generation and distribution losses, and address inefficiencies in the gas sector. The IMF also welcomed Pakistan's new Governance and Corruption Diagnostic, a detailed assessment mapping vulnerabilities across procurement, tax administration, the judiciary, regulators, and state-owned entities. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

Islamabad is now preparing an action plan for a 15-point governance and anti-corruption reform package

derived from this diagnostic, which Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb told parliament must be finalized and submitted to the IMF by December 31. The recommendations cover transparency in procurement, publication of the Special Investment Facilitation Council's annual report, digitization of regulatory procedures, restructuring of the Federal Board of Revenue, and performance-assessment mechanisms for courts and tribunals. The IMF estimates that full implementation could raise Pakistan's long-term GDP by 5–6.5 percent. [Arab News 3]

Alongside the governance agenda, Islamabad is accelerating privatization commitments tied to IMF benchmarks. Privatization Adviser Muhammad Ali said the government will issue Expressions of Interest in January for the sell-off of three major state-owned power distribution companies — Islamabad, Faisalabad and Gujranwala — after their restructuring plans and transaction structures are finalized. The government expects interest from Turkish energy firms. In a second phase, stakes in the Hyderabad and Sukkur distribution companies will also be divested, with Raiffeisen Investment appointed as financial adviser. The drive aims to reduce heavy losses and circular debt in the power sector, which continue to strain public finances. [Arab News 4]

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has also announced that the bidding process for Pakistan International Airlines will take place on December 23. PIA, which has accumulated losses exceeding USD 2.5 billion, is being prepared for majority privatization after years of failed restructuring attempts. Four investor groups have been prequalified, and the sale is seen as essential for restoring international operations and easing fiscal pressure. [Arab News 5]

As the government moves to comply with IMF conditions, Pakistan's anti-corruption body has pushed back against the IMF's governance findings. The National Accountability Bureau described the assessment as "perception-driven," arguing that corruption had fallen by 20 to 25 percent and highlighting what it said were large-scale recoveries, including 4.53 million acres of state land and assets valued at several trillion PKR. While the IMF noted that NAB secured only 31 convictions between 2022 and 2024 and flagged concerns about its voluntary-return mechanism, NAB said all returns are court-supervised and described a series of reforms since 2022 to prevent political misuse, strengthen verification procedures and protect businesses from harassment. [Arab News 6]

Pakistan: ADB expands climate-resilience and infrastructure support

(lm) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved two new financing packages that target climate vulnerability in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province, and strengthen infrastructure planning and water management in Balochistan and Sindh.

The larger package—USD 381 million—focuses on Punjab, where severe monsoon flooding in 2025 exposed structural weaknesses in agriculture, education, and health systems. ADB is directing USD 124 million toward shifting Punjab's farming sector away from highly polluting, outdated machinery toward modern, low-emission equipment. A second component—USD 107 million—targets the chronic underperformance of secondary-level STEM education across the province, where learning outcomes remain far below regional comparators. The third component —USD 150 million—supports nursing-sector reforms. [Arab News 1]

In a separate package, ADB and Pakistan signed USD 61.8 million in agreements for project-readiness and water-sector development. This includes USD 10 million to prepare the Karachi–Rohri section of the Main Line-1 railway upgrade—critical for transporting minerals from the Reko Diq copper-gold project in Balochistan to export hubs. A further USD 3.8 million supports planning for a bus rapid transit system in Quetta, the provincial capital of Balochistan. The largest share—USD 48 million—provides additional financing for the Balochistan Water Resources Development Sector Project, which addresses chronic water scarcity in Pakistan's most arid province. [Arab News 2]

Pakistan: Security forces report heavy losses in Balochistan amid intensified separatist violence

(lm) Pakistan's authorities said the security situation in the southwestern province of Balochistan remained highly volatile in 2025, with Chief Minister Sarfraz Bugti reporting more than 200 security personnel killed and around 900 militant attacks over the year. He said civilian deaths reached 280, while security agencies launched thousands of intelligence-based operations that resulted in 760 militants killed, according to provincial data.

Balochistan, Pakistan's largest but socioeconomically least developed province, has faced a decades-long separatist insurgency led by ethnic Baloch armed groups such as the Balochistan Liberation Army. These groups accuse the federal state of denying local communities a fair share of resource revenues, an allegation Islamabad rejects.

The military reported multiple recent operations, including the killing of 12 militants on December 6 in Kalat district, who it described as "Indian-sponsored" members of *Fitna al Hindustan*—a label the armed forces use for Baloch separatist groups that Pakistan alleges receive support from India, a claim New Delhi has consistently denied. Weapons and explosives were recovered during the Kalat operation, and the military said further clearing operations were underway.

The announcement followed earlier claims that security forces had killed militants in Dera Bugti and a combined 14 fighters in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan the previous day, underscoring a sustained escalation in counterinsurgency efforts across the region. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

Pakistan: Punjab counterterrorism police arrest 12 suspects allegedly linked to Indian intelligence

(lm) Pakistan's Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) in Punjab province arrested 12 suspected militants in coordinated intelligence-based raids across Lahore, Faisalabad and Bahawalpur, saying the group was allegedly linked to India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). The arrests come amid a broader surge in militant activity across Pakistan and persistent allegations by Islamabad that external intelligence networks are supporting anti-state groups—claims India routinely denies. [Arab News]

Sri Lanka: Government response scrutinized as cyclone triggers major economic damage

(lm) Sri Lanka's government, led by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, is confronting one of the most consequential natural disasters in the country's recent history, with Cyclone Ditwah generating economic and infrastructural losses now estimated at USD 6–7 billion, more than triple the USD 1.5–2 billion loss from the

2004 tsunami. The official death toll has risen to at least 618, with more than 209 people still unaccounted for, and more than two million individuals—nearly ten percent of the population—affected by the storm. [Al Jazeera] [Daily Mirror 1]

Transport networks have been severely disrupted, with only about 30 percent of the railway system functional and numerous major roads left blocked or damaged. Energy systems were also hit hard, with more than 3.5 million electricity connections affected, while industrial and agricultural sectors face months of interruption: 416 factories sustained damage that, in many cases, requires machinery to be repaired abroad, and tea production is expected to experience prolonged delays due to a combination of mechanical failures, logistical bottlenecks and temporary labor shortages. Irrigation structures, farmland and rural road networks were damaged extensively, further tightening pressure on food systems and livelihoods. [Daily Mirror 2] [Daily Mirror 3] [Daily Mirror 4]

Against this backdrop, Sri Lanka's early-warning performance and institutional response capacity have come under close scrutiny. Indian Meteorological Department data indicate that Sri Lanka received indicative information about potential cyclogenesis as early as November 13, followed by detailed updates from November 23 onward. While Sri Lanka's Meteorology Department and the Irrigation Department issued warnings on November 25, several components of the Disaster Management Act appear not to have been activated in time. The national disaster committee was appointed only on November 27, two days after red alerts were issued, and essential services were not declared by November 28. High-level coordination structures that were expected to function throughout 2025 did not consistently do so, and this perceived gap between early warnings and institutional action has now triggered a widening accountability debate. [Daily Mirror 5] [Daily Mirror 6]

Multiple political parties, civil-society groups and public movements are preparing writ petitions asserting that the government failed to provide timely warnings, did not issue adequate evacuation orders, and did not activate statutory mechanisms early enough. They intend to invoke precedents from the Easter Sunday attacks and the economic-crisis litigation to argue that the state has a constitutional duty to prevent avoidable harm. Environmental and legal groups are separately preparing cases alleging failures to evacuate residents in high-risk landslide zones, while others argue that the Meteorology Department did not properly communicate risk alerts. [Daily Mirror 7]

Reactions across the political landscape reflect differing priorities. The Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) has called for an international donor conference, noting initial estimates that infrastructure reconstruction may require LKR 900 billion (USD 3.06 billion). [Daily Mirror 8]

Separately, Namal Rajapaksa, a prominent legislator from the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) and part of the Rajapaksa political family, urged the Prime Minister to convene Parliament regularly to oversee relief and ensure government commitments translate into assistance on the ground. In a separate development, representatives of 35 opposition parties, meeting with Ranil Wickremesinghe—a former President and long-serving political leader—called for a national-level meeting of political, religious, and civil leaders to support coordinated disaster management. [Daily Mirror 9] [Daily Mirror 10] [Daily Mirror 11]

Not all reactions, however, attribute the scale of losses to state shortcomings. Former MP and retired military commander Field Marshal Sarath Fonseka argues that legal action is misplaced given Sri Lanka's limited resources and the exceptional nature of the cyclone, and that even a more robust administrative response would not have prevented extensive damage. [Daily Mirror 12]

The government, meanwhile, is attempting to balance immediate relief with broader governance and political pressures. President Dissanayake has emphasized that natural disasters cannot be prevented but argues that their impacts can be mitigated through ecological rehabilitation of the central highlands, stricter enforcement against illegal construction and faster restoration of essential services. He has instructed officials to expedite compensation payments under the 2025 Budget, restore fuel supplies, reopen blocked roads, address disruptions in schools and hospitals and complete all compensation disbursements by year-end to avoid shifting the financial burden into 2026. [Daily Mirror 13]

Concerns also emerged following Deputy Minister Sunil Watagala's instruction to police to use emergency regulations to counter online criticism of the President and ministers. Opposition figures argue that such measures may deter citizens and independent actors from sharing information relevant to relief activities. [Daily Mirror 14] [Daily Mirror 15]

Sri Lanka: Parliament approves 2026 budget in final vote

(lm) Sri Lanka's Parliament has formally approved the 2026 national budget in the final vote of the Appropriation Bill, with 158 votes in favor and one vote against. This third-reading division marks the completion of the legislative budget process, allowing the government to begin implementing its 2026 spending and revenue plans.

The only dissenting vote came from MP Gajendra Kumar Ponnambalam, a legislator from the Tamil National People's Front known for frequently taking independent positions, while several key political groups—including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), and the National Democratic Front (NDF)—were absent during the vote. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Hearings in X-Press Pearl environmental damage case temporarily halted in Singapore

(lm) Sri Lanka's Justice Minister announced that proceedings in Singapore related to the X-Press Pearl disaster have been temporarily halted, noting that a parallel case in the United Kingdom remains active. A domestic hearing in Sri Lanka is scheduled for January 26, 2026.

The X-Press Pearl case concerns a Singapore-flagged container ship that caught fire and sank off Colombo in 2021, releasing chemicals, plastic pellets, and hazardous cargo into the ocean. It is regarded as Sri Lanka's worst marine environmental disaster, with ongoing claims for environmental and economic damages. Multiple jurisdictions are involved because the ship was owned, managed, and insured through international entities, requiring litigation in Sri Lanka, Singapore, and the UK. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Supreme Court condemns entrenched police brutality and signals need for structural reform

(lm) Sri Lanka's Supreme Court has delivered a sharply critical judgment on police misconduct, ruling that two officers from the Thalatuoya Police Station in Kandy violated a lorry driver's fundamental rights through assault, torture, and degrading treatment in April 2019 during a late-night arrest.

In its reasoning, the bench emphasized that earlier judgments condemning police violence had not produced institutional change. Justice Arjuna Obeyesekere underscored that repeated warnings had been ignored by both the Inspector General of Police and the National Police Commission, whose oversight functions have been widely criticized as ineffective. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Government pursues expanded IMF support as post-disaster financing needs intensify

(lm) Sri Lanka is reassessing its economic recovery strategy after Cyclone Ditwah caused extensive nationwide damage, with early government estimates placing the economic loss between USD 6–7 billion. The destruction has raised questions about whether the country can still meet its macroeconomic targets under the International Monetary Fund (IMF) program currently in place. Officials emphasized that all economic decisions are being made in close coordination with the IMF.

At a high-level donor forum convened by the Ministry of Finance, the IMF announced that Sri Lanka is expected to receive USD 350 million—the sixth tranche of the Extended Fund Facility (EFF)—within two weeks. Development partners reaffirmed their support, with several already deploying emergency teams and humanitarian supplies, and the World Bank initiating a rapid post-disaster assessment. [Daily Mirror 1]

In parallel, Colombo has formally requested USD 200 million in emergency financing through the IMF's Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI), which provides swift disbursements to countries facing sudden shocks such as natural disasters. The IMF Executive Board is currently reviewing the request.

At the same time, the government is seeking adjustments to the existing EFF arrangement. President Anura Kumara Dissanayake informed Parliament that Sri Lanka has asked to postpone the sixth tranche—originally expected in mid-December—until February so that negotiations can be held on increasing its size. The fifth program review is now expected in January. [Daily Mirror 2] [Daily Mirror 3] [Daily Mirror 4]

The political debate over the country's economic trajectory is widening. Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa has argued that the current IMF arrangement is no longer viable in the aftermath of

Cyclone Ditwah and called for cancelling the existing program and negotiating a new one tailored to the post-disaster context. He also urged the government to initiate discussions with U.S. President Donald Trump on reciprocal tariffs, propose a new national budget, and convene an international donor conference, stating that the opposition would cooperate with the government on such measures. [Daily Mirror 5]

Sri Lanka: Criminal groups exploit disaster response gaps after major cyclone

(lm) Sri Lanka is facing a rise in violent crime, including multiple shootings, as organized criminal groups appear to be taking advantage of the national focus on disaster relief following Cyclone Ditwah. The cyclone caused extensive flooding, landslides, and more than 600 deaths, triggering one of the country's largest emergency deployments, with over 28,000 military and police personnel assisting affected communities.

Between December 1 and 6, police recorded three shooting incidents in different parts of the country, two of them fatal. Police statistics show that violent crime has already surpassed last year's levels, with 110 shootings reported so far in 2025. Many of these cases are linked to turf conflicts between organized crime groups, particularly those involved in drug trafficking.

Before the cyclone, the government had launched a nationwide campaign on October 30, 2025, called "Ratama Ekata," aimed at reducing drug-related crime and dismantling organized criminal networks. The operation had been making daily arrests until resources were redirected to emergency response efforts. [Daily Mirror]

Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in Southeast Asia

Cambodia: New journalist qualification rules prompt concern over press freedom

(mi) The Ministry of Information has issued new professional qualification rules for journalists and media managers aimed at boosting professionalism and safeguarding information security. Key requirements include a minimum age of 25, a bachelor's degree (with editors-in-chief required specifically in journalism), at least three years of reporting experience, a journalism and audiovisual certificate, a clean criminal record, health and conduct certifications, and passing a ministry-administered knowledge assessment. The ministry can revoke qualifications or suspend licenses for violations of the directive, Constitution, or Press Law.

The rules have drawn criticism from journalist associations, who warn that strict educational and procedural requirements could restrict press freedom, limit practical entry into journalism, and hinder citizens' constitutional rights to form media organizations.

Stakeholders urge the ministry to conduct further consultations and adjust the directive to balance professional standards with accessibility and press freedoms. Private media outlets will have one year to comply. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Activists charged with inciting unrest

(mi) The Phnom Penh Municipal Court has begun trying 11 opposition activists and social media users, linked to the Khmer Will Party and Candlelight Party two non-parliamentary opposition parties—for allegedly inciting public unrest related to the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area

(CLV-DTA). They face charges for “incitement to commit a felony or cause social unrest.”

The case centers on a July 23, 2024, Facebook live broadcast by Srun Srorn claiming that Cambodian authorities had ceded parts of four northern provinces to Vietnam. The accused allegedly shared the post, spread “fabricated” information, and created two large Telegram groups planning a mass protest in Phnom Penh on August 18, 2024, inspired by Bangladesh’s 2024 protest model, with the aim of reinstating former opposition leader Sam Rainsy. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Government aims to reduce US tariffs further after economic slowdown

(mi) Deputy Prime Minister Sun Chanthol has acknowledged at the Cambodia Trade Expo 2025 that negotiations with the United States over tariffs on Cambodian goods are ongoing, and that he hopes to negotiate a further reduction from its current tariff rate of 19 percent. In April, the tariff rate was set to 49 percent but has been gradually reduced to its present 19 percent as a result of government negotiation. [Phnompenhpost]

This follows a slowing of growth in the Cambodian economy, with the IMF in November revising its economic growth forecast down to 4.8 percent due to trade disruption and border tensions. [IMF]

Cambodia: Approved investment projects up since last year

(mi) The number of investment projects approved by the Council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC) between January and November 2025 is 60 percent higher than the same period last year. The total amount of approved investment this year totals over USD 9 billion and is expected to create over 400,000 jobs. The bulk of the projects are planned for Kampong Speu province, followed by Svay Rieng and Phnom Penh. [Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: Clashes with Thailand displace thousands

(mi) Since the renewal of conflict on the Cambodia-Thailand border on December 7, thousands of

Cambodian civilians have been displaced from the conflict zone. The Ministry of Interior has reported that almost 18,000 civilians have been evacuated from the border region.

Cambodian authorities are currently working to provide emergency support for those who have been displaced, with many having fled towards Siem Reap province. [Phnom Penh Post]

Additionally, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport has reported that the conflict along the Cambodia-Thailand border has led to the closure of 377 schools, affecting almost 80,000 students. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Mine Clearance target delayed to 2030

(mi) During a meeting in Geneva from December 1-5, formal approval for a new deadline for the removal of landmines was given by the state parties of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention.

Despite the Ottawa Convention entering force in 2000, Cambodia has repeatedly requested new deadlines for the removal of all landmines from its borders. This is due to a lack of resources available for the project, and the discovery of additional contaminated areas.

Of particular concern is the Thai-Cambodia border region, which remains heavily contaminated by land mines, and is subject to border conflicts, which make mine clearance difficult. [Phnom Penh Post]

Indonesia: President Prabowo signals openness to ending direct regional elections

(ms) President Prabowo Subianto has signaled renewed openness to replacing Indonesia's system of direct regional elections with indirect selection by local legislatures (DPRD), giving fresh momentum to a proposal long championed by the Golkar Party and supported by other members of the ruling coalition. Golkar—Indonesia's second-largest party and a pivotal pillar of the governing coalition—has long sought structural reforms that would expand the role of legislatures in regional governance.

Speaking at Golkar's 61st anniversary event in Jakarta, Prabowo argued that Indonesia's democracy had become "too expensive" and risked being dominated by wealthy political financiers. Indirect elections, he said, could lower political costs, reduce corruption pressures, and still "maintain democratic principles" if implemented through elected DPRDs.

Prabowo pointed to parliamentary selection systems used in Malaysia, India, Canada, the U.K., and Australia, framing the idea as a pragmatic rather than ideological shift. Direct regional elections—introduced in 2005 as part of Indonesia's post-authoritarian reforms—have since been regarded as a cornerstone of decentralization. But they have also become increasingly costly: the 2024 simultaneous pilkada, spanning 415 districts, 93 cities, and 37 provinces, was the most expensive in Indonesian history, costing over IDR 37.5 trillion (USD 2.25 billion) in regional budgets.

Golkar, whose leaders revived the proposal in late 2024, publicly welcomed Prabowo's remarks. Party elites such as Idrus Marham have framed the shift as part of a broader evaluation of constitutional amendments and a push to reduce what they call the "capitalist-individualist excesses" introduced during the Reformasi era.

The National Awakening Party (PKB) has also backed the plan, arguing that governors should function as administrative extensions of the central government while local autonomy remains concentrated at the municipal level. Legal Affairs Minister Supratman Andi Agtas added that democracy "does not always require direct elections," endorsing DPRD-based selection as a legitimate alternative.

Pro-democracy groups, however, warn that shifting authority away from voters and toward DPRDs—where parties hold significant patronage power—risks recentralizing control and weakening the political accountability gained since 1998. Analysts note that indirect elections were prone to elite bargaining and corruption during the New Order, when appointments often reflected presidential preference—a point critics say is unavoidable in any rollback.

Despite these concerns, the government is preparing a major revision of the Election Law, with drafting scheduled to begin in early 2026. While Prabowo did not explicitly endorse abolishing direct elections, his remarks indicate that the idea is now firmly on the negotiating table, backed by the ruling coalition's largest parties. [Kompas] [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Exporters required to keep Dollar earnings onshore under stricter rules

(ms) Indonesia will impose stricter foreign-exchange (FX) requirements on natural resource exporters beginning January 1, mandating that all export proceeds be held in state-owned banks for at least one year and sharply limiting how those funds can be used. The measures, announced by finance ministry officials on 8 December, are aimed at stemming persistent capital outflows and bolstering U.S. dollar liquidity amid pressure on the rupiah.

Under the current regime, exporters of coal, palm oil, nickel and other commodities must keep their foreign-currency earnings within Indonesia's banking system for a year but may use the funds freely if converted into rupiah. The new regulation will cap such conversions at 50 percent, closing a loophole that allowed exporters to convert proceeds to rupiah, withdraw them from retention requirements, and then re-convert the money into foreign currency for transfer abroad.

Finance Minister Purbaya Yudhi Sadewa said restricting conversions and requiring deposits only in state banks will improve monitoring and ensure that export proceeds contribute meaningfully to onshore dollar supply. Officials acknowledged that the existing rules, introduced earlier in 2025, have not delivered the expected strengthening of reserves, with outflows continuing despite formal retention obligations.

The ministry's fiscal policy office said consultations with banks and industry have already taken place. Meanwhile, Jakarta is preparing additional measures, including offering foreign-currency government bonds as a placement option for export proceeds. Economists warn that the tighter regime could reduce FX liquidity in early 2026 and weigh on investor sentiment, but authorities maintain that the reforms are necessary to stabilise the currency. [Bloomberg] [Channel News Asia] [Reuters]

Indonesia: Coal export tax of up to 5 percent in 2026

(ms) Indonesia will impose a new export tax on thermal coal starting next year, with rates ranging from 1 to 5 percent, Finance Minister Purbaya Yudhi Sadewa announced on 8 December. The measure is part of the government's plan to boost state revenues, with

authorities estimating the levy could generate around IDR 20 trillion (USD 1.2 billion) in 2026.

Details are still being finalized, but officials indicated that tax rates may vary by coal grade. Previous comments from the mining ministry suggested the duty would apply only when global coal prices exceed a set threshold.

Indonesia remains one of the world's largest coal exporters, shipping 555 million metric tons in 2024. Exports, however, have softened this year, falling 4 percent year-on-year between January and October amid weaker demand from China.

The Indonesia Coal Miners Association urged the government to adopt a pricing floor to avoid burdening producers, saying such a system would help balance revenue goals with industry stability. [Kontan] [Reuters]

Indonesia: Riau Islands becomes first province to operationalize community service sentences under new criminal code

(ms) Riau Islands province has positioned itself to become Indonesia's first regional test case for community service sentencing, a key reform of the 2023 Criminal Code (KUHP) that will take effect on 2 January 2026. The reform replaces short-term imprisonment for minor offenses with non-custodial penalties aimed at rehabilitation rather than punishment.

Governor Ansar Ahmad and provincial Prosecutor's Office head J. Devy Sudarso signed an MoU on 4 December outlining implementation procedures for community service for crimes carrying penalties of up to five years in prison or fines of PHP 10 million (≈ USD 610).

While the national government has not formally designated pilot regions, Kepri's early readiness—paired with the presence of senior prosecutors at the ceremony—signals that Jakarta may view the province as an informal model for other regions preparing to apply the KUHP's restorative justice provisions.

If implementation proceeds smoothly, Riau Islands is likely to become the reference point for other provinces navigating the transition away from short-

term detention, a major structural shift in Indonesia's criminal justice system. [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Sumatra floods trigger regulatory crackdown and expose cabinet friction

(ms) Severe floods and landslides across Sumatra have evolved from a humanitarian crisis into a major political turning point for Indonesia, prompting permit revocations, cabinet-level tensions, and renewed scrutiny of the country's environmental governance. The disaster, which has left more than 800 people dead and hundreds missing in Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra, has intensified debate over the role of deforestation, mining practices, and degraded watershed management in amplifying climate-driven extreme weather.

Forestry Minister Raja Juli Antoni announced that the government will revoke the permits of around 20 companies operating on approximately 750,000 hectares in affected areas, while an additional 12 firms will be summoned for questioning. Law-enforcement teams have been deployed to investigate allegations of illegal logging, and the administration is considering a moratorium on new permits as part of a broader review of forest governance. The Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources similarly indicated that mining permits could be cancelled if violations are confirmed, signaling a potentially significant tightening of regulation across the extractive sectors.

The political fallout extended into public view when Coordinating Minister for Community Empowerment Muhaimin Iskandar appeared to criticize fellow ministers by calling on them to "repent" for policy failures he implied contributed to the disaster. The remarks sparked internal friction before Muhaimin later apologized, but the episode highlighted the growing sensitivity around environmental responsibility within President Prabowo Subianto's cabinet. The tensions reflect broader concerns over how Indonesia balances economic reliance on mining, logging, and plantation industries with rising climate risks and public demands for accountability.

Images of logs and debris carried by floodwaters, widely circulated online, fueled public anger and strengthened claims by environmental groups that long-term deforestation played a central role in worsening the catastrophe. Monitoring organizations report that Sumatra has lost more than four million hectares of forest since 2001, deepening perceptions

that environmental oversight has lagged behind industrial expansion. The surge of public scrutiny has increased political pressure on the government to improve transparency, strengthen enforcement, and reform land-use governance long criticized for weak monitoring and vulnerability to political influence.

The floods also exposed limitations in disaster-response capacity. Landslides blocked key transport routes, leaving several districts temporarily isolated and delaying relief operations, while shortages of electricity, fuel, and supplies underscored the logistical challenges of large-scale emergencies in remote areas. Authorities have resorted to airlifting aid to hard-hit communities as power restoration and infrastructure clearing continue. [Jakarta Globe 1] [Jakarta Globe 2] [Reuters] [The Diplomat]

Indonesia: Money-laundering allegations deepen crisis in powerful Muslim organization Nahdlatul Ulama

(ms) Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, is facing mounting turmoil after a leaked internal audit alleged that millions of dollars were funneled through its central board in a scheme that may constitute money laundering, intensifying an already serious leadership split at the top of the organization.

Nahdlatul Ulama, often abbreviated as NU, claims tens of millions of followers and wields considerable influence over Indonesian politics, parties and elections. Presidents court its clerics, and its networks of religious boarding schools and social institutions make it a key power-broker in the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy.

The controversy stems from an internal audit of the organization's 2022 financial statement by public accounting firm Gatot Permadi, Azwir and Abimail. The leaked document reportedly flags four transfers totaling around IDR 100 billion (USD 6 million) in June 2022 into Nahdlatul Ulama's central board account. The funds were said to originate from PT Batulicin Enam Sembilan Group, a diversified holding company with mining interests owned by the then general treasurer, Mardani H. Maming, who was later named a suspect in a mining permit bribery case by Indonesia's Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK).

The transfers were recorded as support for Nahdlatul Ulama's centennial celebrations and operational costs and occurred just days before Maming's legal troubles

escalated. The audit also notes more than IDR 10 billion in outflows labeled as debt repayments, including transfers to a senior figure in the organization's legal aid body who had assisted Maming in his case. The report concludes that these patterns indicate weak financial governance and expose the organization to potential money-laundering risks.

Nahdlatul Ulama's executive board has strongly rejected the accusations. Senior officials argue the audit is incomplete and therefore cannot be used as the basis for legal or organizational decisions, calling the allegations premature and legally flawed. They insist the questioned flows of money were controlled personally by Maming and that the organization itself was "passive" and should not be treated as a perpetrator. The KPK has said it will follow up on reports of money flows from Maming to the organization.

The financial scandal lands as Nahdlatul Ulama is already engulfed in a fierce internal power struggle. The organization's supreme council has moved to oust chairman Yahya Cholil Staquf, citing both the alleged financial mismanagement and his earlier decision to invite a prominent supporter of Israel to speak at a leadership event during the Gaza war. Yahya has refused to step down, arguing that his dismissal is procedurally invalid, leaving Indonesia's most influential religious organization split into rival camps.

With President Prabowo Subianto reshaping Indonesia's political landscape, the outcome of this crisis will likely reverberate far beyond Nahdlatul Ulama's internal structures, potentially shifting alliances and religious backing that have long been central to national politics. [Fulcrum] [The Jakarta Post] [Voice of Indonesia]

Indonesia: Former Governor Ridwan Kamil Questioned in Major Bank BJB Graft Probe

(ms) Indonesia's Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) has intensified its investigation into alleged corruption at regional lender Bank BJB, questioning former West Java governor Ridwan Kamil as a witness in a case that prosecutors say caused IDR 222 billion (USD 13.4 million) in state losses. The probe centers on the botched procurement of advertising services at the partly state-owned bank, whose operations fall under provincial oversight.

Ridwan, who governed West Java from 2018 to 2023, arrived at KPK headquarters in Jakarta on 2 December

and was questioned for six hours. He told reporters afterward that he had “no knowledge” of the alleged irregularities, saying the bank’s directors, commissioners and the provincial-owned enterprise supervisory agency never reported any problems to him during his tenure. He stressed his cooperation was meant to demonstrate transparency: “This is what I have been waiting for—an opportunity to provide clarification before perceptions become harmful.”

The case gained national attention after KPK investigators raided Ridwan’s Bandung residence earlier this year, confiscating a Mercedes-Benz once owned by former president B.J. Habibie. A separate luxury car was seen leaving the home the night before the search, though the driver’s identity remains unclear.

The investigation is ongoing, and KPK officials have not indicated whether Ridwan may become a suspect. [The Jakarta Post 1]

In another boost for the KPK, a South Jakarta court has rejected a legal challenge filed by fugitive businessman Paulus Tannos, a key suspect in the massive e-ID corruption scandal. Tannos, currently detained in Singapore under a 2023 extradition treaty, had argued that Indonesia’s arrest warrant was invalid because he now holds Bissau-Guinean citizenship.

Judge Halida Rahardhini dismissed the petition on 3 December, ruling that since Tannos was arrested by Singaporean authorities, the legality of his detention cannot be reviewed under Indonesian law. The decision removes a major procedural obstacle and strengthens the KPK’s long-running effort to bring Tannos back to face trial.

Taken together, the two developments signal a period of renewed activity for the KPK as it pursues both domestic and international corruption cases amid growing public scrutiny of its effectiveness. [Tempo] [The Jakarta Post 2]

Indonesia: Government reverses early closure of major coal plant despite climate pressures

(ms) Indonesia has reversed plans to retire the Cirebon-1 coal-fired power plant ahead of schedule, a move that marks a significant setback for the country’s energy-transition commitments and raises new questions about climate policy coherence amid deadly climate-driven disasters. Chief Economic Minister

Airlangga Hartarto announced on 5 December that the government is unlikely to proceed with shutting the plant in 2035 as initially agreed under the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP), citing the facility's remaining operational lifespan and the high financial burden of early retirement.

The decision comes only days after catastrophic floods and landslides across Sumatra left more than 800 people dead, underscoring Indonesia's extreme vulnerability to climate change (see article above). Yet even as parts of the country struggle with the aftermath, Jakarta is shifting back toward a more cautious, coal-dependent trajectory. State utility PLN estimates that retiring Cirebon-1 just five years earlier than the end of its power purchase agreement in 2042 would require roughly IDR 130 trillion (USD 8.4 billion) to cover contract obligations and construct renewable-energy replacements. Officials say replacing the plant's 600 MW output would necessitate around 3,600 MW of solar capacity plus battery storage—an investment level far beyond current grid readiness.

The reversal is particularly significant because Cirebon-1 had been positioned as a flagship pilot for coal phase-out in developing economies. Under JETP, Indonesia secured a USD 20 billion climate-financing pledge from G7 partners to support an accelerated transition. But only about USD 3 billion has been mobilized to date, and uncertainty over disbursement timelines has further constrained Indonesia's willingness to proceed with costly early retirements. Airlangga said the total commitment has now been raised to USD 21.4 billion, but it remains unclear how soon pending renewable projects—such as the Saguling floating solar farm and South Sumatra wind project—will receive funding.

Critics note that the timing of the reversal amplifies a growing contradiction under President Prabowo Subianto, whose administration is pursuing an ambitious 8 percent economic-growth target that increasingly appears to overshadow climate priorities. Environmental groups warn that continued reliance on coal, even with "supercritical" or "clean coal" technology, undermines the country's net-zero pledge for 2060 and prolongs exposure to the climatic risks that contributed to the recent flood disaster. Government submissions to the United Nations this year included more ambitious emissions-cut targets but also left room for extended coal usage through technological upgrades, prompting concerns of backsliding. [Bloomberg] [Reuters] [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Construction of legislative and judicial districts in new capital starts, amid delays

(ms) Indonesia has begun construction of the legislative and judicial districts in its future capital, Nusantara, after completing 20 contract packages under the 2025–2029 development phase. The final eight contracts were signed on 6 December, covering 16 legislative buildings on 41.81 hectares, four judicial buildings on 15.15 hectares, and supporting facilities including the second phase of the OIKN office complex and the first phase of the Nusantara Police Resort. The projects carry a budget of IDR 12 trillion (USD 740 million).

The milestone comes despite longstanding delays that have slowed the broader capital project, including land issues, coordination problems, and weaker-than-expected private investment interest. Several first-phase works required adjustments, contributing to concerns over the 2028 target for relocating Indonesia's political institutions. Officials maintain the project has entered an irreversible stage and say the new construction packages signal regained momentum for the flagship national initiative. [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia: Bali moves to ban short-term rentals amid rising backlash against foreign-run businesses

(ms) Bali's Governor has announced plans to ban Airbnb-style short-term rentals across the island, arguing that unlicensed digital accommodations are depriving the region of tax revenue and undercutting local hotels. The provincial government would submit a proposal to halt daily rentals offered through global platforms, citing more than 2,000 unlicensed hotels and villas currently operating in Bali.

The move comes as hotel occupancy rates lag behind surging tourist arrivals, a trend officials and industry groups attribute to the proliferation of homestays, villas, and apartments marketed online without contributing to local taxes. PHRI leaders have urged the government to regulate short-term rentals in line with Singapore's model, where daily accommodations must be licensed hotels and apartments can only be rented for longer stays. They warn that many illegal rentals in Bali are run by foreign nationals who lease local properties and re-market them to tourists, often without meeting accommodation standards.

The proposal reflects a broader national and local push to curb the spread of foreign participation in small and medium-sized enterprises, real estate, and informal tourism ventures. In Bali, concerns have intensified over foreigners operating businesses without permits, subletting properties, or competing directly with local entrepreneurs, fueling perceptions that local livelihoods are being crowded out. The crackdown on short-term rentals signals growing political momentum to reassert local control over Bali's tourism economy and ensure that rising visitor numbers translate into regional revenue rather than leak overseas. [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia: Prosecutors advance case in decade-old defense satellite scandal

(ms) Indonesia's decade-old investigation into alleged corruption in a Defense Ministry satellite project has entered a decisive new stage, after state prosecutors and military police formally handed the case to the Jakarta Military Prosecutor's Office for indictment. The move marks the most significant progress in years in a scandal that has cost the state tens of millions of dollars.

The case involves a 2016 attempt by the Defense Ministry to secure a communications satellite for Indonesia's orbital slot at a strategic location used for military and government communications. The project collapsed amid claims that contracts were signed without budget approval, payments were issued before equipment was delivered and documents used to justify the procurement were falsified.

Three suspects are now facing prosecution: Leonardi, a retired two-star Navy admiral who once headed the ministry's defense facilities agency; Anthony Thomas van der Heyden, a United States citizen previously convicted in a separate corruption case in Indonesia; and Gabor Kuti, a Hungarian national and CEO of Navayo International AG, the firm linked to the satellite deal. Leonardi and van der Heyden were transferred to military custody this week, while Kuti remains a fugitive under an Interpol red notice and will be tried in absentia.

Prosecutors allege that Indonesia was misled into awarding a contract worth nearly USD 30 million for satellite equipment and services that were never properly delivered. In one instance, devices certified as secure satellite terminals were reportedly ordinary mobile phones.

The failed procurement later triggered international arbitration, with Indonesia ordered by a Singapore tribunal to pay more than USD 20 million in penalties and damages. [The Jakarta Post]

Laos: Gradual macroeconomic stabilization supports LDC-graduation push, but structural risks remain

(ms) Laos is entering a pivotal phase in its economic trajectory as it prepares for graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) status between 2026 and 2029. The government has completed its Smooth Transition Strategy (STS) and is finalizing a UN Readiness Assessment, following confirmation that the country now meets all three LDC graduation criteria: Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, the Human Assets Index, and the Economic and Environmental Vulnerability Index. GNI per capita is projected to reach USD 1,985 in 2025, well above the UN threshold, supported by gains in health, education, and updated assessments showing reduced climate and economic vulnerability.

The macroeconomic environment—long a major obstacle—has recently shown signs of stabilization. Moody's upgraded Laos' sovereign rating to Caa2 in December, a level still considered "very high credit risk" but reflecting improvement from Caa3, after Vientiane successfully issued a USD 300 million international bond that allowed repayment of a maturing Thai-market bond and lowered near-term default risk. Inflation has fallen sharply to 4.0 percent year-on-year, from above 20.0 percent in 2023, and the kip has stabilized as the gap between official and parallel exchange rates narrowed. Foreign exchange reserves have risen to USD 2.7 billion—around three months of import cover—and are expected to exceed USD 3 billion in 2026. Public debt has declined from 112 percent of GDP in 2022 to 94 percent in 2024, with projections for a further fall below 80 percent by 2028.

Despite these improvements, vulnerabilities remain significant. External debt service will average USD 1.3 billion annually through 2029, with repayments peaking in 2025 and around 40 percent owed to China, underscoring persistent dependence on bilateral creditors. Moody's warns that overall default risk remains high due to weak governance and limited financial transparency.

The government's STS—focused on macroeconomic stability, trade, investment, human capital, and climate resilience—aims to cushion the loss of LDC-related

international support. Vientiane is seeking deeper cooperation with partners to expand digital development, green growth, and regional integration, which it views as essential to maintaining stability once preferential treatment for LDCs is withdrawn.

While Laos' economic crisis is no longer acute, the transition out of LDC status will test whether recent stabilization can be sustained without external buffers. [Investing.com] [The Laotian Times] [The Laotian Times]

Malaysia: Government unveils new public-sector integrity framework

(tl) Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim unveiled the Integrity Governance Management System (SPINE) on the 2025 International Anti-Corruption Day celebration. SPINE is designed as a public sector-focused alternative to the Anti-Bribery Management System (ABMS)—the country's structured anti-corruption compliance system, in force since 2020.

The system provides a comprehensive framework that identifies integrity and governance gaps, guides organizations in implementing corrective measures, and includes reassessment and accreditation for those that demonstrate strong integrity compliance. [Malay Mail 1]

MACC welcomes new journalist association to boost corruption reporting

Meanwhile, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) has welcomed the establishment of the Crime Journalists Association (CiJA), viewing it as a new platform to strengthen cooperation between anti-corruption authorities and crime reporters.

MACC also expressed readiness to provide journalists with training in ethics, law, and the MACC Act 2009, to enhance professionalism in crime reporting.

CiJA recently held its first Annual General Meeting (AGM), appointing Safeek Affendy Razali as president along with a full leadership lineup from major Malaysian media outlets such as Bernama and The Star. [Malay Mail 2]

Malaysia: NGO calls for political financing reform to curb corruption

(tl) Malaysian non-government organization, Projek SAMA has urged the government to prioritize introducing a political financing reform to clearly define what constitutes lawful political donations and what amounts to corruption. The group said that transparency in political funding is essential to prevent abuse, even if prosecutorial oversight improves.

In its new report, Projek SAMA outlined three major reforms: introduction of the Political Financing Act, Amendments to the Election Offences Act 1954 to better regulate campaign spending, and Public Funding for political parties or election candidates to reduce reliance on private donors.

The group also called for comprehensive prosecutorial reforms, noting that merely separating the roles of the attorney general and public prosecutor would not be sufficient. Their recommendations include establishing an independent oversight body, introducing parliamentary scrutiny, drafting a code of conduct for prosecutors, and publishing regular statistics on corruption cases. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia: Parliamentary special committee urges to refine key provisions to protect human rights

(tl) The Parliament Special Select Committee (PSSC) called on the government to review key provisions of the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 747 to better align with the human rights principles while preserving national security.

Committee chair William Leong said concerns have persisted over provisions allowing detention without judicial review for up to 28 days, restricted access to bail, and limited legal representation. He noted that the impact of detention extends beyond suspects to their families, affecting mental well-being, social stability, and public confidence in the justice system.

Among the committee's eight recommendations are proposals to refine the legal definitions of "security offences", "terrorist crimes" and "organized crimes," restore greater judicial discretion in detention and bail and trial decisions, and consider the use of electronic monitoring devices (EMD) as an alternative safeguard.

The committee also urged faster, transparent implementation of reforms and called for stronger protection of detainees' welfare, including access to medical care, proper food and psychological support. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia: Lawyers' association calls for independent inquiry of triple police shooting

(ea) The Malaysian Bar has called for an immediate and independent investigation into the fatal police shooting of three men in Durian Tunggal, Melaka, amid conflicting accounts of the incident. Public concern intensified after a leaked audio recording circulated online, and reports suggested that a forensic review commissioned by the families may contradict parts of the police's narrative.

Bar President Mohamad Ezri Abdul Wahab emphasized that the seriousness of the allegations demands full transparency, warning that public confidence will suffer without a credible and impartial inquiry. He emphasized that all relevant evidence, including video recordings, communication logs, and forensic material, must be preserved, noting that any loss or withholding of such records would further erode trust in law enforcement. He also pointed to previous cases where official accounts were later questioned in court, contributing to a broader deficit of confidence in policing.

The Bar urged that the officers involved be placed on administrative leave and called for a review process consistent with international standards on the use of lethal state force. Citing the United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force, it underscored that deadly force must be a last resort, necessary and proportionate, and subject to independent review. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia: Government to introduce Food Bank Action Plan 2026-2030

(tl) Malaysia Ministry of Domestic Trade and Cost of Living (KPDN) aims to introduce its National Food Bank Action Plan 2026-2030 early next year as a national framework to strengthen food aid efforts and improve the country's social safety net. The plan is in preparation and being developed based on findings from the Food Bank Malaysia Convention 2025 and consultations with diverse stakeholders including NGOs, businesses, retailers, hotel operators and government agencies.

The five-year action plan will set clear objectives, establish national targets and identify underserved

communities, particularly areas not widely reached by existing food aid groups. The government plans to integrate NGO-led efforts into a more coordinated national system with standard guidelines, stronger regulation and improved incentive support.

From 2026, the food bank transformation will prioritize two key areas: sustainability and food security, while continuing to help ease cost-of-living pressures through community-based support. The initiative will also align with Malaysia's commitment to halve food waste by 2030 under the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the 13th Malaysia Plan.

Since 2019, the national food bank program has supported over 1.16 million households and 51,200 students, while rescuing more than 6,500 tons of surplus food. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia: Mission resumed to search for flight MH370

(ea) Malaysia will resume the search for Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 on December 30, more than ten years after the aircraft vanished with 239 people on board. The new 55-day search mission briefly began in March but was put on hold due to poor weather conditions. According to the Ministry of Transport, the renewed effort reflects Malaysia's commitment to offering closure to the families affected.

MH370 disappeared in March 2014 while flying from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, losing contact less than an hour after take-off before veering off its planned route. The incident triggered the largest aviation search in history, including a multinational operation involving 26 countries that ended in 2017, as well as a subsequent three-month mission by Ocean Infinity in 2018. Both efforts failed to locate the aircraft.

A 2018 investigation suggested the plane was deliberately steered off course, though the motive and circumstances remain unknown. US-based Ocean Infinity will again lead the upcoming search under a "no find, no fee" arrangement worth USD 70 million if successful. [BBC]

Myanmar: Election Commission excludes over 2,900 wards and village-tracts from December polls

(su) The Union Election Commission (UEC) announced on December 5 that 161 wards and 2,770 village-tracts across the first two phases of the general election will be excluded from voting, citing the absence of conditions necessary to hold free and fair polls. The elections are scheduled to begin on December 28 in two phases.

The UEC had earlier identified 121 constituencies and 56 townships where voting could not be held due to security and administrative constraints. The commission said the newly excluded wards and village-tracts likewise fail to meet the requirements for a "free, fair, and secure" electoral process.

The move demonstrates the fragmented territorial control and persistent conflict shaping the run-up to the junta-organized election. [Eleven Myanmar]

Myanmar: Junta frees 16 political prisoners in Mawlaik Kalay

(anl) Family members and local sources confirmed that 16 political prisoners were unexpectedly released from Mawlaik Kalay Prison in Sagaing Region on the eve of their scheduled release dates. The group included five women who had been jailed for allegedly spreading statements said to cause fear or disrupt public order, and who were freed on 27 November, as well as two women and nine men who had been convicted of actions deemed harmful to state security or of allegedly supporting resistance organizations. These 11 were released on 1 December.

According to a source familiar with the situation, most of the detainees had only weeks or days left in their prison terms. The source argued that the junta's decision was a public relations maneuver aimed at improving its image by selectively releasing individuals it had previously labelled as "terror offenders." The source added that the real priority should be the unconditional release of more than 20,000 political prisoners nationwide who remain jailed for "standing by their beliefs and the truth."

The releases came shortly after the junta announced on November 26 that it had granted amnesty to more than 8,000 prisoners, fugitives, and individuals charged under Section 505(a) of the penal code, which criminalizes making or spreading statements, rumors, or reports intended—or likely—to cause government or military personnel to disobey orders or lose loyalty. The regime said the amnesty was intended to ensure

that eligible voters do not lose the right to participate in the upcoming elections.

Critics, however, argue that such gestures do little to address the broader crisis of mass political imprisonment and ongoing violence across the country. [Mizzima]

Myanmar: Student activist rearrested on terrorism charges

(su) Ma Poe Piti Khaing, joint secretary of the Hpa-an Computer University Student Union, was reportedly rearrested on December 3, just one day after her release from Myingyan Prison in Mandalay Region. According to sources close to her family, she had been summoned to a police station in Mandalay's Aung Pin Lei District to sign an undertaking linked to her release but was subsequently detained and charged under Section 52(a) of the Counter-Terrorism Law.

The student activist, originally arrested in Mandalay in 2021, had served a combined five-year sentence under Section 505(a) of the Penal Code for incitement and Section 17(1) of the Unlawful Associations Act before her release on December 2. Her release was believed to be part of the junta's recent amnesty announced on November 26 (see article above), under which cases filed under Section 505(a) were formally closed.

Despite the amnesty, rights groups say repression remains widespread. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) reported on December 3 that since the 2021 coup, 30,071 people have been arrested, with 22,676 still in detention and 11,414 serving prison sentences, underscoring the limited scope and fragile nature of recent releases. [Mizzima]

Myanmar: Energy minister admits technological fuel-inspection controls remain unimplemented

(su) Union Minister for Energy U Ko Ko Lwin stated on December 1 that planned technological inspection and control systems for Myanmar's fuel sector have not been put into practice despite longstanding discussions. Speaking at a meeting with the Myanmar Fuel Oil Importers and Distributors Association, he said that while the government aims to ensure the price, quality, and safety of imported fuel, existing manual

inspections have proven insufficient and vulnerable to human error.

Myanmar relies almost entirely on imported fuel, making supply-chain oversight a key policy concern. The minister said the government intends to introduce Auto Tank Gauging (ATG) systems—initially at port terminals—to improve accuracy in fuel measurement and strengthen monitoring of reception, storage, and distribution processes.

Following the discussions, U Ko Ko Lwin inspected tanker offloading procedures, storage-station ATG installations, and control-room operations, emphasizing the need to modernize fuel-handling systems as part of broader energy-sector reforms. [Eleven Myanmar]

Myanmar: Ta'ang National Liberation Army cites ammunition shortages behind ceasefire decision

(anl/su) Major General Tar Phone Kyaw, General Secretary of the Palaung State Liberation Front/Ta'ang National Liberation Army (PSLF/TNLA), stated publicly that the group's decision in October to agree on a ceasefire with the military regime (see AiR No. 44, November/2025, 1) was driven by severe resource constraints and strategic pressures.

In a message shared on his social media account, he explained that the TNLA—PSLF's armed wing—had been forced to halt its operations due to the depletion of ammunition, a lack of financial resources, and diminishing troop strength. However, he emphasized that the decision did not signal an end to their struggle: "This chapter is not over yet."

Following the ninth round of talks between TNLA and junta representatives in Kunming on October 27-28, both sides signed a ceasefire scheduled to take effect on 29 October, requiring the TNLA to withdraw from Mogok and Moemeik.

Nevertheless, resistance forces rejected the arrangement. On the same day the agreement was signed, the Mogok Strategic People's Defence Force, Mandalay People's Defence Force (MDY-PDF), and allied groups vowed to defend Mogok at all costs.

Junta troops entered Mogok and Moemeik on 29 November. Fighting broke out the following day in western Mogok and Moemeik townships and continued into 1 December on the eastern outskirts of

Mogok, where resistance groups clashed with advancing regime forces. [Mizzima]

TNLA accused of shielding junta forces in Mongmit following China-brokered ceasefire

Tar Phone Kyaw's remarks come as the TNLA has been accused by local sources of protecting junta troops in Mongmit, northern Shan State, after the group returned control of the town—and nearby Mogoke in Mandalay Region—to the military under the China-mediated ceasefire arrangement. TNLA forces reportedly escorted junta convoys into both towns on November 30.

Residents told local media that the TNLA has since deployed large contingents near Myit Sone village on the Mabein–Mongmit road, blocking Kachin Independence Army (KIA)-led resistance forces from advancing south. The group has also reportedly stationed around 100 troops on the Mongmit–Mantong road, preventing resistance units from approaching the town from the east. The Irrawaddy was unable to independently verify these claims, and TNLA leadership has not commented.

The regime has entrenched its positions in Mongmit, deploying 120mm howitzers on the town's football field and digging defensive trenches. Most civilians are reported to have fled. The TNLA is said to have opened a liaison office in the town and is allegedly sharing intelligence with the junta on resistance movements, though these claims also remain unverified.

Mongmit had been seized by KIA and allied People's Defense Forces in January 2024 during Operation 1027, a joint offensive involving the TNLA, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and Arakan Army that captured 12 towns across northern Shan.

Resistance groups have since taken up positions around Mongmit and say they will continue supporting local PDF units. Meanwhile, clashes occurred on December 1–2 as junta troops pushed into PDF-held areas between Mogoke and Mongmit, reportedly burning several homes. [Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Junta airstrike kills five family members in Sagaing's Wetlet

(anl) On December 2, a junta airstrike killed all five members of a family in Nat Hmaw U village, Wetlet Township, Sagaing Region, as the regime intensifies aerial attacks ahead of its planned election later this

month. The strike also damaged at least five houses and injured five people, including two 10-year-old children.

Locals stressed that no clashes were occurring in or near the village at the time of the attack. Nat Hmaw U, home to roughly 200 households, was previously targeted in May 2024 when junta soldiers burned more than 30 houses during a raid.

The military has sharply escalated air assaults on civilian areas nationwide since announcing the schedule for its election, set to begin on December 28. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Police destroy opium fields in Shan State as UNODC reports decade-high cultivation

(su) Myanmar's police said on December 5 that joint security teams destroyed around 50 acres of opium poppy fields across three townships in Shan State—Pinlaung, Hsisai, and Hopong. In Pinlaung Township alone, about 40 acres of poppy plants roughly 2.5 feet tall were eradicated near Tinhtek Village, while five acres each were destroyed in Hsisai and Hopong townships during coordinated day-long operations involving police and departmental staff.

The enforcement action follows the release of a United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report showing that opium poppy cultivation in Myanmar has reached its highest level in ten years. According to the report, cultivation expanded by 17 percent year-on-year, rising from 45,200 hectares to 53,100 hectares. With Afghanistan's opium production continuing to decline, the UNODC said the latest figures confirm Myanmar's position as the world's leading source of illicit opium. [Eleven Myanmar]

Myanmar: Hundreds of illegal buildings demolished and sealed in KK Park and Shwe Kokko crackdown

(su) Myanmar authorities said that a total of 321 illegal buildings has been demolished and 161 sealed and confiscated in the Myawady–Mae Htaw Tha Lay (KK Park) and Shwe Kokko areas as part of an expanded campaign against online fraud and illegal gambling. The joint operation, involving security forces, administrative bodies, and local officials, has focused

on clearing buildings used for cyber scams and gambling, as well as destroying seized equipment to prevent reuse.

As of December 6, officials reported that 173 out of 425 illegal buildings in KK Park had been demolished, while inspections in the Shwe Kokko area since November 18 covered 694 buildings, of which 169 were identified as being used for online fraud and gambling. Of these, 161 buildings have been sealed. Authorities also confirmed the systematic burning of equipment linked to cybercrime operations.

Law enforcement operations have led to multiple arrests, including 96 Chinese nationals detained near Mae Htaw Tha Lay Village for alleged involvement in online fraud and gambling.

Additional demolitions were carried out in Myawady Township's Ward No. 3, where several multi-story buildings used for scam operations were torn down. The junta has framed the campaign as a "national responsibility" and pledged to continue coordination with local forces and neighboring governments to eradicate online scam networks operating along the border. [Eleven Myanmar]

Philippines: Flood-control corruption probe deepens as arrests loom, officials charged, and institutional reforms stall

(ms) The Philippines' sweeping investigation into alleged corruption in flood-control and other infrastructure projects intensified this week, with prosecutors filing criminal charges, police mobilizing manhunt operations, and the government grappling with institutional setbacks that threaten the probe's credibility. The developments deepen the turmoil surrounding the flood-control scandal, which has triggered investigations into billions of pesos' worth of substandard or ghost projects embedded in public works budgets for more than a decade.

The most consequential advance came when the Office of the Ombudsman filed malversation, falsification, and graft charges over a PHP 96.5 million (USD 1.65 million) ghost flood-control project in Davao Occidental. Prosecutors found that contractors and Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) officials certified the structure as complete—despite no construction having taken place. The complaint is non-bailable, raising the likelihood of imminent arrests. DPWH district officials and executives of St.

Timothy Construction Corp., owned by contractor Sarah Discaya, were named as respondents.

Discaya, who previously testified in Senate hearings and linked legislators and DPWH leaders to kickback schemes, is now the target of a nationwide manhunt. The Philippine National Police (PNP) has deployed tracker teams and coordinated with the National Bureau of Investigation, Coast Guard, Immigration, and local governments to locate her and several co-accused. Authorities said the pressure campaign aims to force suspects into surrender. [PhilStar 1]

The Independent Commission for Infrastructure (ICI), the investigative body created by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. last year, also escalated its recommendations to the Ombudsman. The commission urged the filing of plunder, bribery, and corruption charges against former senator Ramon "Bong" Revilla Jr., former special envoy to China Maynard Ngu, and multiple private intermediaries and DPWH-linked operators. Additional evidence was referred for possible charges against former DPWH secretary Manuel Bonoan, two former DPWH undersecretaries, COA commissioner Mario Lipana, and local representatives involved in alleged fund manipulation.

More significantly, the ICI recommended case buildup against senior political figures—including Sen. Chiz Escudero, Makati Mayor Nancy Binay, former senator Grace Poe, and Sen. Mark Villar—after witness testimony linked them to a long-standing scheme in which project allocations were allegedly inflated or duplicated to generate kickbacks. [PhilStar 2] [Politiko]

The widening legal exposure for incumbent and former lawmakers has raised the political temperature in Manila, prompting renewed scrutiny of Congress' role in shaping public works budgets. Senate President Pro Tempore Panfilo Lacson recently flagged dozens of "duplicate" or "suspiciously identical" infrastructure projects inserted into past DPWH budgets—patterns he argued were designed to "confuse and corrupt," reinforcing the commission's findings. [PhilStar 3]

Yet even as the probe accelerated, the ICI suffered a credibility setback with the resignation of former public works secretary Rogelio "Babes" Singson, considered one of its most technically knowledgeable members. Lawmakers said his departure undermines the commission's independence and raised questions about internal pressures. Critics demanded clarity on whether political interference contributed to his decision. Singson is the second official to resign,

following Baguio Mayor Benjamin Magalong. [PhilStar 4]

The Marcos administration also signaled reluctance to support congressional proposals for a new, more powerful Independent People's Commission (IPC)—which would have authority to issue lookout orders, grant immunity, and temporarily sequester assets tied to anomalous projects. Officials warned that the IPC risks duplicating the functions of the Ombudsman and the Department of Justice, casting doubt on its viability. [Phil Star 5]

While investigations continue, the DPWH is attempting to pivot toward operational reforms. Secretary Vince Dizon announced that the department will shift priorities away from "expensive and graft-prone flood-control structures" and instead focus on clearing waterways, demolishing illegal obstructions, and rehabilitating pumping stations under a new initiative, Oplan Kontra Baha. The effort aims to begin implementation in early 2026, with pilot rollouts already underway in Metro Manila, Cebu, and Bacolod.

Despite these shifts, structural concerns remain. Oversight groups highlight that many of the budget practices enabling corruption—including opaque insertions, inflated construction cost indices, and overuse of convergence programs—remain intact within the 2026 national budget that Congress is currently finalizing.

Philippines: Ex-mayor Alice Guo begins prison term in POGO trafficking case

(ms) Former Bamban, Tarlac mayor Alice Guo began serving her sentence on 5 December, marking a decisive development in the government's long-running crackdown on criminal operations linked to Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs).

Guo was convicted of qualified human trafficking for her role in abuses inside the Baofu compound, a major POGO hub in Bamban that investigators found to be involved in forced labor, trafficking and large-scale cyber-fraud. The site became one of the most visible examples of how criminal POGO networks allegedly infiltrated local government structures and operated with minimal oversight.

Her downfall grew even more politically sensitive after a court ruled she was *"undoubtedly Chinese,"* voiding her mayoral victory and intensifying concerns about foreign interference in local governance—an issue now

central to Manila's broader investigation into POGO-linked syndicates and their suspected cross-border ties.

Guo was sentenced to up to 40 years in prison, alongside her co-accused Rachelle Carreon and Jaimielyn Cruz. All three were transferred under tight security to the Correctional Institution for Women in Mandaluyong, where they will undergo quarantine and orientation before entering the maximum-security facility. [ABS-CBN] [PhilStar]

Philippines: Marcos urges Congress to fast-track anti-dynasty and transparency reforms amid public anger over flood, corruption scandals

(ms) Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has called on Congress to urgently pass a slate of long-delayed anti-corruption and governance bills, a move widely seen as an attempt to address growing public dissatisfaction following weeks of protests over alleged corruption and the government's response to catastrophic flooding.

In a statement on December 9, the Palace said Marcos asked lawmakers to prioritize four measures: a long-debated Anti-Dynasty Bill, the Independent People's Commission Act, the Party-List System Reform Act, and the Citizens Access and Disclosure of Expenditures for National Accountability (CADENA) Act. The proposals were discussed during a meeting of the Legislative Executive Development Advisory Council attended by Senate and House leaders, including Marcos' son and House Majority Leader Sandro Marcos. [PhilStar]

The push comes as the administration confronts intense scrutiny. Public frustration has mounted following revelations of alleged kickback schemes within the Department of Public Works and Highways and accusations that political patronage worsened vulnerabilities ahead of the severe floods that displaced tens of thousands. Protesters in Metro Manila and several provincial capitals have demanded accountability and reforms, arguing that entrenched political clans and opaque budgeting practices contributed to mismanagement and slow disaster response.

Marcos' call for an anti-dynasty law is politically notable given his own family's prominence. The Constitution prohibits political dynasties, but Congress has never passed enabling legislation. Analysts say the renewed

push signals an effort to show responsiveness to public anger, though passage remains uncertain in a legislature dominated by dynastic interests.

Philippines: Janet Napoles handed multiple life sentences in latest conviction tied to 'pork barrel' scam

(ms) Businesswoman Janet Lim-Napoles has been sentenced to more than 100 years in prison after the Sandiganbayan, Philippines anti-corruption court, on December 5 found her guilty of multiple counts of malversation and graft over the misuse of the late Benguet representative Samuel Dangwa's Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF).

The court convicted Napoles of six counts of malversation and six counts of graft, imposing two life terms for the largest malversation charges, additional prison sentences ranging from 10 to 17 years for the remaining counts, and six to 10 years for each graft conviction. She was also ordered to pay PHP 44 million (USD 750,000) in restitution and another PHP 44 million (USD 750,000) to the Treasury. Several former government officials and NGO officers were likewise convicted for participating in the scheme.

The case stems from the diversion of PHP 44 million (USD 750,000) in Dangwa's PDAF between 2001 and 2010 to bogus NGOs controlled by Napoles, allegedly in exchange for kickbacks. Prosecutors demonstrated that project documents and receipts were fabricated and that no agricultural or livelihood projects were ever implemented, rendering them "ghost projects."

The ruling adds to Napoles' existing incarceration, including her 2018 plunder conviction related to a broader PHP 517 million (USD 8.75 million) PDAF scam involving former senator Bong Revilla. [PhilStar]

Philippines: Senate advances 2026 budget, adds funds for disaster response and restores key social programs

(ms) The Philippine Senate approved the proposed PHP 6.793 trillion (USD 119 billion) national budget for 2026 on second reading on 4 December, keeping the measure on schedule for final approval on 9 December before bicameral negotiations begin. Minority senators Alan Peter Cayetano and Joel Villanueva voted against the measure.

The Senate's version reflects a net reduction of PHP 68.7 billion (USD 1.2 billion) in new appropriations, the result of PHP 362.9 billion (USD 6.35 billion) in increases and PHP 431.5 billion (USD 7.55 billion) in cuts across agencies and special purpose funds.

A major amendment restored PHP 52.13 billion (USD 910 million) to the Department of Public Works and Highways after reversing earlier reductions linked to construction materials pricing. Senators also added PHP 15.33 billion (USD 270 million) to the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Fund, citing the increasing costs of recovery after severe weather events and floods.

The Senate further reinstated PHP 11.17 billion (USD 195 million) for the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) to prevent a PHP 19.4 billion (USD 340 million) payout shortfall projected for late 2025.

Several institutions received increases, including the Office of the Vice President, the Department of Education, the Department of Economy, Planning and Development, and state universities and colleges. Cuts affected the Departments of Transportation, Agriculture, Health, and Environment. Unprogrammed appropriations were reduced from PHP 243.2 billion (USD 4.25 billion) to PHP 174.6 billion (USD 3.05 billion).

Senate finance chair Sherwin Gatchalian confirmed the budget includes funding for the planned salary increase for military and uniformed personnel, as announced by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Senators also committed to livestreaming bicameral deliberations to counter concerns over undisclosed budget insertions. [ABS-CBN] [PhilStar]

Philippines: Inflation eases to 1.5 percent in November as food prices stabilize

(ms) Philippine inflation slowed to 1.5 percent in November 2025, down from 1.7 percent in October, as food prices eased and key commodity groups posted softer increases, according to data released by the Philippine Statistics Authority on 5 December. The latest figure brings average inflation for the first 11 months of 2025 to 1.6 percent, remaining below the government's 2–4 percent target range.

The downtrend was mainly driven by a sharp moderation in food and non-alcoholic beverages, which rose only 0.1 percent, compared with 0.5 percent the previous month. Vegetable inflation fell to 4 percent, down from 16.4 percent in October, while

meat inflation slowed to 4.2 percent. Rice prices continued to decline, although at a slower pace.

Other commodity groups also saw easing price pressures, including alcoholic beverages and tobacco, furnishings and household equipment, and personal care products. However, increases accelerated in housing and utilities, transport, recreation, and restaurant services. Housing, water, electricity, and fuel remained one of the top contributors to overall inflation.

The PSA noted that while many food items became more affordable, prices for fish and seafood—particularly round scad—rose sharply due to supply disruptions caused by recent tropical storms. Onion and shallot inflation also climbed further, reaching 48.2 percent.

Inflation declined slightly in both Metro Manila and the regions, although Central Visayas recorded the fastest rate at 3.3 percent. The Bangsamoro region, meanwhile, continued to experience deflation at –1.4 percent.

Core inflation, which excludes volatile food and energy, also eased to 2.4 percent from 2.5 percent.

Economic officials said the latest data reflect improving supply conditions and ongoing efforts to stabilize food prices. The reading is also expected to give the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas more room to consider a rate cut at its final policy meeting of the year on 11 December. [Philippine Information Agency] [PhilStar] [Rappler]

Philippines: Sandiganbayan clears way for renewed probe into Pharmally pandemic procurement case

(ms) The Sandiganbayan, Philippines anti-corruption court, has denied appeals from former Department of Budget and Management–Procurement Service (DBM-PS) officials and executives of Pharmally Pharmaceutical Corp., upholding its decision to allow the withdrawal and reinvestigation of graft and falsification cases linked to the firm's pandemic-era contracts.

In a December 3 resolution, the court's Sixth Division rejected motions from ex-PS-DBM officer-in-charge Christopher Lao, former procurement group director Warren Liong, and Pharmally officials Mohit Dargani, Linconn Ong and Lin Weixiong. They had argued that reinvestigating the allegations of overpriced COVID-19

test kits and protective gear would cause undue delay and violate their right to speedy disposition.

The court said such claims were “speculative,” stressing that the Ombudsman has authority to review and reverse earlier prosecutorial decisions, especially since none of the accused had been arraigned.

Ombudsman Jesus Crispin Remulla has said the cases filed under his predecessor appeared “intentionally weakened,” and aims to refile strengthened charges by May 2026. [PhilStar]

Philippines: Delay in Manila Bay mega bridge contract as scrutiny of Chinese bidder intensifies

(ms) The Philippine government has postponed awarding a major contract for its planned Bataan–Cavite Interlink Bridge, after local maritime groups and security officials warned that the participation of a Chinese state-owned firm could pose national-security risks. The Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) confirmed that proposals for the PHP 7.25 billion (USD 124 million) land-approach segment are undergoing a detailed review by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which must issue a no-objection letter before the award can proceed.

The delay concerns one component of a 32-kilometer bridge, envisioned to stretch across the mouth of Manila Bay and connect the provinces of Bataan and Cavite. If completed, the nearly USD 3.9 billion project would become one of the world’s longest marine bridges. It is expected to reduce travel time from five hours to under one hour, ease pressure on Metro Manila’s congested roads, and create a new logistics corridor on Luzon. Because the span crosses the Philippines’ key naval and commercial gateway, it is also regarded as strategically sensitive infrastructure.

Local shipping groups urged the government to reject the bid from China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC), which submitted the lowest offer at PHP 4.87 billion. They argued that allowing a subsidiary of China Communications Construction Company — sanctioned by the United States for its role in constructing militarized outposts in the South China Sea — to build part of the bridge would carry “unacceptable risks of sabotage and intelligence collection.” Security officials have acknowledged that other agencies are reviewing the project for similar concerns.

The issue illustrates how flagship infrastructure projects are increasingly shaped by geopolitical tensions. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has taken a more assertive stance against China at sea while seeking to preserve economic ties, but the bridge controversy shows the narrowing space for cooperation. Until ADB completes its review, the award — originally expected in late November — remains on hold. [Bloomberg]

Philippines: President Marcos announces phased pay hike for military, police amid coup rumors

(ms) President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has approved a three-year increase in the base pay of military and uniformed personnel, announcing the move on 3 December as his administration confronts intense pressure from the nationwide flood-control corruption scandal and recurring rumors of coup attempts.

Under Executive Order 107, salaries for personnel in the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Philippine National Police, Coast Guard, Bureau of Fire Protection, Bureau of Jail Management and Penology, Bureau of Corrections, and the National Mapping and Resource Information Authority will rise by 5 percent in 2026, 4.75 percent in 2027, and 4.55 percent in 2028. The subsistence allowance will also increase to PHP 350 (USD 6.24) per day. Funding for 2026 will be drawn from the national budget, with later adjustments to be included in future expenditure plans.

The timing of the announcement has drawn scrutiny, as the government faces its largest corruption scandal in years, with investigations implicating lawmakers, public works officials, and contractors. Social media speculation has suggested growing unease within the security sector, though active military leadership has publicly rejected calls from retired officers advocating intervention.

Malacañang and the Department of National Defense denied claims that the pay hike serves as an incentive to secure military loyalty, calling it a long-delayed adjustment following the last major salary increase in 2018. However, the timing at least lets space open for speculation about the real motives behind the pay increase. [Inquirer] [PhilStar]

Singapore: Court upholds conviction of opposition leader Pritam Singh for giving false testimony to parliamentary committee

Singapore's highest court has upheld the SGD 14,000 (USD 10,800) fine imposed on opposition leader Pritam Singh for giving false testimony to a parliamentary committee—an outcome that leaves his parliamentary seat intact, as none of the individual fines met the constitutional disqualification threshold of SGD 10,000 (USD 7,500) per charge. The Workers' Party chief was convicted in February on two counts related to his handling of former MP Raeesah Khan's false claims in 2021.

Justice Steven Chong ruled that evidence showed Singh had no intention of ensuring Khan clarified her falsehood for at least two months, rejecting the defense's argument that he was merely giving her time to manage a personal trauma-related issue. Singh, who attended the hearing before a packed courtroom of WP lawmakers and supporters, said he was disappointed but accepted the judgment "fully and without reservation," paying the fines immediately after the verdict.

The Workers' Party — the only opposition force in a parliament dominated by the ruling People's Action Party — holds 12 of 99 seats and is expected to keep Singh as its leader.

While convictions involving sitting opposition MPs are rare, the government notes that the case followed established legal procedures, countering long-standing criticism that Singapore's judicial actions can have political consequences. Singh said he will continue focusing on parliamentary and constituency work as the WP prepares for the next general election due by 2025. [BBC] [South China Morning Post]

Singapore: USD 28.5 billion for research and innovation in 2026–2030

(ms) Singapore will invest SGD 37 billion (USD28.5 billion) in research, innovation and enterprise over the next five years, maintaining its long-standing practice of allocating roughly 1 percent of GDP to science and technology. The plan, announced by the National Research Foundation (NRF) on December 5, is structured around four existing priority areas — manufacturing and connectivity, human health, sustainability, and the digital economy — while adding

a stronger focus on talent development and artificial intelligence.

Around SGD 3 billion (USD 2.3 billion) will be directed toward new national “flagships” and “grand challenges,” including semiconductor research and healthy-longevity initiatives. The semiconductor push reflects Singapore’s established position in the industry: the country accounts for about 10 percent of global chip production and 20 percent of semiconductor manufacturing equipment output.

To deepen international collaboration, the NRF will also establish the Singapore–Horizon Europe Complementary Fund, offering financial support to Singapore-based researchers participating in EU-backed projects in fields deemed strategically relevant.

The upcoming funding cycle introduces expanded support for research careers, including a new postdoctoral award that provides SGD 250,000 (USD 190,000) in research funding and multi-year salary support. Additional schemes will help researchers gain entrepreneurial experience in overseas deep-tech environments.

Singapore’s technology ecosystem has grown steadily over the past decade, with business R&D spending nearly doubling between 2012 and 2022 and deep-tech startups consistently securing more than USD 1 billion in annual venture capital. Officials say the central priority is ensuring that long-term investments translate into commercially relevant outcomes and reinforce Singapore’s positioning as a competitive research and technology hub. [Channel News Asia]

Singapore: Government opens applications for 200MW of new data-center capacity

(ms) Singapore has launched a new call for proposals to develop at least 200MW of additional data-center capacity, marking the second expansion round since the city-state partially lifted its 2019 moratorium on new builds. The scheme, announced by the Economic Development Board and the Infocomm Media Development Authority, invites operators to submit project plans by 31 March 2026.

The government is seeking “best-in-class” facilities with high energy and IT efficiency, requiring that at least 50 percent of power come from green sources such as biomethane, low-carbon hydrogen, ammonia, or advanced fuel-cell systems with carbon-capture

capability. Authorities say the expansion is necessary to support growing demand for AI-driven computing while maintaining Singapore's position as a regional connectivity hub.

The move builds on a 2023 pilot allocation of 80MW to operators including Equinix, GDS, Microsoft, and the AirTrunk–ByteDance consortium. [DCD]

Thailand: Constitutional-amendment process enters decisive stage as opposition pressure intensifies

(msz/lm) Thailand has entered a decisive phase in its attempt to amend the constitution, at a moment when political tensions between the government and the opposition are escalating and speculation about an early House dissolution is reshaping the broader strategic landscape. Parliament will convene a special joint sitting on December 10–11 to consider the second reading of the constitutional-amendment bill, following the completion of the vetting process. If the debate moves forward as planned, the earliest possible date for a third and final reading would be December 29, although parliamentary whips increasingly expect the vote to slip into early January due to the year-end period.

The amendment bill includes significant structural changes: the creation of a 35-member Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) and a parallel 35-member public-engagement committee. Both would be selected under the "20-pick-1" formula, whereby groups of 20 MPs and senators nominate a single candidate. The approach is designed to comply with the Constitutional Court's ruling barring a directly elected drafting assembly. The new charter must retain in full Chapters 1 and 2 — defining Thailand as a unitary state and outlining royal prerogatives — a condition endorsed by the vetting committee majority.

Although the second reading is expected to progress smoothly, the third reading faces significant uncertainty. Final approval requires not only a simple parliamentary majority but also the support of at least 67 senators, making the unelected upper chamber the pivotal actor in determining whether the amendment process succeeds or collapses. Political analysts note that this creates a complex dynamic for the ruling Bhumjaithai Party. If the bill fails because the Senate refuses to support it, the government risks appearing incapable of securing cooperation from a body with which it is widely perceived to have close ties. If the bill survives, the timeline could allow for a national

referendum on the new constitution to be held alongside the next general election, possibly in March 2026, although no date has been confirmed. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Legal experts have emphasized that the referendum process cannot be initiated by the cabinet. Under Constitutional Court requirements, the process begins exclusively in parliament, which must authorize the government to hold the first referendum asking whether a new constitution should be drafted. At least ten MPs must co-sponsor the question. The cabinet cannot bypass parliament by framing referendum questions on its own. Once parliament submits the question, the Referendum Act requires that the referendum take place no fewer than 60 days and no more than 150 days after publication in the Royal Gazette. These procedural constraints mean that parliamentary timing — not government preference — will determine how quickly the referendum pathway can proceed. [Bangkok Post 3]

This legal framework is unfolding just as political confrontation deepens. The opposition Pheu Thai Party is preparing parallel moves against the government of Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, combining allegations of ethical breaches involving several cabinet ministers with criticism of administrative performance. Pheu Thai intends first to seek a Constitutional Court ruling on the alleged ethical violations before deciding when to file a no-confidence motion. The sequencing reflects its own recent experience, after its former prime minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra was removed from office earlier this year following a Court ruling on ethical misconduct related to a border dispute with Cambodia.

Pheu Thai argues that the current government faces a broader range of controversies than those seen under earlier administrations, pointing to questionable budget allocations, the state's management of severe flooding in southern Thailand, and mounting difficulties in preparing for the 33rd Southeast Asian Games, where tight funding and the relocation of flood-damaged venues have strained timelines. The opposition has accused the government of attempting to evade scrutiny by signaling that it may dissolve the House in January — a step that would immediately terminate both the amendment bill and any no-confidence proceedings. [Bangkok Post 4] [Bangkok Post 5]

Prime Minister Anutin has acknowledged that preparations for the Games have been constrained by funding issues but has assigned senior ministers to

push remedial work more quickly. He has also suggested publicly that parliamentary assessments of his government's performance may be overtaken by his plan to dissolve the House early next year, reinforcing speculation that political timing — rather than the legislative calendar — may determine whether the constitutional-amendment process reaches its third reading. [Bangkok Post 6]

Thailand: Slow Hat Yai recovery and controversy over national flood response heighten pressure on government

(lm) The government of Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul is facing rising public and political criticism over its post-flood recovery efforts, with Hat Yai — the commercial hub of Songkhla Province in the far south — emerging as the clearest example of stalled rehabilitation. The city was heavily flooded in late November, and although water has receded, recovery remains slow. Officials now estimate that the floods produced close to one million tons of waste, far higher than initial assessments. Much of this debris remains uncleared, particularly in residential areas where narrow streets limit access for cleanup vehicles. The resulting mix of rotting waste and airborne dust has raised concerns about disease, while all major canals in the municipality remain clogged, prompting warnings that new rainfall expected on December 14 could trigger renewed flooding. [Bangkok Post 1]

In response, the Interior Ministry has significantly expanded operations by deploying thousands of additional workers and machinery to meet the government's two-week restoration target. Medical teams have been mobilized to address flood-related illnesses, and essential services in the city — such as hospital operations — have partially resumed. Despite these measures, progress remains uneven, and Hat Yai continues to struggle with a large backlog of waste and obstructed waterways. [Bangkok Post 2]

Nationally, the government's strategy is under intensified scrutiny. More than THB 4.93 billion (USD 143 million) in flood-relief payments has been distributed to affected households across the country, while thousands of additional claims remain under review. Following the lifting of the state of emergency in Songkhla, remaining operations were handed over to a centralized disaster-relief mechanism that coordinates civilian agencies and the military. Prime Minister Anutin has emphasized that recovery will continue despite the formal end of emergency measures. [Bangkok Post 3]

However, opposition politicians argue that the government is relying on committees and temporary coordination structures instead of addressing deeper weaknesses that have long been identified, including fragmented early-warning systems, uneven provincial response capacity, and the absence of a unified national platform for sharing disaster-related information. Critics say these structural shortcomings continue to undermine Thailand's ability to manage large-scale floods. [Bangkok Post 4]

Public frustration has also grown over inconsistent compensation standards. A case from Chiang Rai Province in the far north — where a family received THB 50,000 (USD 1,450) after a volunteer died during last year's floods — has drawn nationwide attention after comparisons were made with the THB 2 million (USD 58,000) compensation offered to families of victims in the recent southern floods. The perceived disparity has fueled debate about unequal treatment of disaster victims and the need for clearer, more transparent criteria. [Bangkok Post 5]

Thailand: Resurfaced photos of senior officials with alleged scam-linked financier intensify scrutiny as government touts major enforcement actions

(lm/bk) Thailand's interim government is confronting escalating political and institutional pressure after resurfaced photographs showed Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, Deputy Prime Minister Ekniti Nitithanprapas, former army chief Gen. Apirat Kongsompong, former senator Upakit Pachariyangkun, and other prominent figures appearing socially with Benjamin Mauerberger—a South African–born businessman widely cited by Thai, Cambodian, and U.S. authorities as being connected to large-scale scam and money-laundering networks operating across the region. [Bangkok Post 1]

The images, taken around 2014 during a National Defense College study trip and related social events, depict Mauerberger dining and traveling with senior officials. One particularly circulated photo shows Gen. Apirat with his arm around Mauerberger's shoulder while Anutin and Upakit stand nearby. Additional photos show Mauerberger attending Gen. Apirat's daughter's wedding and meeting other influential figures in Thailand's political-business establishment.

All officials involved insist the encounters were incidental, predating any allegations, and did not constitute personal or ongoing relationships. Anutin stated that he met Mauerberger only casually “five or six times,” while Gen. Apirat emphasized that photographs from large public events should not be misinterpreted as close ties. [Thai Enquirer 1] [Thai Enquirer 2] [Thai Enquirer 3]

Nevertheless, the images revived longstanding concerns about Thailand’s political-security culture, particularly the informal networking channels created by military- and police-run “executive development” courses. Critics argue these programs serve as gateways for politically connected business figures—including those later accused of wrongdoing—to gain proximity to decision-making circles. Prior reporting by two former *Wall Street Journal* journalists described how Mauerberger leveraged such elite access to build a “shadow empire” valued at roughly USD 1.5 billion, including stakes in Thai listed companies. One transaction linked to these activities contributed to the resignation of a deputy finance minister earlier this year.

The controversy has deepened political tensions. The main opposition People’s Party has renewed calls for the removal of Deputy Prime Minister Thamanat Prompow, arguing that his prior association with Mauerberger—acknowledged by one of his advisers as past legal work—raises concerns about potential conflicts of interest as the government investigates the very networks in which Mauerberger is implicated. Thamanat denies all wrongdoing. [Bangkok Post 2]

People’s Party spokesperson Parit Wacharasindhu has also called for the overhaul or suspension of the executive courses, arguing that they create informal channels that can be exploited by individuals seeking proximity to state authority. Senior Democrat Party figure Korn Chatikavanij echoed these criticisms, warning that Thailand’s entrenched patronage culture heightens vulnerability to “grey-capital” penetration. [Bangkok Post 3]

As scrutiny over elite proximity intensifies, the government has sought to demonstrate firmness by highlighting high-profile enforcement actions. Authorities have seized more than THB 10.16 billion (USD 300 million) in assets tied to regional scam operations, including money traced to Cambodian businessman Yim Leak and to entities connected to Mauerberger. The Anti-Money Laundering Office (AMLO) reports that funds from numerous Thai victims were funneled through complex “mule account” chains dating back to 2021, eventually reaching accounts

associated with both men. Yim Leak has rejected the allegations, denying Thai citizenship, disputing links to intermediaries, and noting that he was removed from a U.S. draft bill on foreign scam networks. [Bangkok Post 4] [Bangkok Post 5]

Prime Minister Anutin has defended his administration, arguing that no previous government has seized illicit assets on this scale. He also points to ongoing operations targeting illegal cryptocurrency mining, which officials say involved "gray Chinese groups" siphoning electricity from the national grid. Anutin said these operations were valued at THB 3–4 billion, causing around THB 2 billion (USD 58 million) in losses to the state. [Bangkok Post]

Financial regulators have responded with additional systemic measures. The Bank of Thailand (BOT), the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), and the Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET) have launched a coordinated campaign to combat "gray capital," strengthen oversight, and curb cybercrime. Meanwhile, AMLO has expanded the definition of politically exposed persons (PEPs) to include senior officials across all branches of government, high-ranking military and police officers, local leaders, state-enterprise executives, and former officeholders for at least one year after leaving office—longer if they retain influence or decision-making access. [The Nation] [Bangkok Post 6]

Thailand: Surge in undecided voters and uneven party coverage reshape pre-election landscape

(lm/msz) Thailand's pre-election landscape is being shaped by two parallel developments: a sharp rise in undecided voters and new Election Commission data showing large variations in how widely parties plan to contest constituencies. These dynamics do not stem from one another, but together illustrate an electorate in flux and a party system balancing national competition with long-established regional strengths.

Polling shows that "no preferred candidate" has now become the leading response in nationwide surveys. In several polls, between one-third and nearly 40 percent of respondents said they had not identified any suitable prime ministerial choice, even though the main opposition People's Party – the single-largest force in Parliament's lower house – continues to lead among declared preferences, followed closely by Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul of the Bhumjaithai Party. Analysts link this rise in undecided voters to years of

political volatility, economic pressure, and a broader erosion of confidence in the political class after repeated coalition reshuffles and limited policy delivery. The government's response to recent crises—such as the Hat Yai floods—has further deepened public frustration. [Bangkok Post 1]

In a separate development, the Election Commission (EC) has released preliminary data showing which parties currently meet the legal requirements to field candidates nationwide, a process that depends on whether a party has established provincial branches or appointed representatives in each province. According to the EC, only Klatham — a party whose de facto center of authority is Deputy Prime Minister Thammanat Prompow, a powerful political broker with a large faction — and the main opposition People's Party — the largest party in the lower house — currently meet the criteria to contest all 77 provinces and 400 constituencies.

Among established parties, some of which remain regionally anchored, the ruling Bhumjaithai Party and the New Opportunity Party, a mid-sized group seeking to widen its national presence, can field candidates in 76 provinces. The Democrat Party, Thailand's oldest political party with long-standing support in the south, meets the requirements in 73 provinces. Pheu Thai, an opposition party with roots in the political networks of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, meets the criteria in 59 provinces. The Palang Pracharath Party, the conservative group that backed the previous military-aligned government, qualifies in 48 provinces, while the United Thai Nation Party, another conservative party associated with supporters of the former administration, meets the requirements in just 14.

In parallel with the release of these figures, the EC issued a warning that anyone submitting falsified documents during the registration of a new political party faces criminal penalties, including up to three years in prison, fines of up to THB 60,000 (USD 1,740), and a five-year political ban. Party registration requires at least 500 qualified supporters with a shared political ideology, 250 of whom must meet to elect party officers and sign the required documentation, all of which must be submitted by the elected party leader. Any falsification of records triggers legal action. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Election Commission files criminal charges against two alleged political brokers

(msz) Thailand's Election Commission (EC) has moved to strip two alleged political brokers of their voting and candidacy rights and has filed criminal charges against them for attempting to manipulate the Senate selection process. The case concerns last year's Senate poll, which produced unusually lopsided results benefiting figures linked to the ruling Bhumjaithai Party — an outcome that triggered multiple investigations into organized vote coordination.

According to the EC, evidence shows that the two men – Thanawut Saeng-arun, a former provincial-level Senate elector, and Sajjaphong Phummisak, a non-candidate broker – acted as intermediaries who recruited electors and facilitated meetings that offered financial incentives in exchange for coordinated voting. Thanawut allegedly helped gather electors for meetings where vote-planning was discussed and was overheard referencing promised payments. Witness testimony, hotel records, and messaging-app invitations were cited as corroborating evidence. Sajjaphong is accused of offering significant payments to individual electors and to a bloc-controller overseeing around 80 electors.

In parallel, the Department of Special Investigation is interviewing hundreds of individuals potentially implicated in money-laundering activities linked to the broader vote-rigging network. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Minor party dismisses secretary-general amid dispute over prime minister vote justification

(lm) The Fair Party — a small reform-oriented group without backing from major political factions and represented in parliament only by Kannavee Suebsang — has removed Kannavee from his position as secretary-general as part of what it described as an internal restructuring ahead of the next general election. In its announcement, the party stated that leader Pitipong Temcharoen had resigned and that the executive committee had unanimously dismissed Kannavee for allegedly violating internal regulations by citing a supposed party resolution when supporting Bhumjaithai Party leader Anutin Charnvirakul for prime minister, a decision that was reportedly required to go before the party's executive board.

Kannavee rejected the accusation, calling it a "false narrative." He insisted that no such party resolution had ever existed and that his vote was based solely on the constitutionally protected discretion granted to MPs. He argued that he had never claimed to follow a

party decision and questioned why a vote cast long ago was now being used as grounds for his removal. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Former MP accused of violating ethics over misuse of state land for landless farmers

(lm) Thailand's National Anti-Corruption Commission has concluded that former Pheu Thai parliamentarian Jirapong Songwatcharaporn committed a serious ethical breach by retaining and profiting from a state land plot originally allocated under the Agricultural Land Reform scheme. The scheme—often referred to in Thailand as *Sor Por Kor*—provides land exclusively for landless farmers to use for subsistence, not for commercial gain or long-term occupation by ineligible individuals.

The commission found that Jirapong continued to occupy and harvest rubber from a 49-rai plot—equal to roughly 78,400 square meters—in Trat province despite no longer qualifying as a landless farmer after becoming an MP in 2019 and receiving a parliamentary salary. His failure to return the land for reallocation was deemed an exploitation of state resources and a violation of the ethical standards that apply to political officeholders. The NACC has agreed to forward the case to the Supreme Court for a ruling. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Supreme Administrative Court reopens case on police conduct during 2020 protest crackdown

(bk) Thailand's Supreme Administrative Court has revived a long-running case concerning police actions during a pro-democracy protest on November 17, 2020, overturning an earlier dismissal by the Administrative Court of First Instance. The ruling means the Court will now examine whether police committed wrongful acts while exercising state authority—bringing one of the most emblematic crackdowns of Thailand's recent political cycle back under judicial review.

The protest took place during Thailand's 2020 youth-led pro-democracy movement, in which students and young activists demanded constitutional reform, limits on executive power, and greater accountability from the government. On the day of the clash, protesters

gathered outside the parliament building as lawmakers debated several constitutional-amendment proposals.

Police used water cannon mixed with chemical irritants, tear gas, and sustained crowd-control measures over nearly six hours. Protesters deployed large inflatable ducks—originally satirical props—as shields. More than ten rounds of tear gas were reported, and gunshots and explosions were heard during clashes between pro-democracy protesters and rival pro-monarchy groups.

The complaint seeks compensation from the Royal Thai Police and court orders requiring senior officials to end excessive force, comply with the Public Assembly Act, prevent clashes between opposing groups, and ensure adequate medical support during assemblies. [Prachatai English]

Thailand: Justice Ministry pushes wider awareness of anti-torture law as implementation gaps persist

(msz) Thailand's Justice Ministry is expanding efforts to ensure that state officials fully understand and properly implement the Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearance Act, which came into force in 2023 and makes Thailand the first country to combine obligations from both key UN conventions on torture and enforced disappearance into a single law.

Thailand has grappled for decades with reports of torture, ill-treatment, and unlawful detention involving police, military personnel, and other officials—problems that earlier legal frameworks struggled to address due to loopholes and weak oversight. The 2023 Act defines torture, cruel or inhumane treatment, and enforced disappearance as primary offences, mandates stronger investigations and prosecutions, and offers expanded protection and redress for victims.

At a recent workshop attended by government agencies, civil society groups, foundation networks, and media representatives, officials stressed that the crucial challenge now is translating the law into daily practice. They noted that internal protocols within law enforcement agencies remain inconsistent, and that proper implementation requires clear operational rules that prevent abuses before they occur. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government launches parallel stimulus and revenue-raising drive amid slowing growth and mounting fiscal pressure

(lm) Thailand is moving simultaneously to stimulate short-term economic activity and reinforce long-term fiscal stability, as rising public-debt interest payments strain treasury reserves and squeeze the government's room to maneuver. The dual-track approach reflects what senior Finance Ministry officials describe as an increasingly precarious balance between supporting households in the wake of southern flooding and addressing structural weaknesses in public finances.

On the stimulus side, the government is preparing a new round of year-end measures aimed at pushing fourth-quarter GDP growth above 1 percent. The centerpiece is a second phase of the *Khon La Khrueng Plus* co-payment scheme, designed to reach groups excluded from the first phase—such as people without smartphones and vulnerable households. Funding is expected from the THB 124 billion (USD 3.84 billion) central emergency budget for fiscal 2026, though officials acknowledge significant competing demands, including large outlays for flood relief and a THB 20–30 billion (USD 620–930 million) shortfall in the state welfare card program. If the emergency budget proves insufficient, authorities may reallocate money from revolving funds, and if needed, borrow temporarily from state financial institutions under Section 28 of the State Financial and Fiscal Discipline Act.

Complementary measures include the *Tiew Dee Mee Kuen* tourism tax-deduction program, which allows individuals to deduct up to THB 20,000–30,000 (USD 620–930) in eligible travel expenses, depending on the destination. The government is also transferring household debts of up to THB 100,000 (USD 3,100) per borrower to state asset-management companies for restructuring, a step intended to free disposable income for consumption. Liquidity support for small and medium-sized enterprises—responsible for 35 percent of GDP—aims to stabilize hiring and investment. Ministry estimates put baseline fourth-quarter growth at around 0.8 percent before stimulus, compared with the National Economic and Social Development Council's forecast of 0.6 percent. [Bangkok Post 1]

Running parallel to these stimulus efforts is a more urgent attempt to slow the deterioration of Thailand's fiscal position. The government's growing interest burden has forced the Public Debt Management Office to draw on treasury reserves for four consecutive

years: THB 1.81 billion (USD 56.1 million) in 2022, THB 8.89 billion (USD 275.6 million) in 2023, THB 39.7 billion (USD 1.23 billion) in 2024, and THB 26.5 billion (USD 821.5 million) in 2025. Officials attribute the trend to extensive pandemic-era borrowing, persistent global interest-rate volatility, and constrained fiscal space. Although the annual burden remains manageable, the rising interest-payment-to-revenue ratio—from 9.59 percent in 2024 to 10.2 percent in 2025—is viewed as an important warning signal for Thailand's sovereign credit rating.

Underlying structural indicators have also weakened. Net government revenue as a share of GDP has declined from 16.1 percent in 2015 to 15 percent in 2025. Public debt reached 65.2 percent of GDP in October 2025 and is projected to rise to 68.2 percent in 2026 and 69.8 percent in 2028, edging close to the legal 70-percent ceiling. In response, the medium-term fiscal plan for 2027–2030 outlines a significant future tax increase: a proposal to raise value-added tax from the current 7 percent to 8.5 percent in 2028 and 10 percent in 2030.

Officials argue that stabilizing fiscal indicators is necessary to maintain market confidence while the government deploys short-term stimulus. They also note improving consumer confidence, strengthening SME sentiment, and a less severe global downturn—helped by a temporary easing in U.S.–China tensions—as supportive factors. The border situation with Cambodia, they believe, is unlikely to worsen in the immediate term, further reducing downside risks as Thailand attempts to navigate its most challenging economic-policy trade-offs since the pandemic. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Rights commission warns of transboundary risks from Laos' Pak Beng dam

(lm) Thailand's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has concluded that the planned Pak Beng hydropower dam in northern Laos could pose significant cross-border risks to Thai communities along the Mekong River. The finding follows a 2023 complaint alleging that Thailand's Ministry of Energy and its state utility, the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), were moving ahead with a power purchase agreement for the project despite unresolved concerns.

According to the NHRC, the dam — located roughly 96 kilometers upstream from Kaeng Pha Dai in Thailand's

Chiang Rai province — may alter Mekong water levels, flood small islands, affect Thai–Lao border demarcation, and disrupt ecological systems and local livelihoods. The commission noted that Thailand has a responsibility to safeguard the rights of affected communities given the potential physical, environmental, and water-related impacts on its territory.

The NHRC also highlighted shortcomings in public participation and transparency. It found that key assessments required by Thai authorities — including a full transboundary environmental impact assessment and clear mitigation and compensation plans — remain incomplete, preventing Thailand from adequately evaluating the project's implications. In addition, the commission said information shared by the Office of the National Water Resources, which represents Thailand in Mekong River Commission deliberations, has been limited, leaving local stakeholders without sufficient updates on the project's progress. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: World Bank warns that structural barriers are stalling country's digital-economy transition

(bk) A new World Bank assessment warns that Thailand's digital-economy ambitions are being held back by deep structural constraints across infrastructure, law, governance, and skills. The *Thailand Digital Data Infrastructure Roadmap (DDIR)*, published this week, argues that the country risks falling behind regional peers unless it undertakes urgent reforms between 2025 and 2029.

The report highlights that Thailand's fixed broadband penetration remains low at 18 percent as of 2022, creating a persistent urban–rural digital divide even though general internet use is widespread. The country's shortage of advanced digital skills is described as especially severe, with very limited uptake of technologies such as generative AI — reflected in the finding that only about 6 percent of the population had used tools like ChatGPT by early 2024.

The World Bank also identifies Thailand's Personal Data Protection Act as a major barrier to innovation, arguing that an overly strict interpretation of the law has discouraged data sharing within the government and the private sector. This legal uncertainty has contributed to a broader culture of "data silos," where state agencies maintain fragmented databases that cannot be linked. According to the report, this

fragmentation weakens public-service delivery, creates redundant processes, and hampers the accuracy and targeting of social-welfare programs.

Technological modernization has also stalled. Cloud-computing adoption in government remains slow, and Thailand still lacks a unified open-data platform that would allow public datasets to be used for research or private-sector innovation. The World Bank notes that these shortcomings could undermine Bangkok's goal of placing Thailand in the global top 40 of the UN's E-Government Development Index.

In the welfare sector, weak interoperability between agencies has resulted in partial or inaccurate beneficiary records, limiting the state's ability to identify vulnerable populations and increasing the risk of misallocated assistance. The report calls for a federated social-registry system supported by improved data governance and big-data analytics. [The Nation]

Thailand: Senate committee to review controversial Bangkok expressway concession plan

(msz) Thailand's Senate Committee on Political Development, Public Participation, and Consumer Protection has launched a review of the government's plan to extend a major private expressway concession in Bangkok and build a new elevated highway across the northern and central parts of the capital. The decision follows a petition from the Expressway Authority of Thailand's labor union, which argues that the project raises legal, financial, and public-participation concerns.

At issue is the Transport Ministry's proposal to extend by more than 22 years the concession held by Bangkok Expressway and Metro (BEM), the private operator managing several of Bangkok's core expressway corridors. In return, BEM would construct a new double-deck expressway intended to relieve congestion on key east–west routes that connect large residential areas in northern Bangkok with central business districts.

The union argues that granting such an extension without an open bidding process could violate Thailand's Public–Private Partnership Act, which requires transparent competition for major infrastructure contracts. It also says that affected communities have not been properly consulted,

leaving unclear whether the new elevated road is needed or socially acceptable.

Concerns intensified after Transport Minister Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn confirmed that the government is negotiating a deal with BEM that would cap inner-city tolls at THB 50 (about USD 1.45), down from THB 90, in exchange for allowing the company to build the new route. The ministry aims to finalize the arrangement within weeks. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Prime minister orders security apparatus to intensify crackdown on scams and transnational crime

(msz) Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul has instructed Thailand's Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) — a powerful security body led by the army and responsible for nationwide intelligence coordination — to significantly escalate its operations against online fraud, cross-border criminal networks, and technology-driven financial scams in 2026.

Speaking while chairing ISOC's annual performance review, Anutin said the government considers transnational crime, call-center scams, and technology-based fraud to be among the most urgent national-security threats, and emphasized that enforcement must become more proactive and modernized. He noted that he had aligned ISOC's strategic direction with the army commander, who serves as ISOC's deputy director.

ISOC units have been directed to intensify suppression of cross-border criminal activity, including drug trafficking along frontier areas and separatist-linked unrest in Thailand's southern border provinces. The prime minister also ordered improved coordination on tackling informal household debt and instructed ISOC to upgrade its intelligence system to deliver faster analysis and counter online disinformation.

Beyond security operations, ISOC is also expected to assist with socioeconomic challenges. Anutin highlighted the need for the agency to support government efforts on land-rights disputes, human-trafficking cases, and the legal status of stateless or undocumented individuals. He further called for closer collaboration with provincial authorities to mitigate environmental risks such as hazardous air pollution (PM2.5), forest fires, industrial chemical leaks, and water contamination. [Bangkok Post]

Timor-Leste: National coordination for ASEAN accession started

(ms) Timor-Leste convened its 3rd ASEAN Interministerial Coordination Meeting on December 4 in Dili to consolidate national preparations following its full accession to ASEAN on October 26. The meeting focused on setting priorities, defining institutional responsibilities, and establishing a national timetable to meet obligations as ASEAN's 11th member.

Prime Minister Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão urged ministries to align ASEAN commitments with national development goals and ensure coordinated implementation. Officials reviewed progress since the signing of the Admission Declaration, including work on legal instruments, participation in ASEAN meetings, and the creation of ASEAN units across government agencies.

Discussions also assessed human-resource requirements, logistical and administrative needs, and the financial implications of regular participation in the bloc's activities. The government reaffirmed its commitment to strengthening interministerial coordination to guarantee a coherent national approach.

A day earlier, the Council of Ministers approved a USD 400,000 contribution to the ASEAN Secretariat's Timor-Leste Unit to support technical monitoring during the integration process.

On November 11, Parliament unanimously ratified the country's accession declaration. Foreign Minister Bendito Freitas hailed the decision as a historic milestone, calling ASEAN membership the fulfilment of "one of the noblest aspirations of the Timorese people." [Government of Timor Leste]

Timor-Leste: New LNG deal sets first concrete timeline for greater sunrise gas project

(ms) Timor-Leste and Woodside Energy have taken the most significant step in years toward developing the long-stalled Greater Sunrise gas fields, after both sides agreed last week to jointly study a 5-million-ton LNG project and, for the first time, set a shared production target of 2032–2035.

The agreement marks the first tangible progress since the 2018 settlement of the maritime boundary dispute

with Australia. Despite that breakthrough, development remained frozen due to disagreement over whether gas should be piped to Darwin, as long preferred by Woodside, or processed domestically at a new plant on Timor-Leste's south coast.

Under the new arrangement, Woodside has dropped its insistence on a Darwin-only option, though it has not yet endorsed Timor-Leste's proposed onshore facility. The study will examine both pathways, including technical, financial and environmental assessments.

The Greater Sunrise fields, located about 140 km south of Timor-Leste and more than 400 km from Darwin, contain an estimated 5.1 trillion cubic feet of gas. Timor-Leste's state oil company, Timor Gap, holds 56 percent of the project, having bought out former partners ConocoPhillips and Shell in 2018–19.

A key development in the latest agreement is the inclusion of a firm timeline—something that had never been jointly announced in four decades of negotiations. Officials involved in the talks say workstreams have accelerated since mid-2024, with technical teams now preparing updated costings.

Analysts note that an onshore Timor-Leste LNG plant could cost USD 5 billion more than a Darwin alternative, raising concerns about funding gaps. Chinese state-linked firms have signaled interest in investing, a prospect that could influence Canberra's position as Australia weighs regional strategic considerations.

Timor-Leste has indicated it is prepared to draw further from its sovereign wealth fund to support an onshore build, hoping the project will anchor new domestic industries. Woodside declined to comment beyond confirming the study agreement. [Reuters]

Timor-Leste: Australian Miner Expands Frontier Exploration as Country Opens Its Mineral Sector

The Australian exploration company, Estrella Resources, is accelerating its work in Timor-Leste as the government seeks new foreign investment to develop a long-untapped mineral sector. In a presentation released to the ASX, the firm detailed early geological surveys across multiple prospective sites, positioning Timor-Leste as one of Southeast Asia's least explored but potentially promising jurisdictions for base and critical minerals.

The explorer has been conducting mapping, sampling and preliminary modelling in areas containing ultramafic and mafic rock formations—geological settings that elsewhere in the region host nickel sulphide and copper deposits. While field teams reported encouraging visual signs, the company stressed that such observations are not a substitute for laboratory assays, maintaining compliance with JORC requirements. Drilling has not yet begun, and the projects remain at an early reconnaissance stage.

The renewed activity comes as Timor-Leste updates its mining framework, offering clearer licensing pathways and signaling readiness to diversify an economy still heavily reliant on petroleum revenues. With ASEAN accession increasing regional visibility, Dili is attempting to attract exploration capital to sectors such as minerals, agriculture and renewable energy.

But commercial mining in Timor-Leste remains largely untested. Infrastructure gaps, evolving regulatory processes, and limited historical geological data mean that exploration companies face long timelines and elevated risk. Analysts note that the country represents a classic frontier market: significant uncertainty, but potentially sizeable rewards for first movers if confirmed mineralization emerges. [TipRanks]

Vietnam: The Central Military Commission sets new goals for national defense in 2026

(hn) Vietnam's Central Military Commission (CMC) convened its 15th meeting on 4 December to review military and defense work in 2025 and set priorities for 2026, the first year of implementing resolutions from the 14th National Party Congress. The conference, chaired by General Secretary Tô Lâm, outlined an agenda centered on accelerating force modernization and strengthening strategic planning.

For 2026, identified as the first year implementing the 14th National Party Congress resolutions, the CMC set the guiding theme: "Determined to research and produce advanced, modern weapons and equipment." General Secretary Tô Lâm instructed the military to focus on six key task groups, including strategic advisory work, political education, building a compact and modern army, enhancing training and combat readiness, expanding international defense cooperation, and strengthening Party building within the armed forces.

He emphasized the motto “5 pillars of steadiness”: strong politics – strong discipline – strong technology – strong military strategy – strong soldier welfare, calling for all personnel to turn these principles into daily practice. Aligning with with the general observation that Vietnam is entering a phase of accelerated modernization driven by intensifying security pressures in the South China Sea and the need to gradually reduce reliance on Russian defense systems. [Quandoinhandan, in Vietnamese]

The meeting continued in the afternoon, chaired by Minister of National Defense Phan Văn Giang. Senior leaders of the military and members of the commission discussed several key matters, including 2025 self-review results, the 2025 emulation and commendation report, plans for 2026, and progress on tasks carried out in the second half of 2025. The meeting also reviewed proposed amendments to regulations on military ranks for senior officers.

Phan Văn Giang emphasized that 2026 marks the first year of implementing resolutions from the 12th Military Party Congress and the 14th National Party Congress, requiring unified, decisive execution of assigned targets. He called for stronger research, forecasting, and strategic advisory capacity, as well as development of military doctrine, modern warfare thinking, and people's defense strategy.

The commission highlighted goals for modernizing the armed forces, adjusting force structure to be leaner and more capable, developing new military units, strengthening equipment production and weapons modernization, and progressing toward defense industry export potential. In line with Vietnam’s push for a “compact, modern” force reflecting a broader trend toward streamlining traditionally manpower-heavy structures in favor of more agile, maritime- and air-oriented capabilities. The military was also instructed to expand international defense cooperation, ensure logistics and technical support, accelerate major defense production projects, and manage defense land effectively as Vietnam prepares major national projects in 2026. [Baomoi, in Vietnamese]

Vietnam: Hanoi appoints new leadership to Capital Command Party Committee

(hn/ms) Hanoi has appointed two of its top civilian leaders to key posts in the Party Committee of the Hanoi Capital Command, reinforcing the close integration between the city government and the

military command responsible for safeguarding the capital.

Nguyễn Duy Ngọc, Secretary of the Hanoi Party Committee, will serve as Secretary of the Capital Command Party Committee for the 2025–2030 term, while Vũ Đại Thắng, Chairman of the Hanoi People's Committee, has been named a member of the Committee for the same period. The appointments were announced on December 6 by the city's Party Organization Commission and later affirmed by Minister of National Defense Phan Văn Giang, who praised Hanoi and the Capital Command for maintaining political stability and securing major national events in 2025.

Speaking at the ceremony, Ngọc outlined Hanoi's development priorities under the 18th Party Congress resolution, including technological modernization, digital transformation, and major urban initiatives such as the Red River landscape boulevard and the Olympic Sports Urban Area. He emphasized continued cooperation with the Defense Ministry, describing security and development as "mutually reinforcing pillars" for the capital.

Nguyễn Duy Ngọc, a former Deputy Minister of Public Security with a long career in policing and administrative enforcement, has deep institutional ties to the security apparatus. His move into the Capital Command's top Party position fits Vietnam's established practice of placing leaders with strong internal-security backgrounds in oversight roles that bridge civilian governance and the armed forces—particularly in politically sensitive regions such as Hanoi.

Vũ Đại Thắng brings a contrasting profile. Trained as an economist, he rose through the Ministry of Planning and Investment and later served as Secretary of the Quảng Bình Provincial Party Committee before becoming Hanoi's Chairman. His career aligns him with Vietnam's technocratic economic-management bloc rather than with the security sector. His addition to the Capital Command Party Committee strengthens coordination between defense authorities and Hanoi's civilian administration on land management, infrastructure development, and planning for national-level events, areas where the Capital Command has significant authority. [Vietnamnet]

Vietnam: Party leaders witness new coordination agreement between Security, Defense and Foreign Ministries

(hn/ms) Vietnam's top Party and State leaders on December 6 oversaw the signing of new coordination regulations linking the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of National Defense, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—three institutions that form the core of Vietnam's national security architecture. The agreement formalizes cooperation across all operational areas and creates a standing annual ministerial meeting, elevating what has long been an informal but essential working relationship.

Leadership emphasized that tight coordination among the security, defense, and diplomatic arms of the state has historically underpinned Vietnam's military victories, external balancing, and domestic stability. In the current environment—marked by strategic competition in the region, rising defense modernization needs, and ambitious socio-economic targets—the institutionalization of this trilateral mechanism is presented as necessary to mobilize resources more efficiently and to meet the Party's strategic objectives: maintaining peace and stability, sustaining high-quality growth, improving living standards, and pursuing double-digit economic expansion.

The new regulations also reflect the Party's broader effort to align Vietnam's internal security posture, defense planning, and foreign policy messaging ahead of future congress resolutions. By codifying cooperation among the three ministries, the agreement strengthens policy coherence at a time when Vietnam is simultaneously modernizing its armed forces, refining its external strategy, and tightening management of internal political security. [Vietnamnews] [Dantri, in Vietnamese]

Vietnam: New 2026 decree raises penalties for missing or late invoices

(hn) From January 16, 2026, sellers who fail to issue invoices in quantities of 50 or more may face fines of up to VND 80 million (USD 3,200) under Decree No. 310/2025, which amends tax and invoice regulations in Decree 125/2020 and significantly increases penalties for not issuing invoices or issuing them late.

Fines scale with the number of missing invoices: violations involving one invoice carry VND 1–2 million (USD 40–80), rising to VND 2–10 million (USD 80–400) for up to ten invoices, and VND 10–30 million (USD 400–1,200) for up to 100. Cases involving more than 100 missing invoices carry VND 30–50 million (USD 1,200–2,000), while failing to issue 50 or more invoices

when selling goods or services triggers the maximum penalty of VND 60–80 million (USD 2,400–3,200).

Late issuance of invoices is also penalized at similar levels, from VND 500,000 (USD 20) to VND 70 million (USD 2,800). These levels represent a major jump from Decree 125/2020, which capped fines for late or missing invoices at VND 8–20 million (USD 320–800). The new decree additionally introduces VND 20–50 million (USD 800–2,000) fines for giving or selling invoices.

The sharper penalties mark a deliberate tightening of Vietnam's tax administration. Invoices are the backbone of revenue collection and VAT enforcement, and gaps in invoicing have long enabled underreporting, false input credits, and large-scale "invoice trading" schemes used in fraudulent VAT refunds. By raising fines to a level that creates real deterrence, authorities aim to reduce revenue leakage and support the nationwide rollout of compulsory e-invoicing.

For businesses—particularly SMEs still adjusting to digital invoicing—the decree increases compliance pressure, as administrative lapses that previously drew modest fines can now result in substantial financial penalties. For the government, however, the stricter regime aligns with broader efforts to widen the tax base, improve fiscal transparency, and boost state revenue without raising headline tax rates, relying instead on enforcement and digitalization.
[Luatvietnam, in Vietnamese] [Vietbao]

Vietnam: Police detain man over ties to exiled critics as pursuit of dissident networks grows

(hn/ms) Vietnam's Investigation Security Agency has arrested Phạm Quang Thiện, 47, on charges of "producing, storing, and disseminating materials against the State" under Article 117 of the Penal Code. His detention was approved by the Supreme People's Procuracy and is tied to an ongoing case involving two prominent exiled dissidents, Nguyễn Văn Đài and Lê Trung Khoa, who were placed on wanted notices last month.

The Ministry of Public Security previously accused Đài and Khoa—both long-established critics of the Vietnamese government—of running online platforms that publish content highly critical of the regime. Đài, a former human rights lawyer, has lived in Germany since 2018 following his release into exile. Khoa, also

based in Germany, operates *Thoibao.de*, a Vietnamese-language news outlet that frequently reports on elite politics and corruption.

Article 117 cases typically rely on digital activity, and Thiện's arrest appears to follow a common pattern in which domestic individuals are prosecuted for interacting with or sharing content from dissident-run overseas media. International rights organizations have long criticized Article 117 as overly broad and routinely used to suppress political expression, independent journalism, and online commentary.

The issuance of wanted notices for two dissidents residing in Germany also draws attention to past diplomatic frictions: Berlin previously accused Hanoi of abducting another activist on German soil in 2017, an incident that temporarily froze bilateral relations. While no such allegations have been raised in this case, Hanoi's pursuit of critics abroad highlights a growing trend in its information-control strategy.

Authorities have called on Đài and Khoa to turn themselves in for leniency and instructed the public to report their whereabouts. The investigation, launched on November 11, remains ongoing as police continue to link domestic arrests to diaspora commentary networks. [Vnexpress, in Vietnamese] [Vietnamnews1] [Vietnamnews2]

Vietnam: Commune official arrested for embezzling relief funds for personal use

(hn) Lam Dong authorities have arrested Uc Kim Khoan, an official from the Vietnam Fatherland Front Committee in Phan Son Commune, for embezzling VND 500 million (approximately USD 19,000).

Investigators say he diverted relief funds into his personal account while overseeing aid distribution. He was suspended and ordered to repay the money. Khoan reportedly admitted to using it for debt repayment, cryptocurrency investment, and personal spending. The case has been escalated for legal handling and further investigation is ongoing. [Tuoitre]

Vietnam: Government advances plans for nationwide free-trade zones as Ho Chi Minh City pilots flagship model

(hn/ms) Vietnam is moving ahead with an ambitious roadmap to build a network of free-trade zones (FTZs) by 2045, beginning with pilot zones in Da Nang, Hai Phong, and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) in 2026. The long-term plan envisions 6–8 FTZs by 2030 and 8–10 internationally competitive zones by 2045, contributing an estimated 15–20 percent of national GDP.

At a December 5 meeting, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh directed ministries to finalize the legal framework, incentives, and selection criteria for the first phase. He stressed the need for internationally competitive but realistic incentives, clear definitions of FTZ functions, and coordinated regional planning supported by infrastructure, technology, and skilled labor. The government also linked the strategy to major industrial projects, instructing ministries to refine support mechanisms for the Dung Quat refinery expansion to ensure long-term energy security.

The most advanced proposal is HCMC's planned flagship free-trade zone, presented to the National Assembly on December 3. The draft resolution would grant the city exceptional authority—similar to Hai Phong—to establish and expand FTZs without Prime Ministerial approval. The model combines duty-free operations with industry, logistics, services, commerce, and financial activities—an integrated framework not yet defined in Vietnamese law.

Under the proposal, investors could operate within the zone without prior investment registration and would receive substantial tax incentives, including a 10 percent corporate income tax rate for 20 years, four years tax-free, and nine years at a 50 percent reduction. Highly skilled workers and scientists would receive a 50 percent personal income tax reduction for 10 years. Companies inside the zone could also list, price, and make payments in foreign currency—one of the most significant regulatory departures envisioned.

HCMC's plan is tied to wider urban development. The city seeks to retain all revenues from land development in transit-oriented development (TOD) areas to reinvest in metro and transport projects. Between 2025 and 2026, TOD zones will be developed along Metro Lines 1 and 2 and Ring Road 3, with 355 km of urban rail planned over the next decade.

Parliament's Economic–Financial Committee supports the FTZ initiative but has requested clarification on integration with HCMC's planned international financial center and the policy's expected economic and fiscal impact. [Tuoitre] [Vnexpress, in Vietnamese]

Vietnam: Low-interest credit packages rolled out to support storm-affected borrowers and businesses

(hn) The State Bank of Việt Nam is deploying multiple low-interest credit programs to support people and businesses affected by storms and floods. About 250,000 borrowers with loans worth nearly ₫60 trillion (approximately USD 2.28 billion) have been impacted. Banks have restructured repayments and cut interest rates by 0.5–2 percent for around 24,000 customers, while a VND 70 trillion (approximately USD 2.65 billion) recovery credit package has already disbursed VND 1.5 trillion (approximately USD 57 million) to 6,500 beneficiaries.

The Prime Minister has approved a 2 percent interest reduction for three million affected borrowers in late 2025, with over VND 1.1 trillion (approximately USD 42 million) in support. A similar proposal worth nearly VND 300 billion (approximately USD 11.4 million) is being prepared for one million customers hit by Typhoon Kalmaegi.

To assist disaster-struck provinces, the Government will allocate VND 6.8 trillion (approximately USD 258 million) from the 2025 central budget. The Ministry of Finance also confirms that businesses and individuals suffering force majeure losses are eligible for tax extensions, deferrals, and deductible loss recognition, while further short- and long-term financial recovery measures are being developed. [Vietnamnews] [Vnexpress, in Vietnamese]

Vietnam: Amazon aims to boost a new export hub in Southeast Asian e-commerce

(hn) On December 5, Amazon has committed to helping Vietnam develop into a regional e-commerce export hub in Southeast Asia, according to discussions held between Deputy Prime Minister Lê Thành Long and Amazon Vice President Susan Pointer.

The company plans deeper collaboration through localization of supply chains, global brand promotion, and training programs—including “V-Brands Go Global with Amazon,” which aims to support 1,000 Vietnamese businesses.

The Government affirmed readiness to facilitate long-term investment and innovation, particularly in digital

technology, AI, and sci-tech development. [Vietnamnews] [Vietnam]

Vietnam: Hanoi to establish its own venture capital fund

(ln) The Hanoi Venture Capital Fund (HVCF), set to launch on December 22, aims to be a financial driver and support Hanoi's innovation ecosystem. The fund will be launched under a business cooperation contract (BCC), in which two or more companies can collaborate without creating a new legal entity in Vietnam, will accept risks to promote innovation and will function under international standards of transparency. [ASEAN]

HVCF will prioritize promoting the commercialization of scientific and technological products by investing and helping high-tech businesses, enterprises focusing on science and technology, and innovative startups. At a meeting with the Vice Chairman of the Municipal People's Committee Trương Việt Dũng and contributing investors, Trương states that Hanoi's venture capital activities must encompass key sections of science and technology division namely, education, biomedical science, healthcare, transportation and smart cities.

The fund will function on a pilot basis for up to 10 years, with expectations to financially boost Hanoi's technological projects and position Hanoi as Vietnam's innovation center.

Funding for the HVCF will come from Hanoi's budget for charters, which is capped at USD 23 million, and other contributions from investors, mobilization, sponsorships and other legal sources. Hanoi aims to partake in the fund with a maximum of six investors to ensure effective governance of the HVCF. [Vietnamnews]

Vietnam: Prime Minister urges to diversify financing for the Mekong Delta's climate response

(ln) Vietnamese Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính has requested the implementation of different mechanisms and policies to diversify funding sources, primarily through public-private partnerships, to handle climate change related threats to the Mekong Delta.

Non-state resources should account for around 35 percent of the finance mobilization for the Mekong Delta's climate response as it is based on the principle of "harmonised interests and shared risks". PM Phạm has underscored the importance of science and technology, economic restructuring and adaptive transport options to handle the region's current conditions. [Vietnamnews]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

China's mobile consular services grow worldwide as oversight questions mount

(ms) According to new reports by the Jamestown Foundation, Chinese diplomatic missions have conducted more than 100 temporary, off-site consular "pop-up" events across Canada since 2015, offering administrative services in hotels, universities, and community centers rather than in formal diplomatic premises. While these events are publicly framed as improving service access for citizens living far from major consulates, the report notes that their operation outside designated diplomatic sites raises questions about oversight, transparency, and compliance with established international norms.

Beijing's use of these temporary, off-site consular service events has expanded beyond China's established diplomatic missions, with recent research documenting more than 100 such "pop-up" activities across Canada since 2015. The findings, published by the Jamestown Foundation, suggest that the practice is more widespread and systematic than previously understood. While the majority of public attention has

focused on Canada and the United States, similar events have been observed in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America, indicating that this model of mobile consular outreach has become a regular feature of the PRC's engagement with overseas Chinese communities.

According to the report, PRC embassies and consulates in Canada conducted these temporary service missions in venues including hotel conference rooms, university facilities, cultural centers, and private halls. These events were typically framed as part of initiatives to "bring consular services to the community," offering passport renewals, notarizations, and other administrative services. The study notes that the activities occurred across 22 cities in 11 provinces, with a significant concentration in provincial capitals and mid-sized urban centers. This distribution suggests a coordinated approach aimed at expanding access for Chinese nationals living far from major consular posts.

A broader international context further shapes the discussion. Since 2022, multiple governments have investigated the existence of alleged PRC "overseas police service stations"—informal offices reportedly linked to local branches of China's Ministry of Public Security. These entities, publicly described by Chinese authorities as service centers assisting citizens with administrative matters, have been scrutinized in Europe, North America, and elsewhere for activities that reportedly include repatriation facilitation and contact with individuals sought by Chinese authorities. In several countries, officials have raised concerns regarding the unauthorized conduct of law-enforcement-related activities on foreign soil. Although consular pop-ups differ in purpose and are organized by diplomatic rather than public-security bodies, both practices involve state-linked outreach conducted in non-official premises, often in cooperation with local diaspora organizations. Analysts note that this similarity in operational environments contributes to broader questions about oversight and the delineation between formal diplomatic work and other forms of state engagement abroad. [read more Brookingsj; The Guardian]

Beyond North America, comparable consular pop-ups have been reported in a number of host countries. In the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and Hungary, PRC diplomatic personnel have organized temporary service days or partnered with local Chinese associations to facilitate administrative processing for diaspora communities. In some instances, these activities were conducted in community centers or business premises rather than official consular buildings. Similar patterns have been

observed in Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, where Chinese diplomatic missions periodically hold mobile service events in cooperation with student groups or cultural organizations. Reports from Tanzania, Kenya, Jamaica, Brazil, and Peru also indicate the use of temporary consular outreach in regions with notable Chinese migrant or business populations.

While many overseas Chinese community members welcome the increased accessibility of consular services, the expansion of off-site activities has prompted discussion among analysts and policymakers. Some observers have highlighted the need to clarify oversight mechanisms for foreign consular operations conducted outside designated premises, particularly in relation to international conventions governing diplomatic conduct. Others have noted that these mobile events may also serve broader engagement functions, including outreach to local organizations and community networks. In several countries, questions have been raised regarding the degree to which such activities intersect with political mobilization efforts associated with the Chinese Communist Party's united front system.

The PRC is not unique in providing mobile consular services; many states dispatch temporary service missions to reach citizens in remote areas or countries with limited diplomatic infrastructure. However, analysts point to the frequency, geographic spread, and organizational partnerships observed in the PRC case as distinctive features. The Canadian dataset, in particular, offers a detailed overview of how these activities have developed over the past decade and provides a reference point for understanding parallel developments in other regions.

As governments continue to review foreign diplomatic activity within their borders, the growing use of consular pop-ups highlights evolving dynamics in state-to-community engagement. Future scrutiny is likely to focus on regulatory clarity, host-country consent, and the administrative boundaries between routine consular service delivery and broader forms of foreign engagement. The global pattern suggests that mobile consular events will remain an active component of the PRC's overseas outreach strategy, with implications that differ by national context and domestic policy frameworks. [Jamestown 1] [Jamestown 2]

Japan rejects EU plan to use frozen Russian assets for massive Ukraine loan

(dql) Japan has rejected a European Uinon (EU)-backed proposal for G7 countries to issue a large “Reparation Loan” to Ukraine using frozen Russian assets held in their jurisdictions. Tokyo told partners at the December 8 G7 finance ministers’ meeting that legal constraints prevent it from deploying roughly USD 30 billion in Russian central bank funds located in Japan.

According to several diplomats, U.S. pressure also influenced Japan’s stance, as the Trump administration opposes the EU plan and wants access to the same assets for its own potential peace negotiations with Moscow.

Japan’s refusal weakens the European Commission’s attempt to build a broader international coalition to fund Ukraine in 2026, worsening concerns that Kyiv could face a severe financial crisis early next year. The United States has already halted new financial support, leaving the EU to shoulder nearly the entire burden.

Within Europe, the initiative has exposed sharp internal divisions. Northern and Baltic states push for aggressively using frozen Russian funds. Germany backs the plan to avoid massive budget exposure while France and the UK face fiscal pressures. Meanwhile, Belgium, home to Euroclear and most of the immobilized Russian reserves, has become the main blocker due to fears of enormous legal liability. Hungary, Slovakia, and now Czechia oppose the idea entirely. [Euronews]

International financial institutions have also distanced themselves. Both the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warn that using central bank reserves in this way would violate established legal norms and risk destabilizing the global financial system. The IMF has additionally tied its new USD 8 billion support program for Ukraine to Europe securing reliable financing assurances — something now in doubt. [Intellinews] [POLITICO]

Mongolia, International Labor Organization discuss expanding youth employment, labor safety initiatives

(fs) Minister of Family, Labour and Social Protection of Mongolia Aubakir Tilyeukhan met with Director of the International Labor Organization (ILO) Country Office for China and Mongolia Changhee Lee on December 2 to review ongoing cooperation and future initiatives.

Discussions included strengthening tripartite social partnerships, increasing youth labor market

participation, and linking wage growth to productivity. Both sides reaffirmed commitment to expanding the scope and impact of ILO-supported initiatives in Mongolia.

Tilyeukhan highlighted Mongolia's interest in expanding the youth employment support project to additional sectors, studying labor safety practices from Germany and the Korean Occupational Safety and Health Agency, and promoting awareness of employment and social insurance benefits among young people. Lee emphasized that the ILO will continue supporting Mongolia's legal and regulatory reforms. [Montsame]

Mongolia moves to join Asian Disaster Preparedness Center

(fs) The Cabinet of Mongolia approved a draft resolution on December 3 to initiate the country's accession to the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC).

The proposal, submitted by Deputy Prime Minister Gankhuyag Khassuuri, received full endorsement. Prime Minister Gombojav Zandanshatar instructed Foreign Minister Battsetseg Batmunkh to submit the formal membership application and appointed the Deputy Prime Minister to represent Mongolia on the ADPC Governing Board. [Montsame]

The ADPC is an autonomous, international, non-profit organization based in Bangkok, Thailand, founded in 1986, whose main objective is to build the resilience of communities and institutions to disasters and climate change in the Asia-Pacific region.

South Korea boosts funding to strengthen global pandemic readiness

(dql) South Korea has pledged an additional USD 18.9 million to the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), raising its total contributions to USD 70 million as part of efforts to reinforce global health security and accelerate vaccine development for future outbreaks. [CEPI]

Under an agreement, signed in Oslo between Ambassador Seo Min-jung and CEPI CEO Richard Hatchett, the new funding will support CEPI's programs through 2026, ahead of the launch of the organization's CEPI 3.0 strategy, which aims to deliver

vaccines within 100 days of detecting new viral threats —a major acceleration compared with the 11-month timeline from the emergence of COVID-19 to the rollout of the first vaccines.

CEPI focuses on fast-tracking countermeasures against emerging pathogens such as MERS, Lassa fever, Chikungunya, and the hypothetical "Disease X." [The Korea Herald]

Founded in 2017, CEPI is global, public–private partnership created to accelerate the development of vaccines and other countermeasures against emerging infectious diseases.

South Korea pledges expanded climate and development cooperation with Pacific Island nations

(dql) South Korea pledged to deepen cooperation with Pacific Island countries on climate change, digital development, and other regional projects, Foreign Minister Cho Hyun said during the sixth Korea-Pacific Islands foreign ministers' meeting in Seoul. Seoul has doubled its official development assistance this year compared with 2023, reflecting its commitment to supporting local priorities such as climate resilience, digital capacity, and resource management.

The meeting, co-hosted with Solomon Islands Foreign Minister Peter Shannel Agovaka, brought together 17 members of the Pacific Islands Forum, including Australia and New Zealand. Participants adopted a joint statement promoting collaboration on environmental issues, oceans, maritime affairs, and fisheries, and welcomed South Korea's initiative to co-host the 2028 UN Ocean Conference with Chile.

On the sidelines, Cho and other officials held bilateral talks with several Pacific nations, resulting in agreements such as a legal framework with Papua New Guinea to stabilize South Korea's development assistance. The discussions also focused on expanding cooperation with Fiji and other countries in climate change mitigation, maritime affairs, and fisheries. [Yonhap News Agency]

Chinese and Russian military aircraft enter South Korean air defense zone

(dql) Nine Chinese and Russian military aircraft briefly entered South Korea's Air Defense Identification Zone (KADIZ) over waters east and south of the country, according to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The incursion, involving two Chinese planes and seven Russian aircraft, lasted about an hour and prompted South Korea to scramble fighter jets, though no territorial airspace was violated.

The KADIZ is a surveillance area, not sovereign airspace, intended to prevent accidental clashes by requiring foreign aircraft to identify themselves. Such incursions have occurred once or twice yearly since 2019 during joint Sino-Russian exercises. Beijing's defense ministry described the operation as a routine patrol under their annual military cooperation plan. [Yonhap News Agency] [SCMP]

Taiwan signs agreement with EBRD to support development in Sub-Saharan Africa

(dql) Taiwan signed a letter of intent with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) in London to support development projects in Sub-Saharan Africa. The agreement focuses on digital technology, SMEs, and green innovation, building on past cooperation under the TaiwanBusiness-EBRD Technical Cooperation Fund, which has assisted over 400 projects since 2006.

Officials highlighted Taiwan's expertise in ICT, fintech, cybersecurity, sustainable infrastructure, and smart transportation as valuable for the bank's international initiatives. The move reinforces Taiwan's role as a global development partner and showcases its ability to contribute to economic and technological development abroad. [Taiwan News]

Quad holds counterterrorism dialogue in New Delhi ahead of leaders' summit

(dql) The Quad countries—India, the US, Australia, and Japan—held an official-level counterterrorism dialogue in New Delhi on December 6, focusing on enhancing cooperation against terrorism across the Indo-Pacific.

The meeting addressed the evolving threat landscape, intelligence sharing, and strategies to counter emerging challenges, including cross-border and proxy terrorism.

The dialogue also serves as preparation for the upcoming Quad Leaders' Summit, which India will host, though dates, agenda, and logistical details are still being finalized. [Ministry of External Affairs, India 1] [The New Indian Express]

Separately, India and the United States called for stricter measures against UN-sanctioned terrorist organizations, urging global asset freezes, travel bans, and arms embargoes on groups including ISIS, Al-Qaeda affiliates, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), and their networks. LeT and JeM focus their activities on Kashmir, aiming to integrate the region into Pakistan, making them a direct and pressing threat to India's national security.

The call came during the India-US Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism in New Delhi, where officials also highlighted the rising use of drones and artificial intelligence in terrorist activities.

Both countries stressed the need for sustained multilateral cooperation through the UN, the Quad, and FATF. India also welcomed the US State Department's designation of The Resistance Front (TRF), a LeT proxy, as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation and Specially Designated Global Terrorist. [Ministry of External Affairs, India 2] [The Tribune]

EU carbon tax set to curtail Indian steel exports

(dql) India's steel exports to the European Union are expected to decline sharply next year as the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) comes into effect on January 1. The levy, designed to level the playing field for European producers by penalizing imports with high carbon emissions, will cover steel, cement, fertilizers, and electricity.

Currently, about two-thirds of India's steel—mostly produced in coal-fired blast furnaces—goes to Europe, making the sector particularly exposed.

While switching to lower-emission electric arc furnaces could mitigate the impact, the transition requires significant time and investment. In the near term, Indian steelmakers are seeking alternative buyers in the Middle East and Africa, offering flexible terms and faster delivery. [Reuters] [Oilprice.com]

Malaysia urges de-escalation amid re-emerging Thailand-Cambodia border tensions

(ea) Malaysia has urged both Thailand and Cambodia to immediately de-escalate tensions after a Thai airstrike on December 8 reignited violence along their disputed border. The strike followed an early morning attack that left Thai soldiers injured, prompting Malaysia to remind both governments of their commitments under the Ceasefire Agreement in July, the Extraordinary General Border Committee (GBC) Meeting in August, and the Kuala Lumpur Accord signed in October. [Malay Mail 1]

Malaysia emphasized that these agreements require both sides to consult at the local level through existing bilateral mechanisms wherever armed incidents occur, in order to prevent further escalation. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim warned that the renewed fighting threatens regional stability, noting that Southeast Asia cannot allow long-standing disputes to slide back into cycles of conflict. [Malay Mail 1] [Malay Mail 2]

The flare-up adds new pressure to a border dispute that has persisted for years, particularly around contested areas near the Preah Vihear temple, where competing territorial claims have triggered clashes. Malaysia stressed that sustained diplomacy will be crucial to preventing the latest confrontation from undermining progress made in recent months. [Malay Mail 1]

Singapore: Surge in 'shadow fleet' tankers carrying sanctioned oil heightens safety fears in the Strait

(ms) Singapore is facing heightened scrutiny over the rising number of "shadow fleet" tankers moving sanctioned oil through the Singapore Strait, just as the United States has imposed sanctions on at least ten Singapore-linked entities allegedly involved in facilitating Iranian petroleum shipments. The convergence of these trends underscores how global sanctions pressure is reshaping maritime activity around Singapore, a chokepoint through which one-third of the world's traded goods passes.

Maritime intelligence data shows more than two dozen such tankers transiting the Strait in the first week of December, with over a hundred more operating from Indonesia's nearby Riau Islands. These vessels typically obscure their identities through flag-hopping, falsified

documents, manipulated AIS signals and nighttime ship-to-ship transfers in the South China Sea. Many operate without valid insurance, raising concerns that any collision or spill in these congested waters would carry severe environmental and financial costs.

The new US sanctions highlight Singapore's proximity to these activities. Washington named several entities incorporated or operating in Singapore, including Strasse Link, which is accused of providing pilotage services that enabled over 20 million barrels of Iranian crude to move through the region, and Anbo Shipping, which the US describes as part of Iran's broader sanctions-evading fleet. Other sanctioned firms, such as Hengyang Petrochemical Logistics and Singapore-registered shipping operators, are alleged to have supported ship-to-ship transfers just outside Singapore's port limits. These actions take advantage of a regulatory gap: activity in international waters lies beyond Singapore's direct jurisdiction, even as the city-state fully enforces UN sanctions and prohibits unauthorized transfers in its territorial sea.

The Maritime and Port Authority continues to monitor vessel movements, but under international law it cannot bar "innocent passage," even for high-risk tankers. Legal scholars note that the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea did not anticipate the emergence of a global sanctions-evasion fleet, leaving states with limited tools unless breaches occur within their territorial waters. As conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East push more sanctioned cargo into Asia, analysts expect shadow fleet traffic to increase, deepening both compliance risks and the possibility of a major maritime incident near Singapore's waters. [Channel News Asia] [The Business Times]

Thailand advances OECD accession as foreign minister calls for a more economically driven diplomacy

(msz/lm) Thailand has taken a pivotal step in its bid to join the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), submitting its initial memorandum — a comprehensive self-assessment of its alignment with OECD standards — to Deputy OECD Secretary-General František Ružička in Bangkok. The document marks the start of the technical phase of Thailand's accession process and launches a multi-year review by 25 OECD expert committees covering issues ranging from investment climate and financial-market regulation to regional development and public administration. OECD Secretary-General Mathias Cormann described the process as a "transformative

journey" that could strengthen Thailand's institutional foundations and support its ambition to reach high-income status by 2037.

Thailand has also formally requested to join the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention, a core international standard requiring countries to criminalize foreign bribery and enforce strong compliance mechanisms. Effective implementation will form part of the wider assessment. The OECD has cooperated with Thailand for more than two decades, and in June 2024 agreed to open full accession talks. [Bangkok Post]

The government's pursuit of OECD membership formed part of a broader strategic message delivered by Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow at the "Go Thailand 2026: Beyond Survival" forum, where he offered a candid appraisal of Thailand's declining diplomatic profile in the Indo-Pacific. Sihasak argued that domestic political volatility, economic constraints, and inconsistent foreign-policy execution have weakened Thailand's ability to command international attention, especially relative to regional powers such as China, Vietnam, and Indonesia. To restore relevance, he urged Thailand to diversify its trade partnerships, expand economic diplomacy, and pursue "new alliances" — including its current applications to join both the OECD and the BRICS grouping.

Sihasak stressed that foreign policy must be closely tied to economic strategy, especially as global protectionism rises and regional competitors gain ground. He also pointed to long-running challenges such as tensions along the Cambodian border, noting that Thailand continues to seek resolution through international mechanisms linked to the Ottawa Convention. [The Nation]

Bangladesh signals readiness to reset ties with India as New Delhi links engagement to political transition

(mml/lm) Bangladesh and India are signaling markedly different tones as bilateral relations enter one of their most strained periods in more than a decade.

Speaking in Kolkata, Bangladesh's High Commissioner to India, Riaz Hamidullah, called for a "new canvas" in the relationship, describing disagreements between the two neighbours as natural in a long, complex partnership and indicating Dhaka's readiness to re-engage despite the political sensitivities that have accumulated since the fall of the Awami League government. [The Daily Star]

The primary source of tension continues to be the situation surrounding former prime minister Sheikh Hasina, who fled to India during the July–August 2024 uprising and later received a death sentence in absentia for alleged abuses committed during that period. Bangladesh has formally requested her extradition twice, most recently after the verdict, but New Delhi has yet to act on these appeals. Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, speaking at the Hindustan Times Leadership Summit, said Hasina's continued stay in India is ultimately her own decision and that India would "consider" Bangladesh's requests. He refrained from indicating whether she is welcome to remain indefinitely, emphasizing instead that she travelled to India "under certain circumstances" that continue to shape her position.

Jaishankar also used the occasion to restate India's expectation that Bangladesh move toward a credible electoral process, noting that those now in authority had previously objected to how elections were conducted under Hasina. He argued that a fair national vote is the necessary starting point for political stability and suggested that whatever government emerges from the 2026 polls is likely to adopt a "balanced and mature" approach to bilateral ties. [The Daily Star]

In Dhaka, Indian High Commissioner Pranay Verma conveyed a more conciliatory message at a Maitri Diwas event, stressing India's desire for a "stable, positive, constructive and mutually beneficial" relationship rooted in equality and mutual respect, and recalling India's early recognition of Bangladesh in December 1971. While acknowledging that relations have deteriorated since the Awami League's ouster, he expressed confidence that they will improve once an elected government is in place. [The Daily Star]

India boosts funding under Bhutan's current development framework with fresh disbursements

(lm) India has released fresh funds to Bhutan under the country's 13th Five-Year Plan, with total disbursements now exceeding BTN 12 billion (USD 150 million). The 13th Five-Year Plan is Bhutan's current national development framework, outlining budgetary allocations and development priorities — including infrastructure, community services and economic stimulus — over a five-year period.

Under Project-Tied Assistance (PTA), 71 projects worth BTN 66.5 billion (USD 831 million) have been approved — combining new initiatives and projects carried

forward from the previous plan. India has so far released BTN 7.29 billion (USD 91 million) under this program, most of which has already been spent.

Community-level investment continues: 572 High-Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) — focusing on water supply, irrigation, roads, fencing and urban infrastructure across all 19 districts and three municipalities — total nearly BTN 8.5 billion (USD 106 million) in funding; India has disbursed BTN 4.97 billion (USD 62 million) so far.

Separately, a recent tranche of BTN 1.31 billion (USD 16 million) was allocated to four key sectors: BTN 750 million (USD 9.4 million) for nationwide chain-link fencing to protect crops from wildlife, BTN 276.23 million (USD 3.5 million) for reconstruction of major highway bridges, BTN 37.65 million (USD 470,000) for upgrades to monastic infrastructure, and BTN 250 million (USD 3.1 million) as part of direct-grant support to government operations.

Under the Economic Stimulus Programme — including concessional credit and a business-reinforcement fund — India has already released BTN 10 billion (USD 125 million). Through this fund, thousands of small enterprises have received subsidized loans via domestic financial institutions, supporting national efforts at economic revitalization. [Kuensel 1] [Kuensel 2]

Japan provides major grant to upgrade Bhutan's diagnostic and emergency health services

(lm) Japan has approved a USD 4.3 million grant to strengthen Bhutan's national healthcare system. The agreement, signed between Bhutan's finance ministry and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), will finance critical upgrades in diagnostic capacity and emergency medical services.

The new support builds on more than a decade of Japanese engagement in Bhutan's health sector. Earlier cooperation included the nationwide replacement of ambulances between 2011 and 2016 and the installation of modern diagnostic equipment in 2017–2018 at the country's three main referral hospitals in Thimphu, Gelephu and Mongar, which serve as Bhutan's highest-level medical facilities.

Japan is also financing two major ongoing projects. One is the construction of the Royal Centre for Infectious Diseases in Gidakom near Thimphu. The

second project focuses on improving maternal and child health services in eastern Bhutan through new imaging technology and enhanced clinical infrastructure. [Kuensel]

Brunei, India launch joint defense working group

(dql) India and Brunei convened on December 9 the first meeting of their Joint Working Group on Defence Cooperation in New Delhi, signaling a formal step to deepen bilateral military ties. The talks emphasized expanding joint training, military exchanges, maritime security collaboration, and cooperation in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief, alongside exploring defence industry partnerships, technology sharing, and capacity building.

The meeting also saw the signing of the Terms of Reference for the JWG, creating a structured framework for future cooperation. Both sides highlighted the growing momentum in their defence relationship and reaffirmed commitment to peace, stability, and a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. [DD News]

Cambodia: Trial of visa-free travel for Chinese nationals to begin next year

(mi) The Ministry of Tourism has announced a trial of visa-free travel for Chinese nationals will begin in June 2026. From June 15 to October 15, Chinese travelers will be able to enter Cambodia for up to 14 days without requiring an application or fees.

Of the 4.8 million tourists in Cambodia in 2025, Chinese nationals have made up approximately 1 million. The visa-free travel trial is expected to boost travel from China even further. [Khmertimes]

US President Trump approves conditional Nvidia chip exports to China as China posts USD 1 trillion trade surplus to the US

(ms) The US will allow Nvidia to export its H200 artificial intelligence processors to “approved customers” in China, President Donald Trump announced on 8 December, on the same day Beijing

reported a record USD 1 trillion trade surplus for the first 11 months of 2025. Trump said the deal — under which 25 percent of revenue from approved H200 sales will be paid to the U.S. government — had received a “positive” response from Chinese President Xi Jinping.

The move marks Washington’s latest attempt to balance economic competitiveness with strategic controls on advanced AI hardware. The H200 is significantly more capable than Nvidia’s China-tailored H20 chip but falls below the firm’s flagship Blackwell line, which remains prohibited for export to China. Trump said the Commerce Department is finalizing the conditions, which will also apply to AMD, Intel and other U.S. chipmakers. Nvidia and AMD had previously agreed to a 15 percent revenue-sharing arrangement in August.

Industry reaction was cautiously supportive. Nvidia called the decision a “thoughtful balance,” while critics in Congress — both Republican and Democratic — warned the policy may aid China’s military modernization despite the controls. U.S. officials justified the compromise by arguing that providing no U.S. chips at all would accelerate domestic alternatives and strengthen Huawei’s position in China’s AI market.

Whether exports will materialize remains uncertain. Beijing has tightened oversight of foreign AI chips, warned companies against purchasing downgraded Nvidia products, and publicly questioned the security of imported U.S. hardware. Analysts say Chinese firms still prefer the H200 for its performance, but government restrictions and political sensitivities may limit uptake.

The announcement came the same day the Justice Department revealed it had dismantled a China-linked smuggling network that illicitly shipped at least USD 160 million worth of Nvidia H100 and H200 chips abroad in 2024–25. [CNBC 1] [Reuters]

The decision also coincides with a period of tentative stabilization in U.S.–China economic ties. Trade data released 8 December showed China’s surplus exceeding USD 1 trillion in the first 11 months of 2025, even as exports to the U.S. fell sharply. Meanwhile, senior economic officials from both countries held a “constructive” call on 5 December to review implementation of the Busan arrangement, under which Washington agreed to lower tariffs and Beijing committed to expand soybean purchases and ease controls on rare-earth exports.

With the new chip policy, Washington is effectively testing whether strategic engagement and revenue-sharing can coexist with national-security restrictions — and whether Beijing will permit its tech sector to rely on U.S. components under heightened scrutiny. [CNBC 2] [CNN]

China–France ties mix rare warmth and rising tension as President Macron pushes Beijing on trade surplus and stronger stands on Russia's war

(mis/ms) French President Emmanuel Macron's fourth state visit to China combined carefully choreographed displays of friendship with increasingly stark public pressure on Beijing over trade and geopolitical disputes. Despite warm optics—including President Xi Jinping personally escorting Macron to Chengdu, an honour extended to very few foreign leaders—the visit ultimately underscored persistent tensions between China, France and the wider EU.

In Beijing, Xi framed the bilateral relationship as a stabilizing force amid global uncertainty, while highlighting China's upcoming 15th Five-Year Plan as a source of "new opportunities" for cooperation. Macron, however, used the visit to warn that the international order is under strain and urged China to play a more active role in restraining Russia and creating conditions for a ceasefire in Ukraine. Beijing reiterated general support for peace but offered no new commitments.

Economic frictions were more explicit. Macron raised concerns over Europe's EUR 300 billion trade deficit with China, calling the imbalance "unsustainable." French officials warned that subsidised Chinese industrial output—particularly electric vehicles—was increasingly flooding European markets. After returning to Paris, Macron escalated the message in interviews with *Les Echos* and *France 24*, saying that if China does not act to reduce its surplus, the EU will be "forced to take strong measures," including tariffs modelled on recent U.S. actions.

A notable feature of the trip was the absence of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who had joined Macron on similar visits in 2023 and 2024. French officials described this mission as strictly bilateral, highlighting Paris's push for "strategic autonomy"—a stance Beijing is keen to encourage as Brussels struggles for unity on China policy.

Twelve cooperation agreements were signed across nuclear energy, agriculture, ecological protection, higher education and panda conservation. Yet no major commercial breakthroughs emerged, reflecting unresolved disputes over EU agricultural access, Chinese brandy investigations and electric-vehicle subsidies.

Macron's Chengdu stop added political theatre: a rockstar-like reception from students and renewed panda diplomacy. But behind the ceremony, the visit made clear that while dialogue continues, fundamental economic and strategic divergences remain—and could soon trigger sharper European action. [Al Jazeera] [France 24] [NBC News] [South China Morning Post]

China and Germany restart high-level dialogue after postponed visits and diplomatic tensions

(ms) German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul visited China on a two-day visit from December 8-9, restoring high-level contact after two earlier postponements and weeks of uncertainty over whether Beijing would receive him. The trip, originally planned for 26 October, was cancelled when China did not confirm meetings with senior officials, a move widely seen as linked to Wadephul's public criticism of China's behaviour in the Taiwan Strait and the East and South China Seas. The delay created diplomatic friction in Berlin, as the visit was intended to prepare Chancellor Friedrich Merz's inaugural trip to China.

Meeting Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing, Wadephul said Germany sought "fair and rule-based trade," while Wang urged both countries to "avoid amplifying differences" and rebuild a stable framework for cooperation. Vice President Han Zheng pressed Germany to adhere strictly to the one-China principle, reiterating Beijing's position that Taiwan is a core interest. Wadephul reaffirmed Germany's long-standing policy but avoided endorsing China's broader interpretation.

Economic issues drove much of the agenda. Wadephul raised concerns over China's export restrictions on rare earths, which are critical for Germany's automotive and technology industries. He said Beijing remained "far" from granting general export licences, despite signals of flexibility. Chinese officials highlighted new exemptions for semiconductor-related exports but did not commit to broader easing. German industry has warned that prolonged restrictions would

disrupt supply chains already under pressure from global competition.

Wadephul also discussed China's support for Russia through large-scale purchases of Russian oil, saying it undermines efforts to pressure Moscow over the war in Ukraine. Chinese officials reiterated their position of neutrality and called for dialogue but offered no policy shift.

The visit comes amid intensified European engagement with China, following recent stops in Beijing by Spain's King Felipe VI and French President Emmanuel Macron. Wadephul will continue his trip in Guangzhou before Chancellor Merz travels to China in early 2026, as Berlin seeks to stabilise relations while scrutinising economic dependencies. [Anadoulu Ajansi] [Deutsche Welle] [ECNS] [Global Times]

EU reconsiders China EV tariffs

(ms) The European Commission has opened a review that could ease tariffs on Volkswagen electric vehicles manufactured in China, potentially offering the German carmaker partial relief from the EU's tough anti-subsidy regime on Chinese-made EVs.

The review concerns vehicles produced by Volkswagen Anhui in China, which builds the Cupra Tavascan all-electric SUV for VW's Spanish brand Seat-Cupra. Under the measures imposed in October 2024 after an EU investigation into Chinese state support, these models currently face a 20.7 per cent anti-subsidy duty on top of the EU's standard 10 per cent car tariff.

According to filings cited by the European Commission, Volkswagen Anhui has submitted an "undertaking" that would replace tariffs with an annual import quota and a minimum import price for the affected models. Seat-Cupra said it has worked closely with Brussels on a proposal it believes meets all requirements, warning that existing duties pose a "significant impact" and a serious threat to its business. If the offer is accepted, VW could gain a tariff exemption within months.

The case is being watched closely across the industry. The EU's October 2024 decision imposed duties of up to 45 per cent on Chinese-made EVs, with individual rates for major players such as BYD, Geely, SAIC and Tesla, while other cooperating manufacturers – including Volkswagen – were assigned the 20.7 per cent rate. Brussels has since signaled it is open to minimum price undertakings where they are deemed as effective and enforceable as tariffs.

The review underscores both the pressure on European policymakers to shield domestic producers from undercutting and the need for carmakers like Volkswagen to preserve access to cost-competitive Chinese production in an intensifying global EV price war. [Financial Times] [Market Screener]

China–Russia: Security drills, diplomatic coordination and expanding energy trade signal tightening ties

(ms) China and Russia entered December with a series of parallel developments across security, diplomacy and energy, underscoring the continued deepening of their strategic partnership despite global scrutiny. The two sides conducted a joint missile-defense drill in Russia, held high-level foreign-policy talks in Moscow, expanded energy cooperation in defiance of Western sanctions, and saw Chinese exporters prepare for a potential shift in the Russian market should peace negotiations on Ukraine advance.

Beijing confirmed that the latest missile-defense exercise — the third of its kind — took place in early December, describing it as part of an ongoing schedule and "not directed at any third party." The drill follows joint naval and artillery exercises earlier this year and reflects steadily growing operational coordination between the two militaries. Chinese media emphasized that the aim was to enhance command-and-control procedures and improve joint responses to hypothetical missile threats, signaling continued investment in interoperability. [China Daily] [The Kyiv Independent]

At the diplomatic level, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov on 2–3 December. Both sides said they reached "broad consensus," including closer alignment on regional security and shared concerns over Japan's recent statements on Taiwan. Discussions also covered the Ukraine war, with China reiterating its readiness to facilitate dialogue but offering no new proposals. The meetings also served as a platform for both governments to frame their coordination as a stabilizing force amid shifting global power dynamics. [Reuters]

Energy cooperation continued to expand. A liquefied natural gas shipment from Gazprom's Portovaya plant — sanctioned by the United States — arrived at China's Beihai terminal in early December. Ship-tracking data indicate nearly 20 LNG cargoes from sanctioned Russian projects have reached China since August. In

oil markets, Russia has increased discounts on ESPO crude to USD 5–6 per barrel below Brent amid reduced demand from Chinese refiners following new US sanctions. Traders say Beijing is leveraging the situation to secure more favorable long-term supply terms as Russia's export options narrow. [Bloomberg] [United 24]

Meanwhile, some Chinese exporters are positioning for possible changes in Russia's business environment should negotiations toward a settlement in Ukraine progress. Firms supplying the Russian market report preparing logistics capacity in anticipation of post-conflict demand, especially in infrastructure and consumer goods. [South China Morning Post]

Dutch Minister cancels China trip as Nexperia dispute continues

(ms) Dutch Economic Affairs Minister Vincent Karremans has cancelled a planned December visit to China amid an escalating dispute over chipmaker Nexperia, whose state-ordered takeover by The Hague has triggered Chinese export restrictions and disrupted automotive supply chains.

In a letter to parliament, Karremans said the trip was scrapped due to "scheduling differences," but noted he remains prepared to travel to Beijing at short notice for talks with China's commerce minister. He also released a detailed timeline showing that he first learned on September 18 of Nexperia management's "far advanced" plans to shift operations to China — a move he said posed risks to Europe's economic security.

The Dutch government seized control of Nexperia on September 30 without prior consultation with allies or Beijing. China retaliated by limiting exports of the company's chips. Wingtech, Nexperia's Chinese parent, has appealed the intervention, as well as the suspension of its former CEO and the transfer of its shares. [Reuters]

India intensifies humanitarian aid to Afghanistan

(dql) India has stepped up its humanitarian support to Afghanistan with the delivery of nearly 64,000 doses of influenza and meningitis vaccines to Kabul, part of New Delhi's ongoing efforts to strengthen the country's fragile public health system amid multiple crises.

This follows last month's delivery of 73 tons of essential medicines, vaccines, and nutritional supplements, which Afghan health authorities say are critical for hospitals facing severe shortages. [Khalsa Vox]

India's latest humanitarian assistance comes at a moment of historic rapprochement between India and Afghanistan. In October 2025, New Delhi formally upgraded its limited "technical mission" in Kabul to a full-fledged embassy—the first time India has restored such a diplomatic presence since the 2021 takeover by the Taliban.

The move followed a visit to New Delhi by Afghanistan's acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and was portrayed as part of a broader reset in bilateral ties focused on humanitarian aid, development cooperation and capacity-building. [New Lines Institute]

India demands assurances from China following Shanghai airport detention

(dql) India has called on China to ensure that its citizens traveling through Chinese airports are not "selectively targeted, arbitrarily detained, or harassed," after a recent incident at Shanghai airport. Prema Wangjom Thongdok, a UK-based Indian passport holder from Arunachal Pradesh, was stopped during a layover on November 21 while en route to Japan.

Chinese authorities reportedly questioned the validity of her documents, citing her place of birth, which China claims as part of southern Tibet ("Zangnan"). Thongdok was held for 18 hours before being allowed to continue her journey.

In response, India lodged a formal protest with Beijing, asserting that such actions obstruct efforts to improve bilateral ties. The foreign ministry emphasized India's expectation that China respect global aviation norms and treat Indian travelers fairly, while advising citizens to exercise caution when visiting or transiting through China. [Reuters]

The ministry also reiterated India's unequivocal stance that Arunachal Pradesh is an integral part of India, warning against any interference in the region. In the context of Thongdok's detention, the Chinese foreign ministry claimed that Zangnan—as Arunachal is known in China—belonged to China's territory, adding that the "Chinese side has never recognized the so-called

'Arunachal Pradesh' illegally set up by India." [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

China's stance asserts that India "illegally occupied" the territory. The Chinese government has actively reinforced this claim by renaming geographic locations in the state. Since 2017, China has changed the names of over 90 places, including mountains, rivers, towns, and lakes, presenting them in Chinese, Tibetan, and Romanized scripts. The latest update in May 2025 involved 27 locations, including 15 mountains, five towns, four mountain passes, two rivers, and a lake. [Bhaskar]

The diplomatic protest and advisory follow a period of cautious rapprochement between India and China, including high-level visits in 2025 aimed at resolving lingering border tensions after the 2020 Himalayan clash in eastern Ladakh that killed 24 soldiers. [NDTV]

U.S. elevates India to strategic role in National Security Strategy

(ppms) The Trump Administration's newly unveiled National Security Strategy (NSS) casts India as a critical partner, signaling Washington's intention to broaden cooperation with New Delhi in trade, technology, and defense. The document highlights the need to strengthen economic engagement and urges India to play a larger role in safeguarding the Indo-Pacific through its involvement in the Quad with Australia, Japan, and the United States. [The White House, USA]

The strategy identifies the Indo-Pacific as a central arena of geopolitical and economic competition, noting that the region generates nearly half of global economic output. In this context, the United States sees India—due to its expanding economic weight and strategic geography—as a key counterbalance to what it describes as harmful economic behavior in the area. Enhanced collaboration in advanced technologies, including AI, quantum research, and military innovation, is singled out as a priority.

Importantly, the "America First" strategy departs from earlier U.S. doctrines by emphasizing practical cooperation grounded in shared interests rather than linking partnerships to political or social reforms, placing India in a particularly advantageous position under this approach.

At the same time, the NSS situates competition with China around supply-chain security and access to critical minerals and encourages partners like India to

adopt U.S. regulatory norms. Yet this strategic convergence coexists uneasily with Washington's recent tariff actions against Indian goods and trade pressure related to India's energy ties with Russia. [Economic Times 1] [Times of India]

In the latest development, U.S. President Donald Trump indicated the US may impose new tariffs on Indian rice, citing concerns over what he described as "dumping" that undermines American farmers. Speaking at a White House event on farm support, Trump criticized cheaper imports from India, Vietnam, and Thailand for depressing domestic prices, and suggested similar measures could target Canadian fertilizer to bolster US production.

The remarks highlight continuing tensions in trade negotiations with India, which have yet to produce a broader agreement. The US imposed 50 percent tariffs on certain Indian goods in August over trade barriers and India's Russian oil purchases. [Economic Times 2]

Two separate US delegations—led by Allison Hooker, Under Secretary of state for political affairs, and Rick Switzer, Deputy US Trade Representative—are scheduled to visit India this week, but prospects for reducing these tariffs remain limited. [Business Standard]

India, U.S. push for tougher UN sanctions on terror groups

(dql) India and the United States called for stricter measures against UN-sanctioned terrorist organizations, urging global asset freezes, travel bans, and arms embargoes on groups including ISIS, Al-Qaeda affiliates, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), and their networks. LeT and JeM focus their activities on Kashmir, aiming to integrate the region into Pakistan, making them a direct and pressing threat to India's national security.

The call came during the India-US Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism in New Delhi, where officials also highlighted the rising use of drones and artificial intelligence in terrorist activities.

Both countries stressed the need for sustained multilateral cooperation through the UN, the Quad, and FATF. India also welcomed the US State Department's designation of The Resistance Front (TRF), a LeT proxy, as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation and Specially Designated Global Terrorist. [Ministry of External Affairs, India] [The Tribune]

India, Russia deepen strategic partnership during Vladimir Putin's visit

(dql) During Russian President Vladimir Putin's December 4–5 visit to New Delhi to attend the 23rd India-Russia Annual Summit, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Putin signaled their shared intent to maintain a close strategic relationship between New Delhi and Moscow built around long-term scientific, economic, and security collaboration. A comprehensive set of agreements expanding cooperation across multiple sectors was signed. [Ministry of External Affairs, India]

Putin's visit— his first since the launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022— comes amid heightened geopolitical tensions, with India's continued engagement with Russia, especially its purchase of discounted Russian crude, drawing Western scrutiny. In August, Washington imposed 50 percent tariffs on most Indian goods, a measure the Trump administration says targets Delhi's purchases of Russian oil, which it claims support the war in Ukraine (see AiR No. 35, September/2025, 1). A U.S. trade delegation is scheduled to visit New Delhi this week for discussions, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration seeks relief from the punitive tariffs. [The Economic Times]

Analysts highlight India's delicate balancing act: maintaining strategic autonomy while managing relations with both Russia and Western powers. The summit has been interpreted as a test of U.S. tolerance for India's independent foreign policy, and as an opportunity for Russia to strengthen ties amid sanctions-induced isolation. [The New York Times] [France 24] [The Business Standard 1] [ETV Bharat] [The Japan Times]

Trade

Putin announced that bilateral trade has reached a record USD 64–65 billion following a 12 percent increase last year, and expressed confidence that the USD 100 billion target is achievable, supported by a newly coordinated economic cooperation program running until 2030. Modi echoed this view, stating that the goal could be reached even before 2030 as both sides continue removing barriers to trade.

Both leaders underlined the rapid transition to national currencies, with ruble-rupee settlements now accounting for 96 percent of all bilateral payments, reducing reliance on the U.S. dollar. Work is advancing

on a free trade agreement between India and the Eurasian Economic Union, which both sides see as a major step toward facilitating trade and investment. [Anadolu Ajansı 1] [Hindustan Times]

Coinciding with Putin's visit, Indian state-owned fertilizer firms Rashtriya Chemicals and Fertilizers (RCF), National Fertilizers Limited (NFL), and Indian Potash Limited (IPL) have signed a memorandum of understanding with Russia's Uralchem Group to establish a 1.8–2-million-ton urea plant in Russia. The agreement is one of the largest fertilizer joint ventures by Indian companies outside the country.

India's imports of Russian fertilizers have surged in recent years, with Russia's share in India's total fertilizer imports rising from 7.7 percent in 2017–18 to nearly 27 percent in 2023–24. The collaboration also opens avenues for broader cooperation in marine and aquaculture sectors. [The Business Standard 2]

In addition, Russian lenders Gazprombank and Alfa Bank have applied for licenses to operate in India. Alfa Bank, Russia's largest privately-owned bank, and Gazprombank, partially owned by energy giant Gazprom, have been under Western sanctions since 2022. Both banks aim to open branches in Mumbai and New Delhi, respectively, with Gazprombank already maintaining a liaison office in the Indian capital.

India already hosts Russian banks Sberbank and VTB, which have recently expanded their offices and are introducing rupee-denominated trade instruments to facilitate imports from India. [Reuter 1]

Oil imports from Russia

Amid pressures from the U.S. on New Delhi to stop Russian oil imports, Putin reaffirmed Russia readiness to continue supplying India with reliable fuel. Putin's assurance of "uninterrupted fuel supplies," New Delhi signaled a cautious stance. India's foreign secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar emphasized that energy companies base their decisions on evolving market dynamics, commercial considerations, and the constraints created by sanctions and pricing pressures.

Reflecting this caution, Indian state refiners such as Indian Oil Corporation and Bharat Petroleum have reportedly placed January orders with non-sanctioned Russian suppliers, taking advantage of wider discounts while avoiding exposure to sanctions-related risks. [CNBC] [Reuters 2] [Reuters 3]

Energy and nuclear cooperation

Both sides committed to expanding cooperation in nuclear energy — covering the full fuel cycle, long-term support for the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant—India's largest operating nuclear power station—, and new initiatives in peaceful atomic technologies. New Delhi signaled readiness to formally allocate a second site for another Russia-assisted nuclear project. In addition, the two countries agreed to fast-track technical and commercial talks on Russian water-water power reactor technology, including research cooperation, localization, and joint manufacturing of nuclear components and fuel assemblies in India. [DD News]

Defense cooperation

In the defense realm, the two sides addressed a long-standing vulnerability in India's military ecosystem, namely the dependence on imported spare parts for Russian-origin equipment. They agreed to localize the production of spares, components and subsystems in India under the Make in India programs, supported by technology transfer and joint ventures, with the option to export to friendly third countries. [The New Indian Express]

Agreements

The summit produced an expanded framework for scientific and technological collaboration, prioritizing joint research, innovation, and industrial partnerships. Government agencies, private companies, startups, and SMEs will work more closely on digital technologies, critical infrastructure security, and law-enforcement-related systems. India and Russia also agreed to deepen academic and research connections through joint programs, mobility schemes and collaborative scientific projects. Space cooperation will grow as the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and its Russian counterpart Roscosmos pursue joint work on human spaceflight, satellite navigation and future planetary missions. Civil-sector ties were strengthened through agreements on healthcare, medical education, and food-safety regulation. [The Tribune] [Space News]

Ukraine

Modi reaffirmed India's support for all efforts toward peace in Ukraine during the summit, with Putin acknowledging India's diplomatic role and their discussions on possible steps toward a peaceful settlement. The remarks came after Putin's unproductive talks with U.S. envoys, while Putin's trip

to New Delhi was his first visit to India since Russia began its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. [Anadolu Ajansı 2]

Defense ministers' meeting

In the shadow of the Modi-Putin summit, the countries' defense ministers reaffirmed their longstanding defense partnership during a high-level meeting in New Delhi. During the 22nd meeting of the India-Russia Intergovernmental Commission on Military and Military Technical Cooperation, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh and his Russian counterpart Andrey Belousov reviewed ongoing military-technical cooperation and explored collaboration in advanced technologies. The discussions underscored India's push to expand domestic defense manufacturing and boost exports, while Russia signaled willingness to support India's drive for greater self-reliance in weapons production.

The ministers signed a protocol outlining current and future areas of cooperation, building on previous discussions involving the S-400 air-defense system and upgrades to India's Su-30 fighter fleet. [Anadolu Ajansı 3]

Russia continues to be a key defense supplier for India, having equipped New Delhi with a wide range of military platforms over decades. Yet, its dominance has waned as India deepens ties with the United States and diversifies its procurement. Russian systems accounted for about 36 percent of India's arms imports from 2020–2024, down from roughly 55 percent in 2015–2019.

Recent cooperation still includes major projects, such as the joint manufacturing of AK-203 rifles using Russian technology, delivery of the stealth frigates INS Tamal and INS Tushil built in Russia, and the planned arrival—around 2028—of a leased Akula-class nuclear submarine (Chakra-III) for the Indian Navy. [Deccan Herald]

Moscow's strategic foothold in India's digital sector

Meanwhile, Russia is seeking to draw India's expanding tech and cybersecurity industries into a strategic partnership designed to reduce both countries' reliance on Western technologies and strengthen Moscow's geopolitical standing—particularly vis-à-vis China. The push is believed to be coordinated by former Russian intelligence operatives, including ex–deep-cover spy Andrei Bezrukov, who now fronts Moscow's campaign to export Russian cyber tools,

secure communications systems and hardware across the Global South and the BRICS network.

During Putin's visit to New Delhi, Moscow has paired offers of high-end defence technology—such as allowing India to manufacture Su-57 stealth fighters—with proposals for deep collaboration in cybersecurity, quantum cryptography, processors, and operating systems. Internal Russian documents show that these initiatives are not merely commercial: Russian officials see them as a way to gain leverage over India's tech ecosystem, embed Russian systems into Indian infrastructure, and ensure long-term dependence. [The Washington Post]

India welcomes UK sanctions on pro-Khalistan terror-linked individual and group

(dql) India has welcomed the UK government's recent sanctions against Gurpreet Singh Rehal, a British Sikh businessman, and the extremist group Babbar Akali Lehar for their links to pro-Khalistan terrorist organizations, including Babbar Khalsa. The UK imposed an asset freeze and director disqualification on Rehal and an asset freeze on Babbar Akali Lehar, marking the first use of Britain's Domestic Counter-Terrorism Regime. [Government, UK]

The pro-Khalistan movement seeks a separate Sikh homeland in India's Punjab and surrounding areas. The group draws inspiration from the historic Babbar Akalis, a militant Sikh faction in the early 20th century that opposed British colonial rule in Punjab through armed resistance.

London's move addresses longstanding Indian concerns about pro-Khalistan activities in the UK, including violent protests, harassment of Indian diplomats, and attempts to promote a so-called Khalistan referendum. India has previously criticized UK authorities for insufficient action against pro-Khalistan groups. [Hindustan Times]

India in talks with Oman to procure Jaguar aircraft spare parts amid deepening strategic and defense partnership

(dql) India is reportedly negotiating with Oman to acquire spare parts for its Jaguar deep penetration strike aircraft, the only country still operating them. Oman is believed to have 20–24 Jaguars in its

inventory, though they have been retired from active service.

The Indian Air Force (IAF) currently operates six Jaguar squadrons, three of which suffered crashes this year resulting in three pilot fatalities. Facing engine issues and reliance on cannibalized parts, the fleet continues to fill critical operational gaps.

India is exploring procurement from alternative sources as original equipment manufacturers have ceased production. [The Print]

The reports come as India and Oman are intensifying their strategic and defence ties. In a December 3 phone call External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Omani Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi reaffirmed their commitment to deepen bilateral cooperation. [S. Jaishankar, X]

On December 4, the two countries held the 14th round of their Strategic Consultative Group (IOSCG) meeting in Muscat. The talks covered political, defence, security, trade, investment, energy, agriculture, education, culture, and people-to-people ties, as well as regional and global issues of mutual interest. [Ministry of External Affairs, India] [Omm Com]

These developments follow last month's 13th India–Oman Joint Military Cooperation Committee meeting in New Delhi, where officials reviewed ongoing defence engagements and agreed to expand collaboration in critical areas, including joint development, technology sharing, defence production, and resilient supply chains. The discussions also covered regional and international security, particularly in the Indian Ocean. [Business Standard]

Australia, India expand collaboration on skills and workforce mobility

(dql) India and Australia have reinforced their commitment to closer cooperation in workforce development and skill-building during the 3rd Australia–India Education and Skills Council (AIESC) meeting in New Delhi. The session explored ways to streamline the recognition of professional qualifications, create bridging programs for sector transitions, and strengthen linkages between Indian training institutes and Australia's Technical and Further Education (TAFE) network.

Key focus areas included advanced construction, sports management, digital and green jobs, and

renewable energy. Chaudhary suggested establishing an annual India–Australia Skills Meet to foster institutional ties and align standards. [DD News]

Indonesia names Chinese metal executive as suspect in Cesium-137 contamination probe

(ms) Indonesian authorities have designated a Chinese national, Lin Jingzhang, as a suspect in a radioactive contamination case linked to a metal-processing facility in Banten Province, marking the most significant development yet in an investigation that has drawn international attention. The contamination, involving the radioactive isotope cesium-137, was first detected in August in a shipment of shrimp exported to the United States, prompting Indonesian regulators to conduct extensive scans at the Modern Cikande Industrial Estate, west of Jakarta.

Investigators have identified PT Peter Metal Technology (PT PMT), a scrap-metal smelting company that ceased operations in July, as the likely source of the contamination. Police said Lin, a director of the firm, is suspected of violating environmental laws governing the handling, storage, and disposal of hazardous materials. Although he has not been detained, authorities have imposed a travel ban while the inquiry continues.

According to Indonesia's task force on radioactive materials, PT PMT sourced large volumes of scrap metal domestically in 2024–2025, some of which is believed to have contained cesium-137—an isotope used in industrial equipment but dangerous when improperly handled. Investigators suspect that contaminated materials entered the company's production cycle, were processed without adequate safeguards, and subsequently dispersed as airborne particulates across parts of the industrial estate. Waste material found at a nearby junkyard is also believed to have originated from the facility.

Authorities have interviewed more than 40 witnesses, including PMT employees, waste collectors, suppliers, and estate managers. All stainless steel produced by the firm was exported to China, though officials say no contamination has been detected in those shipments. [Reuters] [Tempo] [The Washington Post]

Indonesia's President Prabowo concludes first official visit to Pakistan with expanded cooperation agenda

(ms) Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto has completed his two-day state visit to Pakistan, his first since taking office, with both sides announcing plans to deepen cooperation across security, economic, and technological sectors. The visit, which coincided with the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations, marked the first trip by an Indonesian head of state to Pakistan since 2018.

Prabowo arrived in Rawalpindi on 8 December and was received by President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. Over the course of the visit, he held delegation-level talks with Sharif, met separately with Zardari, and held discussions with senior military leaders including Army Chief Gen. Asim Munir.

Talks covered an expansive agenda — from trade and investment to defense, health, IT, climate cooperation, education, and culture — with both governments signaling interest in diversifying ties beyond traditional commodities. Several memoranda of understanding were signed, laying groundwork for future collaboration.

The economic dimension featured prominently. Bilateral trade reached USD 3.3 billion between January and October 2025, driven mainly by Indonesian palm oil exports. Officials said the visit aimed to rebalance and broaden the trade portfolio, while exploring new market access and investment opportunities. [Anadolu Ajansi] [Yeni Safak]

Indonesia welcomes highest-ranking Chinese political adviser Wang Huning

(ms) Indonesia intensified its engagement with China this week as President Prabowo Subianto and House Speaker Puan Maharani hosted Wang Huning, Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), during his official visit to Jakarta.

Wang met Prabowo at the Presidential Palace on 4 December, following earlier talks with Indonesian lawmakers in Senayan. The meetings focused on maintaining momentum in parliamentary exchanges, economic cooperation and coordination in multilateral forums. No new agreements were announced, but

both sides emphasized continuity in existing collaboration.

Puan highlighted China's economic weight in Indonesia, noting USD 147.8 billion in bilateral trade and USD 8.2 billion in Chinese investment last year. Discussions also referenced ongoing cooperation in local-currency settlements and industrial development initiatives.

Wang's visit followed Prabowo's attendance at China's major military parade days earlier, underscoring Beijing's effort to sustain top-level access under Indonesia's new administration. While largely ceremonial, the meetings reaffirmed stable Indonesia–China ties amid evolving regional dynamics. [Antara] [CPPCC] [Jakarta Globe]

Timor-Leste Prime Minister meets Indonesian Governor to deepen cultural and historical ties

(ms) Timor-Leste Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão met Yogyakarta Governor Sultan Hamengku Buwono X on 8 December, underscoring both sides' commitment to strengthening longstanding cultural and educational ties. The meeting highlighted the deep historical connections between Timor-Leste and Yogyakarta, long regarded by many Timorese students as a "second home."

Sultan Hamengku Buwono described the discussion as an opportunity to reinforce mutual understanding rooted in shared history, noting that both sides touched on broader areas for cooperation. He expressed hope that the relationship "will remain harmonious as ever."

Gusmão, making his first official visit to Yogyakarta, said he was honoured by the warm reception and welcomed the chance to learn directly about the region's unique constitutional status, granted in 1950 in recognition of its support for Indonesia's independence.

He added that continued reflection on shared history would help build stronger bilateral ties. Gusmão's broader trip to Indonesia also includes advancing negotiations on the maritime border with Jakarta. [Antara]

Indonesia and Netherlands finalize repatriation of two drug convicts

(ms) Indonesia and the Netherlands have signed an agreement to repatriate two Dutch nationals convicted of serious drug offenses, including one long-serving death row inmate. The deal was formalized in Jakarta on 2 December by Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Law, Human Rights and Immigration, Yusril Ihza Mahendra, and Dutch Foreign Minister David van Weel, who joined virtually.

The convicts, Siegfried Mets, 74, and Ali Tokman, 65, have spent years in Indonesian prisons. Mets received a death sentence in 2008 for distributing 600,000 ecstasy pills and has been incarcerated for 17 years. Tokman was handed the death penalty in 2015 for smuggling 6 kilograms of MDMA, though his sentence was later reduced to life imprisonment.

Yusril said the repatriation follows formal requests from the Dutch government and a personal appeal from King Willem-Alexander to President Prabowo Subianto, who approved the transfer on humanitarian grounds. Mets is reported to be in deteriorating health, a key factor cited by both governments.

Dutch Ambassador Marc Gerritsen welcomed the decision and said it reflects strong bilateral relations. He emphasized that the transfer will allow both men to spend their remaining years closer to family.

Indonesia has not carried out an execution since 2016, yet foreigners convicted of drug crimes continue to populate its death row. Over the past year, Jakarta has repatriated several foreign nationals serving death or life sentences, including citizens of Australia, France, the United Kingdom, and the Philippines. [Reuters] [The Jakarta Post]

Japan submits second letter to UN rejecting China's claims over Prime Minister Takaichi's Taiwan remarks

(ay) Japan sent a second letter to UN Secretary-General António Guterres on December 5 rebutting China's assertions regarding Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's recent comments on Taiwan. The exchange follows Beijing's second letter to the UN earlier last week, which again demanded that Takaichi retract her November statement that a Taiwan contingency involving the use of force could constitute a situation threatening Japan's survival.

Japan's permanent representative, Yamazaki Kazuyuki, wrote that China's assertions are "inconsistent with the facts, unsubstantiated, and categorically unacceptable," adding that Japan will continue to act as a peace-loving state and respond "calmly through dialogue."

The correspondence will be circulated to all UN member states. The diplomatic exchange underscores escalating tension following China's efforts to challenge Tokyo's framing of regional security risks at the UN level. [NHK]

Japanese firms sue U.S. government over Trump tariffs

(dql) At least nine major Japanese companies, including Toyota Tsusho, Sumitomo Chemical, Ricoh, Yokohama Rubber, and Ushio, have taken legal action in the U.S. to reclaim tariffs paid under the Trump administration if the Supreme Court later rules the duties unlawful. They contend that the "reciprocal" tariffs, imposed under a 1970s-era emergency law without Congress's approval, exceeded presidential authority.

The filings come after Supreme Court hearings in early November, during which justices questioned whether the administration had the legal power to impose sweeping tariffs.

Lower courts have already flagged potential overreach, and many other companies—including Costco—have also challenged the tariffs to secure possible refunds. [Kyodo News] [Reuters]

Greece, Japan launch defense dialogue

(dql) On 4 December, Japanese Defense Minister Koizumi and Greek Defense Minister Dendias held the first-ever Japan–Greece defence ministers' meeting in Tokyo.

Highlighted the significance of launching this new bilateral channel, both sides exchanged views on regional security and agreed to broaden defence cooperation across multiple fields. [Ministry of Defense, Japan]

Japan steps up Ukraine demining support

(dql) Japan, working with the U.N. Development Program, has provided 15 U.S.-made protective suit and helmet sets to Ukraine's State Emergency Service to strengthen its efforts to clear landmines and unexploded ordnance.

The delivery builds on Japan's growing role in international demining assistance: in October, Tokyo hosted the Ukraine Mine Action Conference and pledged training, medical support and rehabilitation services. On December 2, Japan and Ukraine also signed a JPY 4 billion (USD 26 million) aid package to fund equipment, materials and medical assistance for mine-clearing operations. [Kyodo News] [NHK]

Australia, Japan establish new framework to deepen strategic coordination

(ay) Japan and Australia announced the creation of a Framework for Strategic Defense Coordination (FSDC) following a ministerial meeting in Tokyo on December 7 between Japanese Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi and Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Richard Marles. [Ministry of Defense, Japan] [Department of Defence, Australia]

The FSDC will convene at least annually and serve as a mechanism to align defense policy, intelligence cooperation, capability development, and bilateral and multilateral activities as the two countries seek to strengthen deterrence amid what both sides described as a deteriorating regional security environment.

The ministers reaffirmed plans to expand Japan Self-Defense Forces and Australian Defence Force activities in both countries and the wider region, and welcomed deeper information sharing, operational alignment, and work on deterrence concepts such as Flexible Deterrent Options.

Cementing deeper defense-industrial ties, Canberra plans to formally sign contracts for 11 of 19 Mogami-class frigates by the end of this fiscal year, while production of the remaining eight ships will shift from Japan to Austal's Henderson shipyard in Perth after a technology transfer. The arrangement—which follows Australia's selection an enhanced variant of the Mogami-class frigate for its next-generation fleet in August—advances Australia's maritime denial posture and helps Japan expand defense exports as export limits are loosened.

Both sides reiterated strong opposition to unilateral attempts to alter the status quo in the East and South

China Seas and stressed that peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait are essential. They confirmed continued close coordination with the United States and reiterated support for ASEAN centrality and regional maritime cooperation activities, including with the Philippines.

The meeting set the stage for further elevation of the "Special Strategic Partnership" ahead of next year's 50th anniversary of the 1976 Basic Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. [The Japan Times] [Financial Review]

During the same meeting, Japan and Australia also urged calm after a Chinese J-15 fighter from the carrier *Liaoning* intermittently locked its fire-control radar on Japanese F-15s near Okinawa on December 6. Tokyo formally protested the incident, with Koizumi calling the radar lock "extremely regrettable" and dangerous, noting that Japanese aircraft had been tracking Chinese carrier operations at a safe distance and had not behaved provocatively.

The incident marks the first known radar-lock confrontation between Chinese and Japanese military aircraft. A prior 2013 incident involved a Chinese vessel targeting a Japanese destroyer. [Washington Post]

Japan, Paraguay sign investment pact

(dql) Japan and Paraguay have signed a bilateral investment pact designed to strengthen legal protections and improve the operating environment for investors from both countries. The agreement, concluded in Asunción on December 5, sets out core guarantees—including national treatment after establishment, most-favoured-nation treatment, safeguards against unfair expropriation, free capital transfers, and detailed dispute-settlement mechanisms.

Paraguay's political stability, its membership in Mercosur, and its proximity to Brazil have made it an increasingly attractive base for Japanese firms seeking access to South American markets. As Paraguay continues to refine its investment promotion framework, Tokyo views the agreement as a way to encourage more Japanese companies to expand in the country. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

Laos–Vietnam deepen security and economic integration as both sides set

2026 cooperation roadmap

(ms) Vietnam and Laos are tightening defense, security, and economic coordination ahead of a major new phase in bilateral cooperation, following a series of high-level meetings in Vientiane and Champasak this week. The moves come as trade and investment between the two neighbors accelerate sharply and large-scale connectivity projects move toward implementation.

During a meeting in Vientiane on December 3, Vietnamese Defense Minister Phan Văn Giang and Lao Defense Minister Khamliang Outhakaysone agreed to implement the 2026 defense cooperation plan and instructed relevant units to draft detailed execution measures. Priorities include securing the upcoming Party congresses in both countries, expanding collaboration in border areas, and jointly preserving historical sites important to the two militaries' shared revolutionary legacy.

Security cooperation was further reinforced at a ministerial-level conference on December 6 in Champasak, where the two Ministries of Public Security reviewed coordination in combating transnational crime, human trafficking, and drug trafficking along the shared border. The sides signed new agreements on crime prevention and counter-narcotics, formalizing increased information sharing and joint operations.

Parallel to the security agenda, economic cooperation has reached new momentum. At the 48th Laos–Vietnam Intergovernmental Committee meeting on December 4, Prime Ministers Sonexay Siphandone and Phạm Minh Chính approved their 2026 cooperation plan and outlined a 2026–2030 roadmap designed to lift bilateral trade toward USD 5 billion. Trade already reached USD 2.6 billion in the first ten months of 2025 —a 50 percent increase from last year—while Vietnam remains one of Laos' top investors, with 267 active projects worth USD 5.63 billion.

Connectivity is central to this next phase. Laos announced that construction of the USD 6.6 billion Laos–Vietnam railway, linking Vientiane with Vietnam's Vung Ang Port, will begin in 2026 and open by 2030. The project will give landlocked Laos its first direct maritime access, reduce logistics costs, and expand ASEAN regional supply-chain integration.

With both security and economic mechanisms being strengthened simultaneously, officials from both sides describe 2026 as a pivotal year for consolidating the Laos–Vietnam partnership and preparing the two

economies for deeper integration over the next decade. [Asia News Network] [Lao News Agency] [The Laotian Times 1] [The Laotian Times 2]

Laos and Azerbaijan hold first political consultations ahead of 30th anniversary of relations

(hn) Laos and Azerbaijan held their inaugural Political Consultations in Vientiane on December 8, co-chaired by Deputy Foreign Ministers Maythong Thammavongsa and Elnur Mammadov. The meeting comes ahead of the 30th anniversary of diplomatic ties in May 2025 and builds on previous discussions between Presidents Thongloun Sisoulith and Ilham Aliyev at the 2024 BRICS Summit.

Both sides reviewed opportunities to expand cooperation in politics, trade, tourism and education, while placing particular emphasis on unexploded ordnance (UXO) clearance—an area where Laos has long sought international technical and financial support. Azerbaijan, which also deals with explosive remnants of war, signalled interest in sharing expertise and exploring joint initiatives.

The consultations concluded with commitments to deepen traditional ties, strengthen economic links and continue coordination in regional and multilateral forums. During his visit, Mammadov also met National Assembly Vice President Sounthone Sayachack and attended a reception marking three decades of bilateral relations. [Lao News Agency]

Malaysia, Singapore to expand cross-border taxi service and Rapid Transit System

(tl) Malaysia and Singapore have decided to significantly expand their cross-border taxis service to address the longstanding shortages and crackdowns on illegal operators. The current quota of 200 licensed taxis per country will be raised to 500 in stages, beginning with an initial increase of 100 taxis per each side, prioritizing larger and premium vehicles for businesses and group travelers.

In a major change, cross-border taxis will now be allowed to drop passengers at any locations, eliminating previous terminal-only restrictions, while pick-ups will still be limited to designed points. Both

governments also plan to strengthen insurance protection, improve accident claims processing, regulate cross-border e-hailing platforms and expand cross-border bus service for tourism. The agreements followed talks between the two countries' transport ministers during the 12th Malaysia-Singapore Leaders' Retreat. [Malay Mail 1]

Moreover, both countries signed the additional agreement on the Johor Baru-Singapore Rapid Transit System (RTS) Link, signaling renewed momentum for the long-delayed project. The agreement was reached during the retreat as well, witnessed by Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and his Singaporean counterpart.

Both governments also committed to closer cooperation in drugs enforcement, including expanded intelligence-sharing on trafficking trends and strengthened joint operations against cross-border syndicates. In healthcare, the two sides agreed to deepen collaboration in areas such as digital health, public health, health financing and long-term care, alongside experts visit and shared research. [Malay Mail 2]

Malaysia and South Korea sign MoU to support intelligent transport systems and infrastructure

(tl) Malaysia is expanding its partnership with South Korea to accelerate talent development, research, and innovation in Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS), according to Works Minister Alexander Nanta Linggi. Speaking at the Malaysia-Korea ITS Roadshow 2025, he highlighted Seoul's global reputation in smart cities and digital technologies as a valuable asset for Malaysia's ITS Roadmap 2030.

The event also featured the first-ever memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Malaysia's Ministry of Works and South Korea's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport (MOLIT). The agreement focuses on collaboration in ITS development, smart tolling, sustainable construction methods, and infrastructure asset management.

Malaysia's ITS Roadmap 2030 aims to reduce accidents, ease congestion, lower emissions, and elevate overall travel safety and efficiency. Nanta emphasized that the strategy prioritizes human-centered mobility, integrating predictive technologies, digital connectivity, and greener transport solutions. [Malay Mail]

Senior Chinese Communist Party delegation meets leadership of Maldives' ruling party

(lm) A senior delegation from the Communist Party of China (CPC) met with leaders of the Maldives' ruling People's National Congress (PNC) to explore ways to deepen party-to-party and state-to-state cooperation. Discussions centered on the outcomes of the 4th Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee, a major policy-setting meeting in China that guides long-term political and governance priorities.

The Chinese delegation was led by Kang Shuai, Deputy Director General at the Information Research Center of the CPC's International Department (IDCPC), the body responsible for managing the CPC's foreign political relations. He was accompanied by Kong Xinhua, the Chinese Ambassador to the Maldives. [The Sun]

Saudi Investment Ministry delegation visits Maldives to discuss expanding bilateral investment cooperation

(lm) A delegation from the Ministry of Investment of Saudi Arabia has arrived in the Maldives for an official visit focused on expanding bilateral investment cooperation. The delegation is led by Sarah Al-Sayed, Saudi Arabia's Deputy Minister of Investment for International Relations, and includes officials from the Saudi government and private sector.

Saudi Arabia is described as a key development partner for the Maldives, having provided financing for several major infrastructure projects, including the ongoing expansion of Velana International Airport (VIA). [The Sun]

China, Mongolia expand cooperation to boost meat trade

(fs) The Second Mongolia-China Technical Seminar on Developing Meat and Meat Product Trade was held in Beijing on November 28 amid rising Chinese demand for meat products. Representatives from government agencies, industry groups, and private sector companies from both countries discussed trade regulations, food safety requirements, and ways to increase export efficiency.

The two sides identified opportunities to expand export volumes, diversify product types, and align meat hygiene certification with international standards. Discussions also focused on harmonizing regulatory frameworks, improving information exchange, strengthening cooperation on the control of highly contagious animal diseases, enhancing transparency and accelerating certification and inspection processes for meat imports and exports.

An agreement was reached to deepen cooperation across trade, food safety, regulatory harmonization and export certification, and officials noted that the dialogue created a foundation for addressing challenges in meat production and export capacity while supporting mutually beneficial partnerships. [Montsame]

Japan, Mongolia expand cooperation across several sectors

(fs) Deputy Prime Minister of Mongolia Gankhuyag Khassuuri met with Japan's Minister for Foreign Affairs Toshimitsu Motegi on November 28 to review bilateral cooperation and future priorities.

Khassuuri expressed appreciation for Japan's decision to resume concessional yen loans under its Official Development Assistance program, which will support the expansion of Chinggis Khaan International Airport, the biggest airport in Mongolia.

Motegi reaffirmed Japan's commitment to enhancing the legal framework for cooperation, expanding collaboration in education, culture, and local partnerships, and further promoting people-to-people ties. Both sides also discussed strengthening cooperation on infrastructure development, human resources, and disaster preparedness. [Montsame]

They welcomed the outcomes of the 12th Mongolian-Japanese Public and Private Sector Consultative Meeting in Tokyo and agreed to work together on the 2026 meeting in Ulaanbaatar (see AiR No. 48, December/2025, 1).

Khassuuri also met with Japan's Minister of State for Disaster Management Jiro Akama that same day to discuss expanding collaboration in emergency preparedness and response.

Khassuuri reiterated Mongolia's commitment to advancing cooperation in natural disaster management, including establishing a formal

framework between the two countries' disaster agencies, improving the capacity of Mongolia's National Emergency Management Agency, and enhancing experience-sharing. He also requested Japan's support for two projects: a mechanized warehouse for emergency food and supplies and a petroleum reserve terminal planned in Ulaanbaatar.

Akama emphasized the value of working closely with Mongolia at bilateral, regional, and international levels, with both sides agreed to broaden practical cooperation and explore new areas of joint work. [Akipress]

India, Mongolia to strengthen digital cooperation

(fs) The Ministry of Digital Development, Innovation and Communications of Mongolia met with Indian Ambassador Atul Malhari Gotsurve on December 4 to discuss accelerating the implementation of the bilateral Memorandum of Understanding on digital cooperation.

Both sides agreed to advance concrete initiatives to strengthen cybersecurity, support digital transformation, expand public-private cooperation, and enhance the exchange of technical expertise. [Montsame]

Mongolia, Austria reaffirm commitment to deepen cooperation

(fs) Minister of Foreign Affairs Battsetseg Batmunkh paid an official visit to Austria on December 5, where she held talks with Federal Minister for European and International Affairs of Austria Beate Meinl-Reisinger.

Both sides agreed to continue advancing economic and investment ties and explored opportunities to expand collaboration in renewable energy, forestry, green technology, education, culture, and tourism.

They also reaffirmed their willingness to enhance cooperation within the United Nations and other international organizations and exchanged views on ongoing regional and international developments. [Akipress]

Mongolia, Germany discuss expanding cooperation on environmental and climate projects

(fs) State Secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change of Mongolia Sh. Batbayar met with representatives of the German Embassy in Mongolia and the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) on December 2.

The two sides reviewed progress in their ongoing cooperation, including Phases II and III of projects on biodiversity conservation and climate change adaptation, as well as preparations for COP17 of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, scheduled to take place in Mongolia next year.

Both parties highlighted their long-standing collaboration in environmental protection, protected area expansion, and sustainable forest and resource management. Mongolia stressed the need to align its climate policies with international standards, while GIZ reaffirmed its readiness to deepen cooperation in the sector. [Akipress]

Mongolia, Italy elevate relations to strategic partnership

(fs) President of Mongolia Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh paid an official state visit to Italy on December 1-3 at the invitation of Italian President Sergio Mattarella, during which the two countries officially agreed to upgrade their bilateral relations to a strategic partnership.

The strategic partnership outlines expanded cooperation across political, economic, security, and cultural domains. Both sides committed to strengthening political dialogue through high-level visits, regular consultations between foreign ministries, and active parliamentary contacts. They also agreed to deepen multilateral cooperation within the United Nations and continue collaboration under the 2017 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU.

Enhanced defence cooperation and increased trade, investment and economic ties form core components of the partnership. The countries will expand collaboration through the Intergovernmental Commission for Economic and Technical Cooperation and direct links between business associations, with a focus on sustainable fashion and cashmere value chains, agriculture, renewable energy and energy-transition technologies. The partnership also prioritizes

developing infrastructure in transport, logistics, ICT, water and waste management, as well as advancing digital transformation.

Further cooperation will cover environmental protection, the circular economy, minerals and raw materials, and joint work on civil protection and disaster management. The two sides also pledged to strengthen collaboration in science, education, culture, sports, and tourism. [GoGo]

Italy is now the second European Union member state to establish such a partnership with Mongolia, after Germany did in February 2024 (see AiR No. 7, February/2024, 2).

Meanwhile, Mongolia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Battsetseg Batmunkh held a bilateral meeting with Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani on December 2.

Within the framework of the new strategic partnership, both sides reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening economic cooperation, particularly in trade, investment, and industrial collaboration. They expressed readiness to support joint projects involving small and medium-sized enterprises and to develop cooperation in fashion and cashmere value chains, agriculture, renewable energy, and technologies for energy transition. [Montsame]

Mongolia, Russia to expand interregional cooperation

(fs) The first Forum of Regions of Mongolia and Russia was held in Irkutsk, Russia, on December 1-2, marking a significant effort to deepen regional-level economic and political ties between the two countries. It featured presentations and panel discussions on trade, industrial cooperation, and tourism. More than 250 representatives from government and business sectors participated in B2B meetings to explore potential joint projects.

During the event, Mongolia's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy and Development Jadamba Enkhbayar and Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Alexey Overchuk announced the approval of a Mid-Term Action Program for the Development of Interregional Cooperation for 2026-2030. The program outlines 72 projects across 11 priority sectors.

Enkhbayar stated that both sides are working to address trade imbalances and strengthen mutually

beneficial cooperation, noting Mongolia's interim trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union that was signed back in June (see AiR No. 26, July/2025, 1).

He emphasized that the agreement not only covers tariff issues but also aims to expand business cooperation, ease border and customs challenges, and increase investment flows. Enkhbayar also added that the forum provides broad opportunities for new partnerships, particularly in infrastructure, transport, and logistics. [Montsame]

Mongolia, Vatican City strengthen ties

(fs) President of Mongolia Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh paid an official visit to the Vatican City on December 4, where he met with Pope Leo XIV.

Both sides discussed expanding cooperation in history, culture, and humanitarian fields. They also exchanged views on international issues, reaffirming their commitment to supporting global efforts on peace, sustainability, climate change, desertification, land degradation, and poverty reduction. [Montsame 1]

China, Myanmar discuss accelerating cooperation

(su) China and Myanmar have held new talks on advancing bilateral economic and technological cooperation during the China–Myanmar Artificial Intelligence Technology Exchange Forum, which opened on December 1 in Baise, Guangxi. The Myanmar delegation was led by Vice Minister of Science and Technology Aung Zeya, who also chairs the Committee for Innovation and Digital Skill Promotion.

Both sides highlighted their intention to deepen bilateral ties and to accelerate ongoing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. Discussions also focused on strengthening cooperation in emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, electric vehicles, and smart agriculture, alongside plans for more systematic human resource development in these sectors. [Eleven Myanmar]

Myanmar sends humanitarian aid to flood-hit Sri Lanka after Cyclone Ditwah

(su) Myanmar has dispatched 9.2 tons of medical and relief supplies to Sri Lanka following severe flooding and landslides caused by Cyclone Ditwah on November 28, which affected more than 900,000 people across 25 districts. The assistance includes medicines, medical equipment, and personal care items delivered by military aircraft to Colombo on December 7.

According to official figures, the shipment comprised 6.938 tons of medicines and medical supplies and 2.262 tons of personal care items, with a total estimated value of USD 120,000. Myanmar has also pledged a further 500 tons of rice and USD 100,000 in additional assistance. During the handover, the Myanmar delegation expressed condolences for the loss of life and reaffirmed what it described as the close friendship between the two countries. [Eleven Myanmar]

Myanmar and Thailand reaffirm cooperation in high-level meetings

(anl) On 7 December, Myanmar and Thailand reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening bilateral cooperation during a series of high-level meetings in Naypyidaw, with discussions centered on border stability, illegal trade, online fraud, and regional diplomacy.

According to junta statements, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing met Thai Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow in a meeting that also included Prime Minister U Nyo Saw and Foreign Minister U Than Swe. Talks reportedly focused on cross-border security amid an intensified crackdown on cyber-scam centers near Myawaddy on the Myanmar–Thailand border.

State media reported that both sides agreed to boost joint efforts against illegal trade, online gambling, telecom fraud, and illicit weapons trafficking. Myanmar briefed the Thai delegation on ongoing demolitions of illegal buildings in the KK Park and Shwe Kokko scam enclaves.

Both governments pledged continued cooperation between civilian authorities and armed forces to ensure stability in border regions vital for trade and local livelihoods. Foreign Ministers U Than Swe and Sihasak highlighted the deep cultural and economic ties underpinning the relationship and stressed the need to maintain peace while promoting legal, regulated cross-border commerce.

Separately, Prime Minister U Nyo Saw and the Thai foreign minister discussed expanding cooperation in economic development, environmental conservation, and ASEAN frameworks. Myanmar also emphasized its preparations for what it described as a free and fair multiparty election, while both sides voiced interest in strengthening collaboration at the regional and international levels. [Mizzima 1]

During his visit, Sihasak urged the military to peacefully hand over power after the upcoming elections, warning that the military-run poll would not be credible and expressing his hope that election would serve as an important political transition and contribute to a broader peace process.

However, Myanmar state media published a front-page report quoting Min Aung Hlaing as saying the military would "maintain political leadership amid current circumstances." He added that the military would "gradually reduce its participation" in parliament only "when democracy flourishes in the country, while there is no armed ethnic group." [Mizzima 2]

Myanmar opposition council welcomes Thai foreign minister's rejection of junta-planned elections

(su) The National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), a key opposition coordination body, has welcomed recent remarks by Thai Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow stating that Myanmar's upcoming junta-organized elections cannot be considered credible while political prisoners, including former State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, remain in detention.

In a statement released on December 3, the NUCC said the minister's position reflected the aspirations of the Myanmar public and aligned with regional and international calls for a democratic transition. It praised Thailand's "principled support" and its role in advocating for justice and fundamental freedoms within ASEAN.

The NUCC added that such positions bolster efforts toward an inclusive political process based on accountability and human rights and expressed interest in continued cooperation with Thailand toward a democratic settlement. [Mizzima 1]

Karen civil society groups urge Thai cooperation on crackdown on Myawaddy scam centers

In parallel, thirty Karen community organizations from Myanmar, Thailand, and abroad issued a joint statement on the same day, calling for urgent international coordination—particularly from the Thai government—to support the Karen National Union's (KNU) operations targeting large transnational scam compounds in the Myawaddy area.

The groups said the KNU's recent raid on a major scam centre in Min Let Pan, Dooplaya District, exposed extensive torture sites, weapons stockpiles, and facilities where thousands of people are believed to be confined. They warned that junta artillery strikes and air attacks in the area appear aimed at disrupting the KNU operation and destroying evidence of criminal activity.

The statement stressed that victims of these networks include not only local communities but also foreign nationals from countries such as the United States, China, India, Taiwan, and Malaysia. It called the Myanmar military the "root cause" of the region's transnational cybercrime industry, citing its alliances with armed groups such as the Border Guard Force (BGF), which enabled the construction and operation of scam compounds along the border.

The organizations urged the Thai government to cooperate fully with the KNU on rescue operations, investigations, and victim protection, noting that Thai citizens are among those trapped in Myawaddy. They called for the deployment of forensic and crime-scene teams to preserve evidence, and for broader regional cooperation to dismantle criminal networks across the border zone.

The statement appealed to the United States, European Union, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and other affected governments to provide technical and operational support. It warned that without immediate engagement, victims would remain at risk, and key evidence could be lost. [Mizzima 2]

Thailand to extend work permits for Myanmar migrant workers by one year

(su) Thailand plans to grant a one-year extension to work permits for migrant workers from Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam whose permits are set to expire between February and March 2026, Thailand's Labor Minister Trinuch Thienthong announced on December 5. The measure is aimed at preventing labor shortages and ensuring workforce continuity across key sectors of the Thai economy.

The announcement follows Thailand's earlier decision not to extend the permits of more than 90,000 Cambodian workers due to border tensions with Cambodia. Thai authorities said labor demand left by departing Cambodian workers, many of whom are employed in agriculture, will instead be met by workers from Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam. [Eleven Myanmar]

Danish Embassy in Yangon to close at end of 2026

(su) Denmark has announced that it will close its embassy in Yangon at the end of 2026 as part of a broader restructuring of its diplomatic representation. Danish Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen made the announcement on December 5.

In a statement, the Danish Embassy said that operations in Myanmar will continue as normal until the planned closure, and that the process will be carried out in a systematic manner. The decision reflects a recalibration of Denmark's diplomatic footprint rather than an immediate suspension of engagement. [Eleven Myanmar]

Senior Indian official visits Nepal amid post-uprising political sensitivities

(lm) A senior Indian foreign ministry official, Munu Mahawar, has arrived in Kathmandu for a four-day visit focused on assessing India-funded development projects and reviewing Nepal's preparations for the March 2026 parliamentary elections. Mahawar, an additional secretary overseeing India's Nepal and Bhutan portfolio, is the most senior Indian official to visit since Nepal's Gen Z uprising in early September reshaped the domestic political landscape.

According to Nepali and Indian officials, Mahawar will meet Prime Minister Sushila Karki and several cabinet members, including the ministers of finance, commerce and home affairs, as well as Foreign Secretary Amrit Bahadur Rai. Discussions will center on Indian logistical support for the elections, including Nepal's request for more than 600 vehicles for the Election Commission and security agencies. Indian authorities have told Kathmandu that procurement is under way and that deliveries will be made in time for the polls.

Mahawar will also inspect a range of India-backed initiatives, including High Impact Community Development Projects, the Integrated Check Post in Bhairahawa, and ongoing construction of a Buddha Stupa in Lumbini.

His visit follows a period in which India refrained from sending senior representatives to Kathmandu, citing heightened political sensitivities after the Gen Z movement. Officials say that New Delhi is deliberately limiting engagement to formal government channels: unlike past practice, Mahawar is not expected to meet political party leaders, and Nepali politicians have likewise been avoiding high-level meetings in India. [The Kathmandu Post]

Japan extends USD 227 million loan for major Kathmandu traffic upgrade

(lm) Japan has approved a USD 227 million concessional loan to overhaul Kathmandu's Koteshwar intersection, one of the capital's most congested transport nodes and the main gateway to Nepal's eastern highway system. The loan adds to decades of Japanese involvement in transport, aviation and energy infrastructure in Nepal, further consolidating Japan's position as a high-trust donor in large urban projects. [The Kathmandu Post]

Omission of North Korea from new U.S. security plan sparks speculation of renewed engagement

(dql) Washington's new security blueprint under President Donald Trump notably omits North Korea and the long-standing U.S. objective of forcing North Korea to abandon its nuclear arsenal — a shift that has triggered speculation about a renewed diplomatic opening with Pyongyang in 2026.

The removal of denuclearization language, present in every U.S. National Security Strategy since 2003, is widely interpreted as a signal that the Trump administration may be preparing conditions for a new summit with Kim Jong Un after years of stalled negotiations.

The updated strategy instead prioritizes managing strategic competition with China, especially over Taiwan, by reinforcing military partnerships with South Korea and Japan. While both Washington and Seoul

publicly insist their official stance on North Korea has not changed, analysts note that Trump's "flexible realism" could allow him to engage Kim without insisting on disarmament upfront.

Kim, for his part, has declared that North Korea's nuclear status is non-negotiable and that any future meeting with Trump must occur on equal footing as leaders of nuclear-armed states. A revived dialogue would serve both internal and external purposes for Pyongyang, strengthening Kim's domestic legitimacy while easing pressure from sanctions.

Seoul, encouraged by what it sees as favorable diplomatic signals from the U.S., China, and Japan, hopes talks could resume next year. At the same time, South Korea is substantially expanding its own defence capabilities — increasing military spending and securing U.S. support to develop nuclear-powered submarines — reflecting Trump's push for allies to shoulder more regional security responsibilities. [Reuters]

Notably, China has removed the phrase "complete denuclearization" from its latest arms control white paper—its first such omission since 2005—signalling a notable recalibration of Beijing's longstanding policy toward the Korean Peninsula. The updated document instead urges all parties to abandon coercive approaches and return to negotiations, framing political dialogue as the path to lasting stability. [The Korea Times]

The shift comes amid rising concerns that China is increasingly tolerant of North Korea's nuclear status, especially after President Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un avoided any mention of denuclearization during their September meeting. This trend has now extended to multilateral settings: the joint declaration from the 2024 South Korea–Japan–China summit also left out any reference to denuclearization, breaking with earlier summit language. [The Korea Herald]

North Korea-Russia military ties highlighted as Kursk plans monument for North Korean troops

(dql) In the latest sign of deepening military cooperation between North Korea and Russia, a monument honoring North Korean troops involved in Russia's defense of the Kursk region is reportedly planned for erection in a city park, backed by the Russian Ministry of Defense.

Since late 2024, North Korea has deployed over 14,000 troops to the region, also contributing to reconstruction efforts.

Simultaneously, Pyongyang is building a War Heroes Memorial Hall to honor North Korean soldiers who served in Russia, with Kim Jong Un attending the groundbreaking ceremony in October. [News 1] [Euronews]

Pakistan pursues a multi-path regional strategy as SAARC remains frozen over tensions with India

(lm) Pakistan is intensifying a multi-path strategy to manage regional diplomacy as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) remains effectively paralyzed by the prolonged breakdown in India–Pakistan relations. The push reflects Islamabad's recognition that South Asia's institutional landscape is no longer functioning in a way that can address rising security risks, economic vulnerabilities or climate-related disruptions.

At the Islamabad Conclave 2025, Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar underscored that South Asia has been without structured dialogue between its two nuclear-armed states for more than 11 years—an absence he described as strategically untenable at a time of rising security volatility, economic fragility and accelerating climate risks. Dar cited the brief but intense cross-border exchange in May, which involved missiles, artillery and fighter aircraft, as evidence of a deteriorating crisis-management environment. Although the United States brokered a ceasefire, India declined to restart formal talks, leaving long-standing political and security disputes without functional mechanisms for de-escalation.

Dar used this context to argue that the "regional architecture is no longer fit for purpose," noting that SAARC has effectively been dormant since 2016, when India refused to attend a planned summit in Islamabad after a militant attack it blamed on Pakistan, prompting Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Bhutan to pull out. Pakistan rejects India's attribution but maintains that SAARC's agenda—economic integration, connectivity and collective responses to shared vulnerabilities—cannot advance if bilateral tensions with New Delhi continue to freeze the institution. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

At the same time, Islamabad is signaling that it cannot depend on SAARC alone. Pakistani officials are

developing alternative pathways that circumvent the India–Pakistan stalemate, most notably a trilateral initiative involving Pakistan, Bangladesh and China. Dar described this framework as an initial platform that could generate issue-specific cooperation across connectivity, climate resilience and economic coordination, and could eventually be opened to other South Asian states. [Al Jazeera]

The deterioration in India–Pakistan relations continues to shape this strategic reassessment. Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar recently argued that India's fundamental problems with Pakistan stem from what he described as the Pakistani military establishment's support for an ideology of hostility and for militant groups and training infrastructure. Pakistan rejected the remarks as inflammatory and baseless, accusing India of running a propaganda campaign designed to malign Pakistani institutions and to deflect attention from what Islamabad characterizes as India's destabilizing regional behavior. [The Indian Express] [Arab News 3]

A separate dispute unfolded over Pakistan's humanitarian response to Sri Lanka, which was hit by Cyclone Ditwah, causing more than 400 deaths and extensive flooding and landslides. Pakistan said India delayed airspace clearance for over 60 hours for a special Pakistani relief flight, forcing Islamabad to dispatch aid by sea instead. India dismissed Pakistan's claim as "anti-India misinformation." [Arab News 4]

As Pakistan tests alternative regional configurations, it is also deepening engagement with the D-8, a grouping of large Muslim-majority developing economies. At the Fourth D-8 Trade Ministers Council in Cairo, Commerce Minister Jam Kamal Khan signed the D-8 dispute settlement mechanism and pressed member states to activate the bloc's long-delayed Preferential Trade Agreement. Khan argued that Pakistan intends to use the D-8 as part of a broader effort to diversify trade relationships and reduce exposure to geopolitical shocks, supply-chain disruptions and climate-driven market instability. The D-8 has historically struggled to operationalize its commitments, but Islamabad believes that harmonized customs procedures, mutual recognition regimes, logistics connectivity and digital-trade integration could transform it into a more predictable and functional economic network. [Arab News 5] [Business Recorder]

Pakistan–Afghanistan border tensions deepen despite Saudi-hosted talks

(lm) Pakistan and Afghanistan experienced another serious border clash along the Chaman–Spin Boldak corridor on December 5–6, with both governments accusing the other of initiating “unprovoked” fire. Afghan authorities said Pakistani shelling in Spin Boldak killed five people, including one Taliban member. The incident follows deadly clashes in October that marked the most violent confrontation between the two sides since the Taliban takeover in 2021. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

The latest violence took place shortly after Saudi Arabia hosted renewed Pakistan–Afghanistan talks, following earlier rounds in Qatar and Türkiye. Officials from both countries confirmed that the meetings produced *no breakthrough*: the only agreement was to continue observing the fragile ceasefire established in October. Pakistan again demanded action against Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) fighters it says operate from Afghan soil. The Taliban rejected the claim, insisting Afghan territory is not used for attacks and urging Pakistan to address its “own fundamental problems.” [Arab News 3] [Arab News 4]

Amid the stalemate, the dispute has expanded into trade and humanitarian access. Afghanistan said it would reopen land routes to Pakistan only after receiving “strong assurances” that Islamabad will not again close crossings for political pressure. Pakistan had shut the Torkham and Chaman routes following the October clashes, which blocked commercial flows and halted humanitarian deliveries. Islamabad has now authorized phased UN aid transit for the World Food Programme, UNICEF and UNFPA after nearly 50 days of suspension. Afghan officials continue to accuse Pakistan of coercive border closures and note that Kabul is increasing reliance on Iran’s Chabahar port and Central Asian transit corridors to reduce dependence on Pakistan. [Arab News 5] [Arab News 6]

The broader deterioration has unfolded as militant violence escalates inside Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) near the Afghan frontier. In recent days, a roadside bomb in Dera Ismail Khan killed three police personnel, while a separate ambush in Bannu killed a senior district administrator, two police officers and a civilian. The Pakistani military reported killing seven TTP militants in North Waziristan operations, accusing them of being “Indian-sponsored,” a claim India has not commented on. [Arab News 7] [Arab News 8] [Arab News 9]

More recently, Pakistan additionally reported 14 militant deaths in combined operations across KP and Balochistan. [Arab News 10]

The crisis also carries a human dimension. In Pakistan, Afghan refugees awaiting US resettlement say their situation has become perilous after Washington froze immigration, green card and Special Immigrant Visa processing for Afghanistan and several other countries. Many fear deportation as Islamabad pressures undocumented Afghans to leave, saying the US pause has "shattered" expectations for safe relocation. [Arab News 11]

Annual China-Pakistan 'Warrior-IX' drills begin as both armies deepen counterterrorism cooperation

(lm) Pakistan and China have launched the ninth edition of their annual "Warrior" counterterrorism exercise series, with the Pakistan Army and China's People's Liberation Army beginning joint drills on December 1 at the National Counter Terrorism Center in Pabbi, a major training facility in northwestern Pakistan.

The drills form part of one of Asia's closest defense partnerships. Pakistan and China jointly produce platforms such as the JF-17 Thunder fighter jet and hold regular naval and air exercises, including the Sea Guardians maritime series and the Shaheen air-combat drills. Both countries also cooperate in intelligence sharing, border security and counterterrorism training, with Chinese contingents frequently hosted at Pakistan's counterterrorism center. [Arab News]

Pakistan–U.S. security cooperation reinforced as Islamabad simultaneously courts U.S. investment

(lm) Pakistan and the United States signaled continued engagement on both security and economic tracks in three separate developments.

In Islamabad, Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi met acting US ambassador Natalie Baker, with both sides pledging to deepen anti-narcotics cooperation. The discussion covered intelligence sharing, airport screening upgrades, joint efforts against drug trafficking, and measures to curb illegal immigration. Pakistani officials reported that the Anti Narcotics Force had seized 134 tons of drugs this year, arrested over 2,000 suspects—including 75 foreign nationals—and cleared more than 40,000 acres of poppy

cultivation. Naqvi said Pakistan was enforcing a "zero-tolerance" policy and planned to establish a National Narcotics Coordination Center, while Baker expressed US readiness to provide technical support. [Arab News 1]

In Washington, Pakistan's ambassador Rizwan Saeed Sheikh emphasized the country's investment potential in technology, energy and minerals, telling a visiting delegation from the Yale School of Management that US businesses could benefit from Pakistan's large and increasingly skilled youth population. He framed bilateral ties as moving toward a stronger economic foundation following a trade agreement reached in July, and cited the presence of more than 80 US companies already operating in Pakistan as evidence of market potential. [Arab News 2]

Separately, in Islamabad, U.S.-based GE Vernova expressed interest in expanding investment in Pakistan's hydropower sector as the government shifts to a system in which private developers will lead future generation projects. Power Minister Sardar Awais Ahmed Khan Leghari said the government would share a list of potential investment-ready sites and described GE Vernova as a strong technical and investment partner. He emphasized that Pakistan is pursuing a least-cost energy strategy and has reached nearly 56 percent clean-energy generation, though transmission constraints still limit renewable integration. The government is seeking battery-energy storage solutions to stabilize wind power, and said it is open to reviewing pumped-storage hydropower as part of future planning. Leghari also highlighted ongoing privatization of electricity distribution companies, noting that GE Vernova's expertise in grid modernization and advanced metering systems could support these reforms. [Arab News 3]

Pakistan says cargo tests on North–South corridor with Russia will continue

(lm) Pakistan and Russia have agreed to proceed with test cargo movements along the eastern route of the North–South International Transport Corridor, a multimodal network intended to link South Asia with Central Asia, Russia, and Europe through combined sea, road, and rail transport. For Pakistan, the route offers an overland entry point into Eurasian markets; for Russia, it provides shorter access to warm-water ports and a direct commercial pathway to the Arabian Sea. The decision follows the 10th session of the bilateral Intergovernmental Commission in Islamabad,

a meeting that covered economic cooperation, energy projects, and long-term transport integration.

The continuation of test shipments comes after three years of steadily improving relations, including Islamabad's imports of discounted Russian crude and earlier deliveries of liquefied petroleum gas. The renewed logistics collaboration is part of a wider diplomatic and economic re-engagement, as Pakistan seeks diversified energy sources and export channels and Russia looks to broaden trade routes under changing global conditions.

In a parallel development, universities from Islamabad and Moscow—working with the Consortium for Asia-Pacific and Eurasian Studies, an academic network focused on regional policy and research—will co-organize the Pakistan–Russia Eurasia Forum 2025 in Moscow. [Arab News]

Pakistan–Türkiye energy cooperation advances through high-level talks and new offshore exploration partnership

(lm) Pakistan and Türkiye have moved to deepen energy cooperation on two parallel tracks. During a meeting in Islamabad, Pakistan's army chief and Türkiye's energy minister discussed expanding collaboration across the sector, including strategic projects and deep-sea drilling. Türkiye, which already has several energy firms operating in Pakistan, reaffirmed its interest in both offshore and onshore exploration, with the minister noting that a new accord is being prepared covering Pakistan's first deep-sea drilling initiative and early exploration work in two onshore blocks and one offshore zone. Both sides highlighted their longstanding bilateral relationship and expressed commitment to strengthening ties.

Separately, Pakistan Petroleum Limited announced that a new partnership with Turkish Petroleum Overseas Company marks what it described as a significant step forward in Pakistan's offshore search for oil and gas. The agreement covers three offshore and two onshore concessions, with Türkiye's state energy company taking a 25 percent operating stake in Eastern Offshore Indus Block C, a work program valued at USD 3.45 million. Pakistan has drilled offshore since the 1960s without achieving commercially viable discoveries, but officials say improved seismic mapping, technical validation and upgraded technology now offer better prospects. The first well is unlikely before 2027, though the partners hope to accelerate progress. Pakistan continues to

seek foreign investment to reduce dependence on imported fuels, expand domestic reserves and respond to rising demand and declining onshore output. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

Pakistan visit by Bahrain's National Guard commander underscores steady military ties

(lm) General Shaikh Mohammad Bin Isa Bin Salman Al Khalifa, Commander of Bahrain's National Guard, met Pakistan's army chief Field Marshal Asim Munir in Rawalpindi for discussions on bilateral defense cooperation. Both sides reaffirmed their intention to strengthen military-to-military ties, with the Bahraini commander praising the professionalism of Pakistan's armed forces and their contribution to regional peace.

Pakistan and Bahrain have maintained close relations since 1971, spanning defense cooperation, labor ties and economic linkages. Bahrain hosts more than 120,000 Pakistani nationals, making it a significant source of remittances and an important Gulf partner for Islamabad. [Arab News]

Pakistan and Iran agree to restart trilateral freight service with Türkiye

(lm) Pakistan and Iran have agreed to resume the Islamabad–Tehran–Istanbul (ITI) freight train service this year, aiming to revive a key regional transport corridor and boost cross-border trade. The decision followed talks in Islamabad between Pakistan's Railways Minister Hanif Abbasi and Iran's ambassador Dr. Reza Amiri Moghaddam, where both sides emphasized the importance of expanding political, economic and commercial cooperation.

The ITI line, a flagship project of the Economic Cooperation Organization, spans more than 6,500 kilometers across Pakistan, Iran and Türkiye. First launched in 2009, it was suspended in 2012 due to security issues, revived in 2021, and then halted again in August 2022 because of administrative and operational constraints. Abbasi said restoring the service would enhance Pakistan–Iran trade and significantly increase railway revenues at a time when Pakistan's railways remain financially strained and reliant on government support.

The minister stressed that expanding regional connectivity through rail networks is a priority for Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's government. He accepted an invitation to visit Iran to inspect its railway system and explore options for more modern and efficient cross-border operations. The announcement also aligns with Pakistan's wider rail sector reforms, with authorities seeking international advisory expertise to support new regional projects and address longstanding infrastructure challenges. [Arab News]

Pakistan and Oman conduct annual naval exercise in Karachi

(lm) A Royal Navy of Oman flotilla arrived in Karachi to participate in *Thamar Al Tayyib (TAT) 2025*, the latest round of the bilateral naval exercise the two countries have held regularly since 1980. The 2025 edition included the Omani vessels Al-Rasikh and Al-Shinas, which were received by senior Pakistan Navy officials. [Arab News]

Pakistan's defense diplomacy with Riyadh deepens as Saudi Arabia extends USD 3 billion deposit

(lm) Pakistan and Saudi Arabia reaffirmed their commitment to expanding defense cooperation during talks in Rawalpindi between Pakistan's army chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, and Lt. Gen. Fahad bin Saud Al-Johani, Commander of the Royal Saudi Land Forces. Both sides reviewed regional security, joint training programs, intelligence coordination and broader defense ties, building on a longstanding military partnership and a mutual defense pact signed earlier this year that treats an attack on one as an attack on both.

The defense diplomacy coincided with a critical economic gesture from Riyadh: the Saudi Fund for Development extended its USD 3 billion deposit at Pakistan's central bank for another year. The deposit — first placed in 2021 and repeatedly rolled over — remains a cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign-exchange stability and has helped Islamabad avoid reserve depletion during a prolonged balance-of-payments crisis. Pakistan said the extension would strengthen its reserve position and support economic growth, adding to Riyadh's broader history of financial assistance, including oil on deferred payments and diplomatic

backing for IMF programs. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

Pakistan and UAE discuss deeper cooperation in IT and digital infrastructure

(lm) Pakistan's IT minister met the new UAE ambassador in Islamabad to discuss stronger cooperation in information technology, digital infrastructure and technology-driven innovation, according to a statement from Pakistan's IT ministry. The meeting also covered emerging technologies, digital transformation and capacity building, and both sides agreed that deeper engagement with the Pakistani diaspora in the UAE could support cross-border partnerships and digital-sector growth.

Pakistan highlighted its developing digital ecosystem, expanding startup activity and investment opportunities, noting the role of expatriates and tech entrepreneurs in fostering innovation and knowledge transfer. The IT ministry statement described Pakistan as a global "tech destination," supported by a young talent base and pro-innovation policies.

The UAE is Pakistan's second-largest trading partner, a significant investor in multiple sectors, and home to a large Pakistani diaspora. It is also the second-largest source of remittances for Pakistan after Saudi Arabia and is considered an important export destination due to its geographic proximity. [Arab News]

Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan push regional connectivity with port access, transit-trade revival, and renewed electricity-corridor plans

(as) Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan used President Sadyr Zhaparov's first visit to Islamabad in 20 years to shift their relationship from largely symbolic engagement toward practical connectivity and energy cooperation. The two governments signed 15 wide-ranging agreements that touch on trade, port logistics, energy, mining, customs data exchange, education, legal cooperation and municipal partnerships. The breadth of the documents signals an attempt to rebuild institutional channels that have been dormant for nearly two decades.

At the core is Pakistan's offer to provide Kyrgyzstan with the shortest land route to the Arabian Sea through the ports of Karachi, Port Qasim and Gwadar. Islamabad framed this as an opportunity for Bishkek to reach global markets more competitively, while positioning Pakistan as a southern outlet for Central Asia at a time when regional transport corridors are being reshaped by geopolitical fragmentation. Kyrgyzstan, for its part, is seeking to diversify away from dependency on a narrow set of transit routes and sees Pakistani port access as a potential structural shift in its external economic geography. [Arab News 1]

Both sides also attempted to revive a long-discussed transit trade agreement, which they regard as essential for raising bilateral commerce from today's negligible levels to a politically stated target that is an order of magnitude higher. [Arab News 2] [Arab News 3]

Energy cooperation formed the second strategic anchor. Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan reaffirmed their intention to advance the delayed regional electricity-transmission corridor designed to move surplus Central Asian hydropower southward toward Afghanistan and Pakistan. Bishkek projects operational readiness by early 2027, although progress depends on security conditions and financing stability across all transit territories. Islamabad views the project as part of a broader effort to diversify its strained power mix, while Kyrgyzstan continues to pursue export routes that have been promised for years but repeatedly stalled. [Arab News 4]

The visit also revived educational, cultural and administrative ties, which matter more than they appear given the large number of Pakistani students in Kyrgyz universities and the recurrent political sensitivities this creates. Security discussions focused on cross-border crime and counterterrorism coordination but did not introduce new defense commitments. [DAWN] [Radio Pakistan]

Philippines strengthens naval defenses as newest South Korean-built frigate enters service

(ms) The Philippines has taken a significant step in modernizing its maritime defenses with the commissioning of BRP Diego Silang (FFG-07) on December 2, the country's most advanced warship to date. Built by South Korea's HD Hyundai Heavy Industries, the 3,200-ton guided-missile frigate is the second vessel of the Miguel Malvar-class and forms

part of Manila's accelerated naval upgrade program amid rising tensions in the South China Sea.

Delivered to Subic Bay in September, the frigate completed testing before officially joining the fleet. It carries a 16-cell vertical launch system for VL MICA air-defense missiles, eight C-STAR anti-ship missiles, triple torpedo tubes, a close-in weapon system, and a modern AESA radar—capabilities that allow the ship to conduct anti-air, anti-surface, and anti-submarine missions.

Rear Adm. Roy Vincent Trinidad, the Navy's West Philippine Sea spokesperson, said the ship "significantly expands the Navy's ability to patrol our exclusive economic zone and respond to threats," noting it is now the service's most sophisticated vessel.

The commissioning comes at a time of elevated operational pressure. On 6 December, a Philippine patrol aircraft reported that Chinese forces on Subi Reef fired three flares toward it during a routine surveillance mission. The aircraft continued flying safely, but the incident underscored the increasingly hazardous environment confronting Philippine assets.

The frigate program is part of a broader effort that includes six Hyundai-built offshore patrol vessels and plans for two additional frigates. Defense officials argue these platforms are essential to safeguard fishing grounds, enforce maritime law, and deter coercive actions in contested waters.

As the Philippines faces stepped-up Chinese activity across the Spratlys, BRP Diego Silang's entry into service marks a rare expansion of capability for a Navy long constrained by budget limits—and a clearer signal that Manila intends to defend its maritime claims with modern assets rather than rhetoric. [ABC News] [Defense News] [Naval News]

Japan rejects claim of planned missile export to Philippines as Tokyo prepares separate defense-tech transfer

(ms) Japan has again denied that it is considering exporting its Type 03 Chū-SAM air-defense missile system to the Philippines, seeking to tamp down reports that triggered a diplomatic protest from China and renewed debate over Tokyo's shifting defense-export policy.

Chinese state-linked outlets had accused Japan of preparing a missile transfer to Manila—framing it as a

destabilizing move amid intensifying South China Sea confrontations. Japan's Defense Ministry countered that while it regularly conducts technical exchanges with the Philippines, "no talks on exporting the Chū-SAM" have taken place.

The clarification comes as Japan simultaneously moves ahead with a different defense export: a command-and-control (C2) system for Philippine air-defense operations. Japanese officials say the system, which integrates radar and sensor data to detect aircraft and missiles, qualifies for export under existing rules governing "warning" and "surveillance" equipment. It would complement the Japanese-built air-surveillance radars already operating in the Philippines and enable smoother, shared situational awareness between the two militaries.

Tokyo's denial of any missile-export talks does little to diminish strategic interest in the capability. Philippine officials have openly signaled interest in the Type 03, a medium-range interceptor capable of engaging aircraft and cruise missiles—precisely the sort of system Manila lacks as it shifts from internal security to external defense and hosts additional US forces under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement.

For now, the missile remains off-limits: the Chū-SAM does not fall under Japan's five permissible export categories. But Japan's ruling coalition has agreed to abolish those restrictions next year, potentially opening the door to future transfers if Tokyo's industrial capacity and political calculus allow.

The episode illustrates both the sensitivity surrounding missile deployments—especially after Japan announced it would station the Type 03 on Yonaguni near Taiwan—and the degree to which Japan's evolving export rules are now watched as closely as its military posture. Even absent an imminent missile sale, deeper integration of Japanese C2 and radar systems marks a significant shift in defense cooperation with the Philippines at a time of heightened Chinese pressure in the region. [Asahi] [Asia Times] [Zona Militar]

Philippines, Oman sign pact to recognize seafarers' certificates

(ms) The Philippines has expanded its global maritime partnerships with a new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Oman, allowing mutual recognition of seafarers' certificates and easing deployment for Filipino maritime workers.

The agreement, signed on 24 November 2025 on the sidelines of the IMO General Assembly in London, was concluded between MARINA Administrator Sonia B. Malaluan and Oman's Ministry of Transport. Under the MoU, both countries will recognize and validate each other's seafarer certifications, reducing administrative steps for ship operators and improving access for Filipino crews to Omani-flagged vessels and offshore projects.

MARINA said the pact strengthens career pathways for Filipino seafarers, who make up one of the world's largest maritime labor pools. For Oman, the deal helps address manpower shortages in its growing shipping, offshore and port sectors, where Filipino officers and ratings are already widely employed.

The arrangement also reinforces broader bilateral cooperation as both countries deepen labor and transport ties. Manila and Muscat marked 45 years of diplomatic relations this year, with maritime labor mobility remaining a central pillar. [Maritime Fair Trade]

Senior French military visit to Seychelles signals continued security cooperation in Indian Ocean

(lm) A visit to Seychelles by General Jean de Monicault, head of France's Southern Indian Ocean Forces (FAZSOI), was presented by both sides as part of an ongoing effort to deepen bilateral defense cooperation. Although the detailed content of the meetings was not publicly released, the French commander's presence in Victoria underscores the strategic relevance of Seychelles for France's Indian Ocean security posture, which relies heavily on its military facilities in La Réunion and Mayotte. [Seychelles Nation]

Seychelles' president uses first foreign trip to anchor ties with key development partner UAE

(lm) Seychelles' President Patrick Herminie's visit to the United Arab Emirates from December 6 to 11 — his first foreign mission since taking office — was presented by both governments as a move to consolidate an already central bilateral relationship. Herminie met President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al

Nahyan to review existing cooperation and identify priority areas for expansion.

The UAE highlighted long-standing assistance to Seychelles in infrastructure, renewable energy, health, education, and maritime security, which Herminie publicly acknowledged as having played a significant role in the country's development. Both sides signaled interest in strengthening collaboration in energy, sustainability, technological development, and government modernization.

The visit also served to establish direct working relations between the two leaders. Beyond ceremonial exchanges, the published summaries indicate that the UAE reaffirmed continued development support, while Seychelles sought to secure sustained engagement across sectors that remain structurally important for the islands' economy and governance capacity. [Emirates24|7] [State House, Seychelles]

Singapore and Malaysia report progress on longstanding bilateral issues, agree on new consulates and cooperation MOUs

Singapore and Malaysia signalled progress on several longstanding bilateral issues during the 12th Singapore–Malaysia Leaders' Retreat in Singapore on 4 December, with both governments indicating that previous points of contention — particularly water supply — are being handled in a more structured and less adversarial manner. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said water is "no longer a contentious issue", while Singapore Prime Minister Lawrence Wong confirmed that both sides are focusing on long-term supply resilience rather than immediate disputes over pricing.

Water has been a sensitive topic for decades under the 1962 Water Agreement, which allows Singapore to draw raw water from Johor while selling treated water back to the state. Johor's recurring water shortages, attributed to pollution, climate-linked dry spells and rising industrial demand, have amplified the stakes of the arrangement. Any major disruption affects both Johor's 1.7 million households and Singapore, which still sources around 40 per cent of its water from Malaysia. Officials have begun studying joint infrastructure projects to strengthen supply capacity and environmental safeguards, though pricing discussions remain unresolved.

Other longstanding issues, including airspace management and maritime boundaries, were also

reviewed. Both leaders said talks would continue under agreed principles and technical studies, noting that the issues are complex but should not impede broader cooperation. Airspace discussions will focus on optimising traffic management for major airports in both countries amid rising regional flight volumes.

Singapore received Malaysia's formal approval to open new consulates in Sabah and Sarawak, expanding its diplomatic presence beyond Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru. The move will increase consular access for Singaporeans in East Malaysia and support growing economic links.

The two governments also exchanged memorandums of understanding on public health cooperation and on combating cross-border drug trafficking. The agreements cover information-sharing, capacity-building, coordinated enforcement activities and collaboration on disease prevention, digital health and ageing-related challenges.

Both sides said they will continue advancing the Johor–Singapore Special Economic Zone and other joint initiatives while maintaining dialogue on unresolved matters. [Channel News Asia 1] [Channel News Asia 2] [South China Morning Post]

Singapore to open first embassy in Mexico in 2026 as ties deepen

(ms) Singapore will open an embassy in Mexico in 2026, marking its first diplomatic mission in the Spanish-speaking world and only its second in Latin America. President Tharman Shanmugaratnam announced the decision during his state visit to Mexico City on December 1, calling the move a "significant milestone" that reflects Singapore's confidence in Mexico's long-term economic outlook.

The new mission is expected to strengthen political engagement, expand economic cooperation, and enhance consular support for Singaporeans, according to Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum welcomed the decision, noting rising international interest in Mexico as it builds out major investment programs under *Plan Mexico*.

The visit also saw progress on trade ties, with Mexico reaffirming its intention to ratify the Pacific Alliance–Singapore Free Trade Agreement, and both sides signing agreements on coral reef restoration and international development cooperation.

Additionally, President Tharman invited President Sheinbaum to make a state visit to Singapore. [Channel News Asia]

South Korea rules out adjusting U.S. drills as incentive for talks with North Korea

(dql) South Korean national security adviser Wi Sung-lac has reaffirmed that Seoul is not considering scaling back joint military exercises with the United States as an incentive to restart dialogue with North Korea. While acknowledging the lack of progress in inter-Korean relations under President Lee Jae-myung, Wi emphasized that adjusting the drills—long condemned by Pyongyang—remains off the table despite Seoul's broader efforts to reopen communication channels. Lee has signaled that reducing large-scale exercises could be conceivable only under conditions of stable peace, which do not currently exist.

Seoul continues to push for military talks to prevent accidental clashes along the border, but North Korea has not responded. Wi also downplayed concerns about Pyongyang's omission from the latest U.S. National Security Strategy, attributing it to Washington's "America First" framing rather than a retreat from addressing North Korea's nuclear issue. [Yonhap News Agency] [Korea JoongAng Daily]

South Korea increases inter-Korean cooperation fund

(sm) South Korea's recently passed 2026 budget raises funding for inter-Korean cooperative projects to over 1 KRW (USD 681 million) which is the first time the allocation of monies has reached this level in three years.

The increase aims to support humanitarian exchanges and longer-term initiatives such as a peaceful coexistence center and preparations for a DMZ tourism project.

This reflects Seoul's intent to reopen channels of engagement and communication despite the protracted political tensions on the Korean Peninsula. [The Korea Times]

South Korea acknowledges detention of six citizens in North Korea

(sm) On December 4, the office of South Korean President, Lee Jae Myung, publicly acknowledged that six South Korean nationals remained detained in by North Korean authorities, including three missionaries and three defectors who became South Korean citizens. The individuals were reportedly arrested between 2013 and 2016 on charges that include espionage. The government noted that efforts to resolve the cases remain difficult amid the prolonged halt in inter-Korean communications.

The acknowledgment followed a press conference in which President Lee Jae Myung said his office would examine the cases after noting he was previously unaware of them. The Ministry of Unification's renewed appeal for the release of the three missionaries, following the adoption of a UN report on the cases, reflects the ongoing absence of movement on securing their return. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea, Uzbekistan deepen economic cooperation

(dql) South Korea and Uzbekistan held their sixth deputy-prime-minister–level meeting in Seoul on December 8, the first under President Lee Jae-myung who assumed office in June.

The talks reviewed expanding economic cooperation ahead of next year's South Korea–Central Asia summit. Seoul highlighted that bilateral ties are widening from traditional infrastructure projects into future-oriented sectors such as science, health care, and climate initiatives. Uzbekistan agreed to deepen cooperation in these areas and pursue new infrastructure collaboration.

Both sides also reaffirmed South Korea's support for Uzbekistan's bid to join the World Trade Organization. [The Korea Herald]

Meanwhile, Uzbek workers will be able to seek employment at Kia Auto service centers in South Korea under a new cooperation program confirmed by Uzbekistan's Migration Agency on December 6. Kia Auto, which oversees roughly 580–600 service centers nationwide and services over one million vehicles annually, is facing rising demand for skilled technicians.

Beginning in early 2026, Kia-standard training workshops will open in Uzbekistan, offering a three-month program in Korean language and culture, workplace safety, and practical auto-service skills. Graduates who meet requirements will qualify for South Korea's E-7 skilled worker visa, issued for 1–3 years, extendable as long as the worker remains employed in the approved occupation.

The South Korean government has also approved hiring foreign specialists in car body painting from 2025, with Uzbekistan becoming the first participating country. [Daryo]

South Korea touts expanded nuclear cooperation with U.S.

(dql) South Korean President Lee Jae-myung revealed that U.S. President Donald Trump proposed a 50–50 partnership allowing South Korea to enrich uranium and reprocess spent nuclear fuel domestically—an idea tied to ongoing negotiations to expand Seoul's civilian nuclear rights beyond current treaty limits.

Speaking to foreign journalists at a press conference, Lee argued that local enrichment would strengthen South Korea's energy security, reduce reliance on Russian supplies, and generate economic benefits.

He also highlighted U.S. approval for Seoul's pursuit of nuclear-powered submarines as a major strategic gain, stressing that such vessels do not violate nonproliferation rules and would bolster South Korea's autonomy. While Trump suggested building the submarines at a U.S. shipyard, Lee said domestic construction would better support Korea's defense industry and national security.

On inter-Korean policy, Lee urged Washington to take a more active role in restarting talks with Pyongyang, noting that North Korea looks to the U.S. for security guarantees. He signaled readiness to adjust joint military exercises as part of efforts to create conditions for renewed diplomacy, while avoiding moves at home that could inflame ideological divisions.

Lee also positioned South Korea as a potential mediator amid heightened China-Japan tensions, stressing nonalignment and the need to preserve stable relations with Beijing. He expressed interest in meeting President Xi Jinping soon to discuss broader regional security. While ties with Japan have improved, he acknowledged that unresolved historical issues

continue to carry emotional weight. [Yonhap News Agency]

U.S. approves sale of precision-strike bombs to South Korea

(dql) Washington has cleared a potential USD 111.8 million sale of 624 GBU-39/B Small Diameter Bombs to South Korea, a move that strengthens Seoul's precision-strike capabilities and deepens defense interoperability with U.S. forces.

Boeing will produce the munitions, and the deal will not require deploying additional U.S. personnel to South Korea. [TRT World]

Romania, South Korea eye deeper defense and nuclear cooperation

(dql) South Korean President Lee Jae Myung and Romanian President Nicușor Dan held their first phone call on December 4, using the conversation to anchor closer cooperation in defense, nuclear energy, and broader economic ties.

Lee highlighted the significance of South Korea's exports of the Shingung air-defense system and K9 howitzers to Romania and encouraged continued Romanian support for Korean participation in upcoming nuclear power projects.

Dan praised Seoul's defense technology and signaled interest in expanding defense collaboration. The two leaders also agreed to pursue cooperation in ports, infrastructure development, cultural exchanges, and people-to-people links. [The Korea Times]

U.S. transfers fourth Coast Guard cutter to strengthen Sri Lanka's maritime security

(lm) The United States has transferred a fourth former U.S. Coast Guard cutter to the Sri Lanka Navy, a move that Washington describes as part of its long-term commitment to strengthening Sri Lanka's maritime security and operational readiness. The vessel will take several months to reach Sri Lankan waters and will expand the navy's fleet of U.S.-supplied cutters. [Daily Mirror]

Taiwan signs digital trade pact with Japan

(dql) Taiwan and Japan signed a digital trade agreement during last week's Japan–Taiwan Economic and Trade Conference in Taipei, expanding on a 2013 e-commerce pact to include tariff exemptions on cross-border electronic transmissions, free data flows, and cybersecurity measures. A memorandum on customs cooperation was also signed.

The deal comes amid heightened China–Japan–Taiwan tensions, following Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae's remarks on a potential Taiwan conflict, and underscores Tokyo's willingness to maintain economic engagement with Taipei despite Beijing's pressure.

Observers note the agreement represents a pragmatic, incremental approach to deepening bilateral trade ties, strengthening Taiwan's digital economy, and supporting its broader diplomatic and trade objectives in the region. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan urges South Korea to correct downgrade of designation in new e-arrival system

(yl) Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) criticized South Korea's new e-Arrival card system for listing Taiwan as "China (Taiwan)" in departure and destination dropdown menus.

The ministry said it has repeatedly requested corrections since the system launched in February but has not received a positive response, calling the designation "regrettable" and contrary to the fact that the ROC (Taiwan) and PRC are not subordinate to each other.

The ministry urged Seoul to fix the issue to avoid harming bilateral ties, noting the scale of exchanges, 2.47 million two-way visits in 2024, including 1.4 million Taiwanese travelers. [Focus Taiwan]

Canada's security concerns open market for Taiwanese drones as Chinese models restricted

(dql) Canada's federal police are restricting the use of Chinese-made drones over security concerns, limiting

them to non-sensitive tasks like community policing and search operations. About 80 percent of the fleet is Chinese made, chosen originally for cost reasons, while alternatives from France, the U.S., and Belgium are more expensive.

The shift creates opportunities for Taiwanese drone manufacturers to supply secure systems and components. Taiwan's expertise in airframe design, control stations, and communications positions it as a trusted alternative, with potential for local assembly in Canada to meet procurement requirements.

Analysts note other Canadian agencies may follow suit, expanding Taiwan's market amid global moves to reduce reliance on Chinese technology. [Taiwan News]

U.S. strengthens Taiwan ties with new assurance law, security funding measures

(yl) The U.S. has enacted the Taiwan Assurance Implementation Act after President Donald Trump signed it into law, requiring the State Department to review and update its guidelines governing official contact with Taiwan at least every five years.

The measure strengthens and institutionalizes the 2020 Taiwan Assurance Act by shifting what was previously a one-time review into a recurring process. [Focus Taiwan 1] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan]

China condemned the law, calling U.S.-Taiwan official exchanges a violation of its "core interests," while urging Washington to avoid sending "wrong signals" to pro-independence forces. [Reuters]

Separately, the U.S. Congress released a new compromise draft of the 2026 National Defense Authorization Act, authorizing up to USD 1 billion for Taiwan-related security cooperation. The bill tasks the Pentagon with enabling uncrewed and anti-uncrewed systems that can be jointly used by U.S. and Taiwanese forces by March 2026, and mandates annual reporting to Congress through 2029 on reciprocal procurement and security planning.

The legislation also supports expanded medical and battlefield casualty-care capacity for Taiwan and authorizes joint maritime operations planning and leadership training between the U.S. Coast Guard and Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration. U.S. Coast Guard training teams may be deployed to Taiwan from 2026 to 2030 to strengthen maritime security and law-enforcement capabilities.

The Pentagon must also submit a Taiwan security assistance roadmap and an assessment of rapid mobilization and sustainment needs for potential conflicts in the Taiwan Strait and broader Indo-Pacific region. Final funding will depend on subsequent appropriations. [Focus Taiwan 2]

Taiwan to finalize tax deal with U.S. next year

(dql) Taiwan's representative to the U.S., Alexander Yui, said the US-Taiwan Expedited Double-Tax Relief Act could be finalized next year, concluding negotiations that have lasted about 20 years. The legislation aims to prevent double taxation for Taiwanese employees in the U.S. and reduce withholding rates on U.S.-sourced income.

The bill has passed the House and awaits Senate approval. Officials expect it to boost U.S. investment in Taiwan, extend opportunities beyond large firms like TSMC to small- and medium-sized enterprises, and complement broader U.S.–Taiwan economic measures, including the Taiwan Assurance Implementation Act. [Taiwan News]

Taiwanese fighter jet developer signs deal with US Vantor Technologies

(acl) On December 2, Taiwan's fighter jet developer Aerospace Industrial Development Corp. (AIDC) signed a software integration deal with US geospatial intelligence firm Vantor Technologies to enhance the positioning accuracy of its military drones.

AIDC President Tsao Chin-Pin and Vantor Chief Transformation Officer Will Cocos signed the agreement at the Interservice/Industry Training, Simulation and Education Conference 2025, the world's largest military training and simulation exhibition.

Vantor's Raptor Guide system provides precise navigation for drones operating in GPS-denied environments by combining high-accuracy 3D terrain data with vision-based positioning, enabling accuracy within seven meters and improving resistance to interference. AIDC said drones equipped with the system showed high positioning accuracy without requiring expensive anti-interference antennas or radar, reducing procurement and maintenance costs.

AIDC said it plans to adapt the technology across multiple drone models and support domestic defense firms in integrating the system to strengthen Taiwan's drone industry. [Focus Taiwan][Taiwan News]

Cambodia-Thailand border situation worsens again as both governments trade military strikes

(ln/bk/acs) Border fighting between Thailand and Cambodia intensified sharply between December 7 and 9, marking the most serious deterioration in bilateral security since the mid-year clashes. The fighting unfolded principally in Thailand's northeastern provinces of Si Sa Ket, Ubon Ratchathani, Surin, Buri Ram and later Sa Kaeo, opposite Cambodia's Preah Vihear and Oddar Meanchey provinces. These areas have long been sensitive due to unresolved demarcation, the presence of high ground offering tactical advantages, and a history of past clashes.

According to Thai accounts, the latest escalation began on December 7 with a 35-minute exchange of fire in Si Sa Ket, close to Preah Vihear, which left two Thai soldiers injured. Thailand subsequently reported further gunfire in nearby areas and said it ordered evacuations from several border communities because it feared the situation could spread rapidly. Thailand later stated that, overnight, Cambodian units had repositioned heavy weapons—including multiple-rocket launchers and tanks—closer to the frontier, had restricted mobile-phone use among personnel, and had begun evacuating Cambodian civilians from some villages. [Bangkok Post 1] [The Nation 1]

Before dawn on December 8, Thailand reported that Cambodian troops opened fire with rifles, machine guns and mortars in several sectors of Si Sa Ket and Surin. Thailand said it returned fire under the right of self-defense and in accordance with international rules of engagement. Cambodian positions were also reported to have deployed unmanned aerial vehicles, although Cambodia has not commented publicly on these accounts. Cambodia, for its part, accuses Thailand of violating existing ceasefire arrangements and denies initiating hostilities. [The Nation 2]

Thai casualties rose the same morning, with one soldier killed and at least eight others wounded during what Thailand described as Cambodian strikes on Thai positions. In response, the Royal Thai Air Force conducted air operations on December 8, deploying F-16 aircraft to attack what Thailand identified as Cambodian military sites at Chong An Ma, Prasat

Khana, and a communications installation near the Preah Vihear area. The most prominent strike destroyed a casino complex that Thailand said had been converted into a drone control and command facility. [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3] [Bangkok Post 4] [The Nation 3] [The Nation 4]

As the clashes expanded east and west along the frontier, Thailand reported Cambodian rocket fire in Buri Ram and renewed shelling in Si Sa Ket and Surin. Civilian evacuations increased to more than 385,000 people on the Thai side, and several hospitals in Sa Kaeo were temporarily closed to non-emergency services. Thailand later stated that Cambodian forces had targeted sites deeper inside Thai territory, including areas near Buriram Airport and a hospital in Surin. Cambodia has not affirmed these claims and maintains that its actions were reactive and defensive. [Bangkok Post 5]

Thai Prime Minister Anutin cancelled a planned border inspection on December 8 and convened a national-security meeting in Bangkok. He later stated that Thailand would no longer pursue negotiations with Cambodia, arguing that recent attacks—described by Thailand as deliberate—left no room for renewed talks. [The Nation 5] [The Nation 6]

International reactions remained limited but notable. Malaysia, whose prime minister helped broker the July ceasefire, publicly urged both sides to exercise maximum restraint and emphasized that further violence risked undermining the diplomatic framework established earlier in the year. Japan also called for restraint, warning that stability in Thai-Cambodian relations is essential for regional security and urging both countries to return to the terms of the ceasefire agreement. [Bangkok Post 6] [Bangkok Post 7]

The confrontation unfolded against the backdrop of an unresolved diplomatic dispute concerning newly discovered landmines on the Thai side of the border earlier in the year. At the annual meeting of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention in Geneva, Thailand presented what it described as scientific, independently verified evidence that new PMN-2 anti-personnel mines had been laid on Thai soil by Cambodian forces. Cambodia rejected the allegation, arguing that it had been denied full access to inspection sites and questioning the reliability of Thailand's evidence. ASEAN military observers who visited some areas reported that mines appeared recently emplaced, but Cambodia disputes these assessments. [The Nation 8] [Bangkok Post 8] [Bangkok Post 9]

Political tensions between the two governments intensified during the crisis. On December 8, Cambodian Senate President Hun Sen released a short video on Facebook showing Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul dining with Ban Sreymom, the governor of Cambodia's Pailin province, as well as photos of Anutin visiting a temple in Takéo province. In a written message, Hun Sen said he regretted what he described as a broken personal friendship since Anutin became prime minister and accused him of using military actions against Cambodia to strengthen his position ahead of Thailand's general election expected in March 2026. Earlier in June, Hun Sen released a private conversation with former Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, a disclosure that contributed to her removal from office by Thailand's Constitutional Court. [The Nation 9] [Thai Enquirer]

Border conflict with Cambodia threatens Thailand's progress in U.S. tariff negotiations

(lm) Thailand's commerce minister has warned that the escalating border conflict with Cambodia risks delaying or derailing ongoing tariff negotiations with the United States after Washington requested a temporary suspension of talks until the situation stabilizes. The minister stressed that Thailand did not initiate the latest clashes and said the government is working to reassure U.S. counterparts through all available diplomatic channels, though no response has yet been received.

Thai business groups warn that Washington's pause signals that the border conflict has effectively become a condition for moving forward with tariff negotiations. They have urged the government to quickly clarify that Thailand was not the aggressor and to protect the credibility of its trade diplomacy at a time when investor sentiment is already fragile. [The Nation]

First Thailand–Russia business forum reveals early signs of renewed economic engagement

(lm) Thailand and Russia used their first dedicated trade and investment forum, held in Phuket from November 26–28, to explore ways to revive a bilateral economic relationship that has stagnated for nearly a decade. More than 100 Russian firms—ranging from major conglomerates and financial institutions to

energy, software, and agrifood exporters—held direct talks with Thai companies in what both sides framed as groundwork for longer-term commercial re-engagement.

Bilateral trade has remained minimal compared to potential, reaching only about USD 2 billion in 2024, far below targets set in the mid-2010s. Both sides acknowledged that Western sanctions on Russia remain the primary structural barrier, but discussions indicated a shared expectation that constraints may eventually loosen, making early positioning strategically valuable.

Russian participants included large entities such as AFK Sistema, Alfa Bank, Alterra Group, Rosatom, 1C Company, and energy equipment producer Energo. Moscow's state-backed Russian Export Center (REC), which opened a permanent office in Thailand earlier this year, reported that Russian exports to Thailand rose more than 40 percent in the first half of 2025, driven by technology, agrifood, logistics, and industrial products. REC has also launched a "Made in Russia" digital storefront on major Southeast Asian e-commerce platforms, signaling a push toward consumer-market penetration despite sanctions.

Agrifood has emerged as the fastest-growing segment, expanding sharply since 2023 and reaching USD 45.8 million in the first nine months of 2025, with notable gains in baby food, seafood, and other non-food marine commodities. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand positions Saudi Arabia as primary access point for expanding into Middle Eastern markets

(lm) Thailand is strengthening commercial ties with Saudi Arabia to use the country as its main gateway into Middle Eastern and Gulf markets. Commerce Minister Suphajee Suthumpun met her Saudi counterpart in Riyadh to advance Thai food and agricultural exports and to align product standards so that Saudi Arabia can scale up imports of Thai goods, especially halal-certified products. Saudi Arabia has also agreed to provide permanent promotional space for Thai products, signaling long-term support for Thailand's regional market entry strategy.

Both sides are preparing a cooperation roadmap focused on service sectors where Thailand sees high demand in the Middle East, including tourism, hospitality, healthcare and skills training. This aligns with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 diversification agenda,

which seeks external partners for non-oil economic development.

Trade data underline the importance of the relationship: bilateral trade reached USD 7.76 billion in 2024, and USD 5.82 billion in the first nine months of 2025. Thailand aims to expand its share of this market by deepening its role as a food-security supplier and by supporting Thai companies seeking investment and distribution channels across the Gulf. [Bangkok Post]

Timor-Leste and Pakistan deepen cooperation on nutrition-focused social protection systems

(ms) Timor-Leste and Pakistan advanced practical cooperation on nutrition-focused social protection during the Global Working Group meeting held in Islamabad from December 2–4.

Timor-Leste's Vice-Minister Céu Brites and Pakistan's Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) Chairperson Rubina Khalid held bilateral talks focused on operational lessons from BISP's large-scale cash-transfer system. Discussions covered digital registration, verification procedures, grievance mechanisms, and targeting tools—areas directly relevant to Timor-Leste's upcoming Conditional Health and Nutrition Maternal and Child Grant (BdMK-SANUTRIO), set to launch in 2026.

Timor-Leste officials also conducted a field visit to a BISP One-Window Center in Rawalpindi to observe payment and beneficiary-service processes that may be adapted to Timor-Leste's system.

Both governments agreed to continue technical exchanges in 2026, particularly on Proxy Means Testing, monitoring frameworks, and digital delivery platforms. The cooperation supports Timor-Leste's ongoing program design with assistance from the World Food Program and Asian Development Bank, while strengthening Pakistan's international partnerships on nutrition-sensitive social protection. [Government of Timor Leste]

Brunei Sultan's state visit strengthens comprehensive partnership with Vietnam

(hn) Brunei's Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah concluded a three-day state visit to Vietnam on December 2. During

the visit, he attended an official welcome ceremony, held talks with key Vietnamese leaders, and expressed condolences for recent flood and landslide victims in Vietnam.

Both sides welcomed the Sultan's seventh visit and affirmed their commitment to deepening the Vietnam–Brunei Comprehensive Partnership. They highlighted strong progress in bilateral cooperation, including defense, security, fisheries, oil and gas, education, and especially trade, which increased 165% in 2024 and exceeded the 2025 target ahead of schedule.

Vietnam and Brunei agreed to enhance political trust, boost trade and investment, strengthen connectivity, support business cooperation, and expand collaboration in agriculture, fisheries, the Halal industry, culture, tourism, and people-to-people ties. A joint statement was issued reaffirming cooperation across all areas. [Vietnamplus] [Vietnamnews]

Japan drops out of plans to build a nuclear power plant in Vietnam

(ln) According to what Naoki Ito, Japan's ambassador to Vietnam, told Reuters, Japan has officially pulled out of plans to build the Ninh Thuận 2 project, a major nuclear power plant in Ninh Thuận province, citing complications with a demanding timeline.

Despite being home to major manufacturing operations for multinational companies including Samsung and Apple, Vietnam has faced instances of significant power outages because the increasing demand from the industrial sector and expanding middle class surpasses available supply. Vietnam's major power shortages are also compounded by the increasingly frequent occurrence of extreme weather incidences, namely droughts and typhoons. The Ninh Thuận 2 project is a part of Vietnam's energy strategy to enhance their power generation capacity and increase electricity production from various sources.

Vietnam's plans to implement nuclear plants in central Vietnam originally began in the early 2010s but was discontinued in 2016 because of safety and budget concerns. Russia obtained the Ninh Thuận 1 and Japan was awarded the second plant. The project eventually resumed in 2024, as Vietnam had asked, but Japan has decided to pull out of the plans in November after meetings with Vietnamese officials because the deadline for completion is too soon. In addition, Japanese companies have expressed little desire in working on the Ninh Thuận 2 project because they

prioritized rebuilding Japan's skilled workforce after the Fukushima accident in 2011.

This announcement complicates Vietnam's long-term plans to avoid new power shortages and brings new challenges between Hanoi and Tokyo. Ambassador Ito said Japan was still looking at options for additional nuclear plants in Vietnam for a later stage, meanwhile there have been interest from French, South Korean and U.S. investors for the Ninh Thuận plants. [Reuters]

Vietnam's trade surplus with the United States reaches a record high despite President Donald Trump's tariffs

(ln) Despite United States President Donald Trump implementing a 20 percent tariff on most Vietnamese goods in August, Vietnam's trade surplus with the U.S has increased to USD 121.6 billion within the first eleven months of 2025.

Vietnam and the U.S. remain in talks for a trade deal that would specify certain Vietnamese goods exempted from Trump's tariffs and determine the extent that some U.S. products have preferential access to the Vietnamese market. [Reuters]

With Vietnam's exports to the U.S. increasing year-on-year by 22.5 percent by November, the trade surplus in the January-November period has surpassed the trade surplus for the entirety of 2024, in which it reached USD 104.5 million according to Vietnam's statistics agency.

Although there has been overall export growth in 2025, Vietnam's month-on-month export rate decreased 7.1 percent in November with a 7.3 percent decline in shipments to the United States. November had been the fourth consecutive month that month-on-month exports to the U.S. had dropped. Additionally, Vietnam's overall trade surplus with the U.S. in November was USD 1.09 billion, a notable decrease from Vietnam's USD 2.6 billion trade surplus with the U.S. in October. [Reuters]

Vietnam and Cuba to prioritize cooperation on the economy, trade and investment while celebrating 65 years of bilateral relations

(ln) Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister Hồ Quốc Dũng officially visited Cuba from December 1-3 to commemorate and strengthen the 65-year long diplomatic relationship between Vietnam and Cuba.

In discussions with Cuba's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Trade and Foreign Investment Óscar Pérez-Oliva Fraga, both sides affirmed and expressed their gratitude and appreciation for the countries' bilateral diplomatic relations and close cooperation especially in the field of economy, trade and investment.

Within the inaugural session of the Joint Committee, both countries established the implementation of a bilateral trade agreement which had set a target of raising a two-way trade goal of up to USD 500 million. The agreement addressed payment solutions and further collaboration in biotechnology and pharmaceuticals research and production.

The action steps agreed upon at Hồ's visit include creating advantageous conditions for Vietnamese investors and businesses currently operating in Cuba and utilizing the Intergovernmental Committee more effectively. Both countries will also increase promotion in trade and investment to better market understanding and improve business-to-business connectivity. In addition, Pérez-Oliva Fraga asserted Cuba's preparedness to focus on cooperation projects in Vietnam, especially within food and agricultural production to strengthen Cuba's food security. [Vietnamnews] [QDND] [Nhan Dan]

Two US Navy ships begin four-day friendship visit to Vietnam

(hn) Two U.S. Navy ships — the amphibious assault ship USS *Tripoli* (LHA-7) and the guided-missile cruiser USS *Robert Smalls* (CG-62) — began a four-day friendship visit to Da Nang, featuring defense, humanitarian, and cultural exchanges.

On the evening of December 8, USS *Tripoli* entered Da Nang waters while USS *Robert Smalls* docked earlier at Tien Sa Port. A welcome ceremony was held with representatives from the Da Nang Department of Foreign Affairs, Vietnam's Naval Region 3, Military Region 5, Border Guard forces, and U.S. officials including Ambassador Marc E. Knapper.

USS *Tripoli*, designed to deploy Marine forces and support F-35B fighter operations, arrived with units from the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, Amphibious

Squadron 11, and Task Force 76. Rear Admiral Tom Shultz said the visit signals continued growth in U.S.–Vietnam defense ties.

The U.S. has provided USD 1.75 million in disaster relief to Da Nang and plans to expand security and humanitarian cooperation.

While in port, U.S. officers will meet Da Nang leaders and Vietnamese military commands; conduct professional exchanges and sports activities with the Vietnam Navy; visit local children at the Hope Village, university students, and tour cultural sites.

Da Nang has previously hosted three U.S. aircraft carriers: USS *Carl Vinson* (2018), USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (2022), and USS *Ronald Reagan* (2023). [Vnexpress, in Vietnamese] [Dantriinternational]

Vietnam establishes honorary Consulate in Croatia, deepening diplomatic links

(hn) On December 4, Vietnam has opened its Honorary Consulate in Zagreb, Croatia, marking a new step in the two countries' long-standing partnership. At the inauguration, Ambassador Bùi Lê Thái highlighted that the new office demonstrates both governments' commitment to deepening cooperation and supports Vietnam's policy toward overseas Vietnamese communities.

The consulate is expected to enhance people-to-people links and boost collaboration in trade, investment, culture, education, and tourism. Newly appointed Honorary Consul Marko Moric pledged to help strengthen bilateral ties, while the Vietnamese side affirmed continued support to ensure effective operations. [Vietnamnews]

Announcements

Upcoming online events

10 December 2025 @ 1:00-2:00 p.m. (GMT+1), Bruegel, United Kingdom

Europe's tech dependency: risks and solutions

Europe's growing technological dependencies are increasingly exposing the EU to external pressure, threatening its ability to chart its own social and economic path. This hybrid workshop will explore concrete case studies of foreign leverage over critical inputs, assess the credibility of such threats, and discuss strategies for reducing the EU's vulnerability. Participants will examine risks of protectionist overreaction and consider both short- and long-term options for the European Commission to mitigate tech dependency. For more information and registration, visit [Bruegel].

10 December 2025 @ 1:00-2:00 p.m. (GMT+1), European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), Germany

Navigating multipolarity: Angola's middle power ambitions

This online panel will discuss the new policy brief "Middle power dreaming: The geopolitics of Angola's emergence." The session will explore Angola's growing diplomatic visibility in 2025, its strategic interests and regional role, and the implications of its rising middle-power profile for multilateral cooperation and global partnerships, including with Europe. For more information and registration, visit [ECFR].

10 December 2025 @ 9:00 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. (GMT+7), ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

CIIS-ISEAS Joint Symposium on China-ASEAN AI Cooperation

Artificial intelligence is transforming economies and societies across Asia, creating both major opportunities and complex governance challenges. This hybrid symposium—jointly organized by ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute and the China Institute of International Studies—will bring together experts, academics, and industry practitioners to explore China–ASEAN cooperation on AI governance, ethics, and regulation. Participants will exchange insights, assess policy gaps, and develop recommendations to support responsible and inclusive AI development across the region. For more information and registration, visit [ISEAS].

11 December 2025 @ 9:30-10:30 a.m. (GMT+1), Chatham House, United Kingdom

South Korea rethinks its foreign policy: Is it ditching the US for China?

Following his June 2025 election, President Lee Jae-myung has pledged to steer South Korea toward a more pragmatic foreign policy amid a challenging geopolitical landscape. As Seoul navigates shifting U.S. alliance dynamics, growing Sino-U.S. rivalry, Chinese economic coercion, and North Korea's expanding nuclear threat, the Lee administration faces complex strategic choices. This webinar will examine the key drivers of South Korea's foreign policy and assess whether Lee's approach signals continuity or change from his conservative predecessor.

For more information and registration, visit [Chatham House].

11 December 2025 @ 1:00-5:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

2025 Critical Minerals Supply Chains Summit

The webcast will present the inaugural 2025 Critical Minerals Supply Chains Summit, exploring how to build secure and competitive mineral supply chains. As US demand for critical minerals accelerates, senior

officials, industry leaders, and global experts will examine new financing tools, strategic partnerships, and innovation-driven solutions. High-level discussions will chart a path from mine to market to strengthen the foundation of the energy and manufacturing economy. For more information and registration, please see [Atlantic Council].

11 December 2025 @ 8:30-9:30 a.m. (GMT-5), Asia Society (New York), USA

U.S.-India 2025: Strains, Shifts, and the Road Ahead

This webinar will assess the sharp narrative shift in U.S.–India relations in 2025 and what it will take to reset the partnership. The discussion will examine the stalled trade deal, India's continued energy ties with Russia, Washington's renewed engagement with Islamabad, and the implications for defense, technology cooperation, and the future of the Quad. This session will offer forward-looking insights into how both sides may navigate 2026 amid a lingering trust deficit. For more information and registration, please see [Asia Society].

12 December 2025 @ 1:00-5:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

Analyzing stagnation and militarization in the Russian economy

At this webinar, the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center will launch the latest installment in its "Russia Tomorrow" series, examining the current trajectory of the Russian economy. The new report, Russian economy in 2025: Between stagnation and militarization, analyzes Russia's deepening dependence on China, the dominance of the defense sector, and the uneven regional impacts of the war. Authors Elina Ribakova and Lucas Risinger will discuss their findings and what they mean for Russia's economic future. For more information and registration, please see [Atlantic Council].

12 December 2025 @ 10:00-11:00 a.m. (GMT+1), European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), Germany

Climate realism: Rethinking EU–South Africa engagement after COP30 and the G20 Summit

The online discussion will examine South Africa's G20 presidency, outcomes from recent global gatherings, and how shared priorities—green industrialization, energy transitions, and sustainable development—can anchor a more pragmatic partnership. Speakers will also assess South Africa's evolving multilateral role and the opportunities and constraints for advancing realistic climate action in a fragmented geopolitical landscape. For more information and registration, visit [ECFR].

15 December 2025 @ 10:00-11:30 a.m. (GMT+7), ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

Myanmar's 2025 Elections: What's at Stake?

This webinar will discuss Myanmar's evolving political landscape as the country approaches the State Peace and Security Commission's planned election exercise. Researchers and observers will unpack the shifting conflict dynamics, assess the economic "known knowns" and uncertainties, and examine the mechanics and implications of the proposed electoral process. For more information and registration, visit [ISEAS].

16 December 2025 @ 12:00-1:00 p.m. (GMT+1), Chatham House, United Kingdom

Yemen's conflict: The Islah Party's evolving role, and vision for a post-war society

Amid Yemen's protracted civil war, the Islamist Islah Party has remained a central force in the country's political landscape and continues to play a key role within the internationally recognized government. Marking the party's 35th anniversary, this hybrid event will examine Islah's evolving position, its regional and international relationships, and its role in shaping post-war governance. The discussion will also explore the party's vision for a sustainable political settlement and the future structure of the Yemeni state. For more information and registration, visit [Chatham House].

Recent Book Releases

Benjamin Selwyn, **Christin Bernhold**, ***Capitalist Value Chains: Labour Exploitation, Nature Destruction, Geopolitics***, Oxford University Press, 320 pages, published October 22, 2025. For a review, see [LSE].

Vince Cable, ***Eclipsing the West: China, India and the Forging of a New World***, Manchester University Press, published September 16, 2025. For a review, see [Foreign Affairs].

Calls

The **Swiss Society for African Studies (SGAS/SSEA)** and the **Association for African Studies in Germany e.V. (VAD)** invites paper proposals for their conference "African Perspectives on Global Treansformations," scheduled for August 26-28, 2026. The deadline for abstract submission is January 11, 2026. For more information, see [African Perspectives].

The **Oxford Programme in Asian Laws (OPAL) of the University of Oxford and the Faculty of Law, Thammasat University**, invite paper proposals for the ***3rd International Forum on Asian Laws: "Identity of Asian Laws,"*** to be held on July 30-31 at Thammasat University. The deadline for abstract submission is January 15, 2026. For more information, see [University of Oxford].

The Responsible AI Forum, to be held in Munich, Germany, on May 19-20, 2026, invites paper proposals. The deadline for abstract submission is December 12, 2025. For more information, see [Ieai].

Decolonization Forum 2026, to be held on May 11-12, 2026, invites paper proposals under the theme **"Decolonizing Knowledge Production and Circulation."** The deadline for abstract submission is December 12, 2025. For more information, see [Decolonization Forum].

Jobs and Positions

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Senior Coordinator – Governance and Policy Support**. The deadline for application submission is December 23, 2025. For more information, see [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Representative in Namibia**. The deadline for application submission is December 13, 2025. For more information, see [FAO].

The **International Court of Justice (ICJ)** seeks a **Head of the Security and General Assistance Division**. The deadline for application submission is December 14, 2025. For more information, see [UN].

The **International Court of Justice (ICJ)** seeks a **Head of the Department of Legal Matters/Principal Secretary of the Court**. The deadline for application submission is December 11, 2025. For more information, see [UN].

The **International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)** seeks a **Legal Officer (Climate and Private Sector)** - Rome, Italy. The deadline for application submission is December 11, 2025. For more information, see [IFAD].

The **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** seeks a 2025 Research Analyst. The deadline for application submission is December 31, 2025. For more information, see [IMF].

TI International (RTI) seek as **Director – Technology & AI Automation**. The deadline for application submission is December 11, 2025. For more information, see [RTI].

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