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CHINA

Joint naval drills by China, Russia and Iran

China, Russia and Iran conducted a [four-day joint naval drill](#), ‘Security Belt-2023’, in the Gulf of Oman from 15-19 March. According to a [statement](#) released by the Chinese Defence Ministry, the exercises were aimed at facilitating the naval cooperation between the participating countries and also to demonstrate their willingness to jointly protect maritime security. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) [dispatched guided-missile destroyer Nanning](#) to participate in the aerial search, maritime rescue, ship parade and other exercises. Reportedly, the *Nanning* is a part of the PLA Navy’s [43rd naval escort task force](#) to the Gulf of Aden and the waters off Somalia, and earlier this year had also participated in the AMAN-23 multinational naval exercises held in Pakistan.

The primary training exercises held in the drill were [search and rescue missions](#). The ships also [carried out](#) manoeuvres, hosted special forces in their live-fire shooting practice against mock incoming armed targets and organised night-time communications exercises with other ships in the joint flotilla.

Increase in China’s Defence Budget

China’s [defence budget grew](#) 7.2 per cent in 2023 amounting to a total of \$ 224.79 billion. While the increase in defence budget has come under scrutiny from the United States (US), China has responded to the US saying that the ‘China threat’ is being exaggerated when the US has the largest defence budget in the world. Wang

Chao, the spokesperson of the first session of the 14th National People’s Congress, stated that the increase in the defence budget is needed to come to terms with the growing ‘complex security challenges and for China to fulfil its responsibilities as a major country’.

US and Chinese Navy in the Paracel Islands

On 23 March, senior Colonel Tian Junli, spokesperson of the PLA Southern Theatre Command [informed in a written statement](#) that the PLA “expelled” a US destroyer (*USS Milius*) in the Paracel Islands, where the US apparently “trespassed”. The State news media outlet, *Global Times* [reported](#) that the PLA organised both naval and air forces to track, monitor and warn the US destroyer. US-China competition is heating up in the South China Sea where the military forces of both the countries are increasingly confronting each other. In particular, there are increasing cases where the PLA is reporting confrontation with US naval forces. The PLA has stated that this was the [second](#) incident where the US ship has been expelled in the South China Sea.

JAPAN

Japan gets new head of JSDF

Japan’s Ministry of Defense [announced](#) in mid-March that General Yoshihide Yoshida, who was previously the Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF) Chief of Staff, would be the country’s senior-most uniformed officer. General Yoshida, who took charge on 30 March, replaces General Koji Yamazaki, who had been serving as the Chief of Staff of the Joint Staff of the Japanese Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) since April 2019.

Gen. Yoshida's appointment is significant in that he is the first Chief of Staff who is not a graduate from the National Defense Academy at Yokosuka, Kanagawa Prefecture. He graduated in 1986 from the University of Tokyo's engineering department. General Yoshida was appointed as the GSDF's Chief of Staff in March 2021, before which he commanded its Northern Army (which includes the Northern Territories disputed with Russia) among other positions.

In a [statement](#) Gen. Yoshida said that the focus of the JSDF moving forward would be the Indo-Pacific, and that he aimed to keep 'Japan at the forefront' of efforts to maintain security in the region.

Japan-US to jointly explore hypersonic missile interceptor capability

Reportedly, the US and Japan are [exploring a partnership](#) to develop hypersonic missile defence capability. In 2020, news reports had emerged about the US Missile Defense Agency planning to design and build an interceptor capable of defending against regional hypersonic missile threats. Vice-Admiral Jon Hill, Head of the US Missile Defense Agency, announced in March that the organization is considering cooperation with Japan to work on the Glide Phase Interceptor (GPI), one of the Agency's top priorities. In a press briefing on 15 March. Vice-Admiral Hill informed that talks with Japan are at a preliminary stage as the two countries are discussing potential areas of cooperation. The hypersonic defence capability, if developed, will add to the strength of the US Army as the interceptors will be installed into the US Navy's current *Aegis* ballistic missile defence-equipped destroyers.

TAIWAN

Taiwan-US Military Cooperation

The Taiwanese media reported that the country had ["received 11 of the 13 MK15 Block 1B gun systems"](#) from the US. This system is known as the MK15 Phalanx Close-In Weapons System (CIWS), which includes rapid-fire quick-reaction guns designed to stop anti-ship missiles. Taiwan's National Chung Shan Institute of Science and Technology (NCSIST) is developing the *Hsiung Feng II* anti-ship missile, which ["has a maximum range of more than 250 kilometers."](#) It is also reported that ["its ECM technology is on par with American and European anti-ship missiles."](#) The missile is a more sophisticated version of its predecessor. This year, Taiwan is likely to produce 1,000 missiles. Also, Taiwan will receive [400 Javelin missiles](#) from the US in 2023 (update info) and 2024. Apparently, 200 of the missiles will be delivered by the end of this year and the remaining 200 in 2024. Besides, Taiwan will [buy 460 engines for its M60A3 TTS tanks](#), costing it NT\$7.24 billion (\$238.92 million) from RENK America, which manufactures these tanks. This tank is "the most prevalent" in Taiwan's army.

THE KOREAN PENINSULA

ROK Defence Diplomacy in March

On 7 March, the Republic of Korea's (ROK's) Defence Minister, Lee Jong-sup and his Saudi Arabian counterpart Khalid bin Salman Al Saud, met at Seoul. This was the first visit of a Saudi defence minister to the Korean Ministry of Defence. [In the meeting the two sides](#) agreed to institute a

regular ministerial-level dialogue on arms industry cooperation. The bilateral relations between the ROK and Saudi Arabia have been in the limelight since November 2022, following Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to South Korea and discussions on ROK and Saudi cooperation. Reportedly, during the [defence ministers' meet](#) Saudi Arabia expressed its intention to buy South Korea's *Cheongung II* mid-range surface-to-air missile system. It is noteworthy, that during IDEX 2023, a defence exhibition in the UAE held in February, discussions with Saudi Arabia about the sale of *Cheongung II* missiles were already underway. [On 16 January 2022, ROK and UAE](#) signed a contract valued at about \$3.5 billion, for the *Cheongung II* missile systems.

North Korea's Missile tests

North Korea [conducted 18 missile tests](#) in the month of March. The first six tests were organised on 9 March, when Pyongyang fired six Short-Range Ballistic Missiles (SRBMs) off the west coast of North Korea. The second round of tests were conducted in 12 March apparently to protest the US-South Korea military drills in 13 March. During these tests North Korea launched two cruise missiles from the submarine in the East Sea to display the country's amphibious launch capabilities. Two days later, on 14 March, North Korea again fired two SRBMs and subsequently fired the indigenously developed Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) *Hwasong-17*. The other tests also followed in a short span of time, reportedly between 19-26 March. According to the State news media, these tests were aimed to convey North Korea's combat preparedness to the 'enemy'.