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Grasp the pattern, read the trend

Asia in Review

(2/2/2018)

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Dear Reader,

With many thanks for the kind and stimulating feedback on the last Asia in Review I am glad to invite you to the present issue for which we would be glad to receive your opinion as well.

While ASEAN shows some current signs of cohesion that, however, should not be overestimated, politics in two South Asian countries at the increasingly important edges of the overlapping Indian – Chinese spheres of influence are currently experiencing a serious deterioration of their anyway volatile domestic conditions.

In both countries the scenario is prone to bloodshed and extended repression, having started in Bangladesh already after the sentencing of former Prime Minister and leader of the extra-parliamentary opposition Khaleda Zia who is said to have sympathized in the past with Pakistan and anti-Indian insurgents and currently partners up with far-right Islamic fundamentalist. In the Maldives, after the President declared the state of emergency and sentenced two Supreme Court judges stopping short before a 'self-coup', the situation is volatile as well, additionally fueled due to the impending great power involvement after the opposition called for a military intervention by India and the government is seeking support for its position from China, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Nothing highlights the regional change in the Indo-Pacific more in this context than the contrast of the current heavy Chinese presence on the Island state and the fact that the rising power had not even have an embassy in Male until 2011.

Arguably, the greatest dangers of escalation have a

good chance to be avoided for the meantime in both countries. This, however, does not affect the overall assessment of an increasingly fluid and strategically important greater Indo-Pacific region with an increasing number of areas with different potentials to cause serious friction. Notably, the assumption of a number of sustaining trends that are taking shape with probably profound consequences at the moment also entails the expectation of dialectical process, opposing developments, moments stabilizing the status quo ante and temporary resistance against the trend.

This is leading back to domestic politics in Asia which are currently much under the sign of coming elections which are to be hold in quite a number of countries either this or next year in Asia. At the same time, the constitutional politics – and electoral prospects - in a growing number of countries seem either to be characterized by strong leaders emphasizing national security and conservative values with more or less reservation towards Western governance discourse or highly divisive politics, repressive attempts to preserve power on the side of the respective regimes and challenging contenders who are often all but the 'good guys' just because they are in opposition. Characteristically displayed this week again, are the strategic employment of judicial politics and anti-corruption campaigns such as in Bangladesh as well as the limits of anti-corruption efforts where they touch on vested interests as shown in South Korea.

With this, I wish you a good read and a great week with greetings from the AiR team!

Henning Glaser
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P.S. Don't forget to check out our website and Facebook page for upcoming events and the latest information about CPG and its partners!

Main Sections

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Law and Politics in East Asia

China: Advancing surveillance

(dql) In the latest development of China's attempt to establish a nationwide digital surveillance system, police officers in the central city of Zhengzhou are using high-tech sunglasses equipped with facial recognition technology to identify criminal suspects in the city's train station. The glasses carry a camera enabling officers to take police photographs of suspicious persons and refer those pictures to a database back at police headquarters. Critics have voice concern over the potential for abuse of the technology. [BBC News]

Meanwhile, France-based international organization Reporters Without Borders has warned journalists and bloggers using Apple's iCloud China that the security of their data and sources might be endangered from 28 February on when operation of iCloud services in China will be shifted from Apple to Cloud Big Data Industrial Development Co., Ltd., an enterprise closely linked to Guizhou provincial government. Critizing Apple for bowing to the Chinese government, Reporters without Borders urged journalists to change their geographic region or to close their accounts. [Hong Kong Free Press]

Against the background of a rapidly developing digital surveillance system in China, Anna Mitchell and Larry Diamond forecast the possible establishment of an all-pervasive algorithmic surveillance system in the form of the social credit score system in a few years whose scope of data collected will very wide including not only online consumption and purchasing information and political posts online, but also the behavior of family relatives and friends. [The Atlantic]

China: Best implementer of Catholic social doctrine?

(dql) According to Bishop Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo, chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, China is worldwide the leading country in implementing the Catholic social doctrine. Praising in an interview with Vatican Insider China for its defense of human dignity and moral leadership in the fight against climate change, the bishop criticized the USA for allowing the economy to dominate politics and liberal thought for its liquidation of the common good. [National Catholic Register] These statements follow last's week breakthrough in yearlong secret negotiations between the Holy See and China about the resumption of diplomatic relations, almost 70 years after their cut off following the communist takeover in China in 1949. [AiR 1/2/2018]

Japan: Prime Minister uncompromising in push for Art. 9 revision amid negative polls

(dql) Despite latest polls revealing a majority of the Japanese population opposed to change of Art. 9 of the Constitution under Abe, the Prime Minister, speaking before the Lower House Budget Committee this week, presented himself uncompromising in his goal to revise the disputed article which prohibits Japan's maintenance of armed forces or resort to war as an instrument to solve inter-state disputes. Abe insisted that his proposed insertion of an explicit reference to the Self Defense Force (SDF) in Art. 9 would not alter the post-war pacifist identity of the country and would not expand the Japan's rights to collective self-defense further than already allowed under the country's security legislation of 2016. [The Japan Times]

In a related development, all lawmakers of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party have been ordered by the chairman of the party's headquarters to present writing proposals for a revision of Art. 9 within 10 days and urged to keep in mind the proposal's chances for acceptance by the public. [The Asahi Shimbun]

Japan: High court rules Lower House election held in 'unconstitutional state'

(dql) Nagoya High Court on Wednesday ruled that due to a value disparity between a vote in the most and a vote in the least populous constituencies the 2017 Lower House election was conducted in a "state of unconstitutionality". The court's decision refers to all 24 constituencies in the three prefectures in the Tokai region. The court, however, refrained from nullifying the poll results. It was the tenth ruling out of 14 lawsuits filed by a group of lawyers demanding the nullification of the election due vote-value disparity. All previous nine court decisions ruled upheld the constitutionality of the poll. [The Asahi Shimbun]

South Korea: Release of Samsung's de-facto leader Lee Jae-yong a setback for the rule of law?

(dql) Reversing a lower court judgment of last year, an appellate court on Monday handed Samsung Electronics Vice Chairman and de-factor leader Lee Jae-yong a suspended sentence of two and a half years imprisonment. Lee had been sentenced to five years in jail on grounds of giving 8.1 Mio. US Dollar to former and detained President Park and her confidante, Choi Soon-sil, in return for the government's support of a merger of two key Samsung units, a move considered by the prosecution instrumental for Lee's leadership succession. In its decision the appellate court dismissed the accusation of Lee soliciting Parks' favor in the leadership succession and found him only guilty of funding Choi's daughter equestrian training in compliance with a request of Park. [Yonhap]

The court decision in this trial, which has been seen as a litmus test of the robustness of the rule of law vis-à-vis the power on the large business conglomerates in South Korea, has sparked fierce criticism of both government and opposition for its leniency towards the country's business elite and raised fears of a setback for the rule of law in the country. [Financial Times]

South Korea: New political party founded

(dql) On Tuesday lawmakers, who defected the opposition People's Party over its leadership's decision to merge with the conservative Bareun Party, founded the new Party for Democracy and Peace. With its 15 members in the National Assembly, the new party represents the fourth-largest parliamentary group

following the ruling Democratic Party of Korea with 121, the Liberty Korea Party with 117 and the People's Party with now 24 seats, and ahead of the Democracy and Peace Party with 14 and the Bareun Party with 9 seats. [Korea Herald]

Law and Politics in South Asia

India likely to regain title of "fastest growing large economy" this year

(jk) Based on economic projections, and if the international environment remains supportive, India is set to grow faster this year than China. The country, which over time will also turn into the most populous country in the world is projected to grow between 7 or 8 percent which will be good news for PM Modi. Relatively strong growth projections aside, India remains a poor country with a GDP per capita rate of roughly one-eighth of the US and significant room for institutional and policy improvement. [Financial Times]

Pakistan: Thousands of young Pashtuns from the FATA areas protest in Islamabad against mistreatment

(jl) People from Pakistan's northwest "Federally Administered Tribal Areas" have experienced the killing or displacement of thousands of civilians since 9/11 when especially Al-Qaeda hid in this region. In addition, they suffered from ethnic stereotyping, mistreatment and other coercive measures by the military through the last decades. However, it was the recent killing of an Pashtun social media star in Karachi on January 3 by

police forces claiming they had targeted Taliban insurgents [The New York Times 1] that led to an unprecedented but peaceful sit-in protest of thousands of young Pashtuns lask week in Islamabad demanding an improvement of the situation [The Diplomat] [The New York Times 2].

Pakistan: Less than one percent of the 210 million population pay direct taxes

(jk) After last week's AiR piece on the challenges of fiscal governance in India [AiR], it is also worthwhile to look at Pakistan where less than one percent of the entire population pay direct taxes. In the past, attempts to change the system have been met by protests, demonstrations and strikes by businesses and policies to broaden the tax base have shown little success. Now, it has been announced that the country's identity registration database will be used to create a taxpayer profile for every (registered) citizen in order to increase the tax-to-GDP ratio, which is currently only at a very low 12%. [Business Standard]

Pakistan: Death penalty in murder case of student accused of blasphemy

(jk) Blasphemy in Pakistan is a highly sensitive issue and whilst the penal code allows for the death penalty in these cases, no one in Pakistan has ever been killed under blasphemy laws. The mere allegation of blasphemy however, has more than once let to lynch mobs taking matters into their own hands and hunting down the accused. Needless to say, the possibility to abuse the high sensitivities for personal gains and getting the better of personal rivals is high.

A recent case, where a student was accused of blasphemy appeared to be just one of these cases. [The Guardian] After the accusation had been made (and to this date no evidence has been found supporting it), a lynch mob came after the 23-year-old university student and attacked him with fatal consequences. The attack, which was filmed and later circulated online, sparked outrage across the country resulting in demonstrations and calls for justice for its particularly revolting violence. A Pakistani court has sentenced one member of the mob to death and a further five to life in prison. [Radio Free Europe]

Bangladesh: Violence over imprisonment of opposition leader Zia

A court has sentenced opposition leader Khaleda Zia from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to five years in jail for embezzlement of money meant for an orphanage. At news of the ruling BNP supporters clashed with police and supporters of the ruling Awami League outside the court and in cities across the country. In the capital Dhaka more than 5000 police had been deployed. Zia slammed the charges against her as politically motivated aimed at preventing her from standing the general election in December against her arch-enemy Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina with whom she has been fiercely rivaling for political dominance in Bangladesh for the past three decades. [The Guardian]

Meanhwile, Bangladesh President Abdul Hamid was confirmed as President for a second term by the election commission after no other candidates were nominated to run in an election. The ruling Awami League, who holds an absolute majority in parliament, had submitted Hamid as candidate. Since the adoption of the system of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh in 1991, the presidency is largely a ceremonial office. [The Nation PK]

Sri Lankan politics and the competing Indo-Chinese influences

(hg) Despite heavy Chinese investment Sri Lanka is currently ruled by a pro-Indian coalition government that is just about to face a litmus test of its policies in the first local elections since it has been elected in 2015. In case that former pro – China leader Mahinda Rajapaksa and his Sri Lanka People´s Front (SLPF) would win the elections, Chinese stakes would gain a significant boost. Rajapaksa`s SLPF has realistic chances to win the elections over President Maithripala Sirisena's Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP). [Nikkei Asian Review]

The local elections seem meanwhile to turn out to become the most peaceful ever recorded. [Xinhua]

In context of the elections, a former Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka to the United Nations has just given a speech to mobilize support for a strong Sri Lankan engagement with the Chinese OBOR plan and a corresponding SLPF government

which is interesting due the actual contours and the arguments regularly fielded in favor of the OBOR plan. Outlining a map for an “own development path”, he envisions an “investment bonanza that [...] could revive the glory days of the ancient Silk Route” with its expected financial backing of stunning USD 4-8 trillion vis-à-vis the USD140 billion provided under the U.S. Marshall plan, at 2017dollar values, an investment that could be reinforced by the recent recognition of the Yuan as a reserve currency by the IMF easing China´s move to do international payments in Yuan.

The former diplomat also stresses the Chinese investments in Europe giving examples such as the Toulouse Blagnac airport, Volvo, the AC Milan football club, Piraeus harbour which is owned to 70% by COSCO, or the leading, formerly German robot manufacturer Kuka, the rail link between Piraeus Harbour and Serbia and Hungary.Pointing also at the current U.S. defense strategy with its hostile view on China, he claims that the OBOR concept would raise “concerns, especially among the former colonial powers who ruthlessly ravaged Africa and Asia when they had the opportunity” while it “can be used by countries of the Indian Ocean region and beyond to enhance their mutual prosperity without being constrained by the fears and suspicions inculcated by the colonial past [...] without territorial occupation, racial discrimination and forced alteration of cultures.” Read extensive excerpts of the speech under [InDepthNews].

Meanwhile, the American Center in Colombo which is being operated by the US government has been closed indefinitely until further notice. Reasons for the closure are not reported. [Daily Mirror]

Nepal: Religious freedom in the 2015 constitution falls short of international human rights standards

(jk) Nepal adopted a new constitution in late 2015, after a fairly open and widely held debate on its merits and discontents, it stated that it would uphold internationally accepted (western) human rights standards and that it grands basic human rights to all its citizens. A case in point was the decision to include LGBT protections into the charter. The level of protection of religious freedom in Nepal has come under some scrutiny however, as parts of section 26 of the charter are very vaguely worded and could be used and abused as seen fit by the powers that be. Human rights advocates have particular problems with the

issue of religious conversion and the way it is dealt with in both the constitution but also the criminal code, which has seen some controversial amendments to strengthen the constitutional provisions. [Forbes]

Maldives: A domestic crisis with regional implications

(jk) Since its inception last year, AiR's South Asia section has repeatedly reported on smaller countries like Sri Lanka or the Maldives, reflecting the increasing importance of these geo-strategically important positioned nations. The ongoing power play between China, India and the US, has repeatedly drawn these nations into the news spotlight. Major developments in the Maldives, as AiR has reported, were the FTA signed with China along with some other bilateral deals signed in the context of the Belt and Road initiative last year. [China FTA Network] Domestic politics however, have also increased in its global importance as they are largely seen as proxy conflicts between the great powers, and who supports who in the domestic context has obvious connections to the international scale.

In this regard, the current political crisis in Nepal is more than an internal struggle for power. Last week, the Supreme Court had ruled to release nine prisoners who are all former opposition politicians, based on the judgement that the trials against them were politically motivated. In response to the ruling, current President Abdulla Yameen called to ignore the decision of the court and alleged that some judges were planning a coup against him. In order to revoke the decision, he then declared a state-of-emergency and had the court building stormed and the chief justice as well as another judge arrested. Following the arrest, the remaining three supreme court justices revoked the earlier decision to free the prisoners "in light of the concerns raised by the president". [Times of India]

In a reaction to the developments, former and now exiled President Mohamed Nasheed has called on the US and India to (forcefully) intervene in the crisis and free the prisoners. He also would like to see the current president to be removed from power. [BBC]

As alluded to above, the domestic political crisis takes place against the background of a greater, regional power play. Before his ouster in 2015, President Nasheed followed a course directing the country much closer to its northern neighbour India, with limited Chinese influence. As epitomised in the FTA

negotiations, President Yameen has no issues with engaging with China as they seek to increase their influence in the region, much to the dismay of opposition figures in the Maldives, but obviously also to India which is not willing to make room for Chinese influence in its backyard. Whether or not India will follow Naheed's call and intervene will have at least as much to do with countering China as with their desire to solve a domestic political crisis so close to home.

Law and Politics in Southeast Asia

Indonesian anti-gay legislation faces criticism

(ls) As AiR reported in recent weeks, Indonesian lawmakers are pondering legislation outlawing extramarital sex – a move seen as targeting LGBT people in particular as they cannot legally marry in Indonesia. Now, some parliamentarians call for caution. "We don't want to have the criminalization of LGBT," one of them said. Legislators may now opt to make sex outside marriage a crime only if one of the two consenting parties makes a formal complaint to police, similar to cases of adultery. [South China Morning Post]

Malaysia: Mahatir would be Prime Minister for two years at most

(ls) Former Malaysian prime minister and now opposition leader Mahathir Mohamad says he will be Prime Minister for two years at most should Pakatan

Harapan, an alliance of Parti Keadilan Rakyat, Mahathir's pro-Malay Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, the Chinese-centric Democratic Action Party and moderate Islamic party Parti Amanah Negara win the 14th general election. As AiR reported earlier this year, if Mahatir becomes prime minister, he intends to eventually hand over the role to his former deputy and jailed opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim. However, the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) is still very deeply entrenched throughout the federation, making Mahatir's victory unlikely. [Straits Times]

Philippines: Drug war resumes as rule-of-law ranking plunges

(ls) Nearly 50 people suspected of using and selling drugs were killed by officers in the past two months, the Philippine National Police said last week, contradicting earlier pronouncements that the government's war on drugs would become less deadly. Last year, President Rodrigo Duterte temporarily placed the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency in charge, but later handed the responsibility back to the police. The government says fewer than 4,000 suspects have been killed in Duterte's war on drugs, but Human Rights Watch estimates the figure at more than 12,000. [New York Times]

In the 2018 Rule of Law Index published by the World Justice Project, the Philippines experienced the biggest drop in the rule-of-law ranking of all countries worldwide over the last 12 months. The index calculates weighted scores across eight categories, among them corruption, constraints on the government, fundamental rights, and open government. [Asian Correspondent]

Singapore's mystifying political succession

(ls) Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has said he would step down by the age of 70, which is now four years away. Three fourth-generation ("4G") leaders are said to be on the shortlist to take over: Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat, 56, and two 48-year-olds, Chan Chun Sing and Ong Ye Kung. In the New Mandala, Cherian George writes that the uncertainty is testing people's faith in a political brand associated with surprise-free long-term planning. In his article, he analyzes in particular how the People's Action Party has sidelined Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam. [New Mandala]

Thailand: Military government under continued public pressure

(ls) The scandal over luxury watches and undeclared assets of Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Prawit Wongsuwan continues to draw widespread public attention. The National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) placed Prawit under investigation. He himself said that he borrowed the watches from friends, but would resign if that was the public's wish. [South China Morning Post] However, on Monday, a spokesperson said that he does not plan to resign and is determined to continue working in the interests of national security and public safety. [Bangkok Post] Adding to the public outcry, an online petition demanding Prawit to step down appeared having been manipulated in favor of Prawit by members of the Thai military. [The Nation 1]

On the weekend, students from Chulalongkorn University and Thammasat University satirized Thai politics under the junta government before the traditional Chula-Thammasat football game. Political satire and papier-mache puppets addressed the "Watchman" scandal, mocked Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha and attacked the junta regime's authoritarian rule. [The Nation 2]

Meanwhile, the general election, already delayed various times, may be delayed another time if a Constitutional Court ruling is sought on whether proposed revisions to two organic laws are constitutional. Deputy Prime Minister Wissanu Krea-ngam said the current road map to democracy did not take into account time for such "legal detours". [The Nation 3]

Thailand: Abused workers sued for defamation

(ls) A Bangkok court began a defamation trial on Wednesday against 14 Myanmar migrant workers who accused a Thai chicken farm of labor abuse. The poultry farm charged the workers with criminal defamation after they filed a complaint with the National Human Rights Commission in 2016 alleging they had been overworked and underpaid. [Straits Times]

Timor-Leste: An example of a well-functioning democracy in Southeast Asia?

(ls) With Vietnam and Laos remaining one-party communist states, Cambodia dismantling the opposition, Thailand being under military rule and Myanmar under military control, the Philippines exposed to President Duterte's attempts to undermine democracy, and Singapore and Malaysia never having been tested by a change of political parties in government, Luke Hunt argues in the Diplomat that Timor-Leste displays a remarkable resilience to maintain its democratic system. After last month's dissolution of parliament and new elections called, he holds it likely that elections will take place in an orderly manner, showing the small country's early democratic maturity. [The Diplomat]

Vietnam: Corrupt oil executive gets second life sentence, environmentalist blogger gets 14 years

(ek/ls) The Vietnamese oil executive Trinh Xuan Thanh got his second life sentence for corruption, in particular for embezzling $ 622,000 from a property project developed by a unit of state-owned Petro Vietnam. Embezzlement carries a maximum sentence of death in Vietnam. Thanh was allegedly kidnapped in Germany by Vietnamese agents in Berlin last year. Hanoi denies the accusation and said Than returned to Vietnam voluntarily. [Deutsche Welle]

In a separate development, a court in central Vietnam sentenced an activist to 14 years in jail on Tuesday for live-streaming fishermen marching to file a lawsuit against a Taiwan-owned steel plant's spill of toxins into the ocean. He was convicted of abusing democratic freedoms to infringe on the interests of the state, organization and people and opposing officers on duty. The toxic spill, which was one of the country's worst environmental disasters, killed massive amounts of fish and other sea life along more than 200km of coastline. The company has paid US$500 million in compensation. [South China Morning Post]

The AICHR: A toothless tiger?

(ls) In an article for the Jakarta Post, Yuyun Wahyuningrum argues that the ASEAN

Intergovernmental Commission of Human Rights (AICHR), which was established in 2009 to promote and protect fundamental freedoms, remains paralyzed. Citing AICHR's silence on the Rohingya genocide, she holds that it remains bound by its guidelines to be "non-confrontational" and refrain from interference in the affairs of member states, in line with ASEAN's eternal doctrine. In particular, she argues that member states often assign conservative officials or individuals with no expertise on human rights to effectively hamper progress of the AICHR by reducing its activities and minimizing the quality of its work. [Jakarta Post]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

China: Plans for military build-up in the Indian Ocean revealed

(dql) Following successful test of its ground-based mid-course defence system on Monday [Reuters], Chinese military experts on Thursday announced China's plans to develop sea-based anti-missile systems to be deployed in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean. [South China Morning Post]

China's relations with regional political entities: ASEAN and African Union

(ls/dql) A gathering of ASEAN foreign ministers in Singapore ended on Tuesday. They agreed on the importance of non-militarization and self-restraint in

activities in the South China Sea to avoid raising tensions in the disputed waters. Francis Chan opines that this is a promising sign of unity as ASEAN begins negotiations with China next month on a code of conduct to manage tensions. [Straits Times 1]

In a parallel meeting, ASEAN defense ministers discussed ways to improve cooperation between China and ASEAN, and said they would conduct an inaugural ASEAN-China maritime exercise at the end of the year. Besides, the defense ministers agreed to enhance counter-terrorism cooperation, identifying terrorism as the region's most serious security threat. [Straits Times 2]

At the same time, recent surveillance photos show that China is nearly done building air and naval facilities on seven islands it claims in the South China Sea. The photos show that the runways for the three biggest islands – Fiery Cross, Subi and Mischief – have been completed or are ready for use. Lighthouses, radar domes, hangars and multi-storey buildings have been built on them, while helipads, wind turbines and observation and communication towers can be seen on four smaller islands – Burgos, Calderon, McKennan and Johnson South. [Straits Times 3]

The Philippines, for their part, have disallowed groups from China and other countries to undertake scientific research in disputed waters. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte issued the respective order in a Cabinet meeting late Monday after doubts were raised over the country's sovereign rights in the offshore region called Benham Rise, which the government has renamed Philippine Rise. About 30 research permits are revoked. [South China Morning Post]

Meanwhile, at the seventh China-African Union strategic dialogue in Beijing this week, African Union (AU) Chairman Moussa Faki Mahamat and China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi jointly confirmed to deepen cooperation between both sides, with Wang stating China's readiness to become AU most reliable strategic partner. Cooperation between China and Africa has grown significantly in the last two decades, with the latest boost in 2015 when President Xi Jinping pledged investment in Africa worth 60 billion USD under the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). [The Diplomat] [Brookings]

China-US relations: Agreement to pressure Pyongyang and overhaul trade relations amid adversarial rhetoric

(dql) US Secretary of State Tillerson and China's top foreign policy advisor Yang Jiechi met this week in Washington for a lunch talk revolving around North Korea and US-Chinese trade relations. Both sides agreed on maintaining pressure on Pyongyang's nuclear program and the need for further discussions on the promotion fair and reciprocal economic relations between the two countries. [The Japan Times]

The two-day visit of Yang followed Tillerson's statement on China as new imperial power in Latin America during his Latin America trip last week [Foreign Policy] and the announcement of imminent punitive trade actions against China by Deputy US Trade Representative Wendy Cutler a day before Yang's arrival in Washington. [South China Morning Post]

Meanwhile, China announced on Wednesday that its new fleet of advanced, Russia-built Sukhoi Su-35 jets have carried out a joint combat patrol over the South China Sea and called the move a reaction to a provocation of the USA referring to US destroyer USS Hopper shipping within 12 nautical miles of Huangyan Island, also known as Scarborough Shoal, claimed by both China and the Philippines. [Sputnik News]

China-Japan relations: Defense education exchanges to be resumed amid signs of thaw in Sino-Japanese ties

(dql) After a break of six years following Tokyo's the acquisition of some of the Senkaku Islands from a private Japanese owner in 2012, a Sino-Japanese military educational exchange program will resume in spring this year. Chinese senior military officers and the Chairman of Japan's Sasakawa Peace Foundation, which is in charge of this program, agreed on Monday on the resumption this program for the next five years. This move comes after signs of thaw in the relations between Beijing and Tokyo most recently expressed during Japan's Foreign Minister's visit to China and the agreement on reciprocal visits of the leaders on China, Japan and South Korea. [NHK]

Pence in Japan: Abe reassured of US robust alliance against North Korea

(dql) During a stop in Tokyo on his way to attend opening ceremony of Olympics in South Korea Vice-

President Pence and Prime Minister Abe US Vice-President reaffirmed they joint stance in adhering to a policy of put utmost pressure on Pyongyang's denuclearization. Pence expressed the US commitment to equip Japan with cutting edge defense systems. [The Japan Times]

Japan-Russia relations: Joint economic activities on disputed islands precursor for a peace treaty?

(dql) On Tuesday senior Japanese and Russian diplomats agreed to advance talks on planned joint economic activities on the four islands off Hokkaido over which both countries have been claiming sovereignty since the end of World War II. Both sides view the joint economic activities as possible steps on the way to a peace treaty. [The Japan Times] Following the talks, Prime Minister Abe on Wednesday announced his resolve to put an end to the territorial dispute and conclude a peace treaty with Russia. [TASS]

India: Military Capabilities continue to grow

(jk) As we have reported in more detail a couple of weeks ago [AiR and News18], India is continuing to increase its military prowess in order to become a very large and very well-equipped military force. India has last year again emerged as the world's largest arms-importer [The Tribune], but India also seeks to build on indigenously built weapons. In this regard, the recent successful testing of the Agni-I missile, a short-range ballistic missile capable of delivering a nuclear war head, is significant as this is another rocket successfully developed and integrated in India [NDTV]. At the sidelines of the recent Singapore airshow, India has also revived talks with one of Israel's major defence corporations about the purchase of guided anti-tank missiles. Rather than just purchasing the product though, there is a particular interested in technology transfer industrial cooperation. [CNBC]

Pakistan: US-Aid cut not final

(jk) After souring relations between the US and Pakistan and the cutting of almost all US financial aid

to the country by President Trump in January, the relations may improve again soon. Trump's reasoning for withholding the money was based on his belief that Pakistan is not doing enough in the fight against terrorism, and are in fact harbouring terrorists. Now, Pakistan's interior minister has called for direct talks between the governments to end the increasing mistrust between the two countries and also reiterated his country's importance in the fight against terrorism. [Washington Times]

A senior US State Department official in the meantime has stated that the US has shared their South Asia strategy with Pakistan and if progress is made and Pakistan addresses some of the US concerns, the financial aid could be un-freezed. [Defense News]

At this stage, it is more likely that a modus operandi will be found rather than extending the aid cut to non-military aid, which would be a further step in the other direction the US could take.

Bangladesh: A soon-to-be very valuable US ally?

Bangladesh is an often under-exposed country in international politics, but, as this brief piece explores, has a lot to offer as future ally to the Unites States. President Trump's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy could provide opportunities for Bangladesh-US cooperation on issues ranging from counter terrorism to rising Chinese influence in the region. [National Interest]

Thai - U.S. ties consolidated again

(hg) Two events last week offered valuable insights in the current state of U.S. – Thai relations against the backdrop of the upcoming massive military Cobra Gold exercise: the celebration of 200 years American – Thai friendship and the visit of the highests - ranking US general, the USMC general Joe Dunford, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chief of Staff.

After another delay of the first elections since the 2014 Coup election is looming, both the Prime Minister and U.S. ambassador Davies found clear words in their mutual attempt to serve democratic rhetoric while acknowledging the strategic priorities of each side. Despite considerable domestic criticism and with obligatory and polite reminders of democratic

compliance, Davies core message was that “our relationship and priority will be balanced on strategic interests [...] and on our principles that will continue under any administration”, meaning also in the absence of democracy in a Western sense. [The Nation]

At the same time, the U.S. Department of Defense quotes General Dunford on his´ visit of the Thai Prime Minister and the most important representatives of the Thai military including Dep. Prime Minister and Minister of Defense General Prawit Wongsuwan, that it is about to “foster strong military-to-military relationships” and, to also “establish a personal relationship”. With an ally like Thailand, the general is quoted that this is “to be prepared to fight together should that be required.” [US Department of Defense 1]

On the meeting between General Dunford and General Prawit, who is currently under investigation by the National Corruption Commission, the Thai government stated that the generals discussed the security in the Asia Pacific.
Noteworthy, against the background of the domestically sharpening election debate, the U.S. general remarked regarding his talks with the Thai government that he was “very encouraged by the Thai leadership's commitment to return to a democratic government.” [US Department of Defense 2]

The common message of these statements reinforces those of the way the Cobra Gold exercise is executed this year, smoothly and determined. [Bangkok Post 1]

Plain and simple, the U.S. wants to keep Thailand as a key ally in a key region in a transformative period. If there was another sign needed, the remarks signal the final conclusion of a long and initially moderately painful change of the discursive parameter to eventually acknowledge the 2014 coup at least de facto as a fait accompli but also to increasingly relate the encouragement to hold elections to the domestic realities from the perspective of the regime. This is, after all, in line with the adjustment of other Western states and consistent with similar policies of leading Western powers towards countries with a significantly worse governance record on the one hand and the fact that Western ideas of democratic governance are at best only resembled in the region on the other, - and this even only by very, very few countries. At the same time, democracy and human rights are still an important diplomatic currency coined by the West, albeit one which is facing domestic devaluation and a competition with powerfully emerging new ‘currencies’ leading to a continuous shrinking of the old´s potential

to second power projection if necessary. In the words of Prime Minister, General Prayuth, on the cordial encounter with the U.S. ambassador: “He didn’t ask or worry about Thai elections, […] he just encouraged us on our democratic path.” Cunningly quoting President Trump – who he referred to with the informal Thai phrase indicating a familiar relation to a senior one – General Prayuth said: “P’ President declared, ‘America first!’ So for me, I have to declare, ‘Thailand first!’ I have to take care of my people and our country’s interests.” [Khaosod English]

More importantly, not only the national interest seems to be common ground now in the bilateral exchange on elections, but the Prime Minister also took the initiative to ideologically beef up the always more or less subtle insistence that democracy is a term with various meanings and that the Thai one is essentially different than those of the West. Now, General Prayuth has announced to launch a nation - wide campaign to promote ‘Thainess’, Thai Niyom, to foster the way forward to a “true democracy”for the people. [Bangkok Post 2]

Cobra Gold 2018: Will Myanmar attend as Rohingya mass graves are being found?

(ls) Members of the U.S. Congress are demanding Myanmar’s exclusion from the Cobra Gold military exercises next week, amidst pressure for more American sanctions in response to atrocities against Rohingya Muslims. Cobra Gold is America’s largest, annual multi-nation drills in the Asia-Pacific. The Trump administration has already imposed sanctions on the chief of Myanmar’s western military command and says it’s considering blacklisting others. It maintains restrictions on visas and assistance to Myanmar’s military. [Bangkok Post]Meanwhile, evidence of a number of previously unreported mass graves around Rakhine state has been emerging, the area where most Rohingya resided before the current wave of persecution began. The U.N. special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burma as well as humanitarian nongovernmental organizations have been barred from the territory. [Washington Post]

Counter-Terrorism in Southeast Asia: The Philippines and Singapore

(ls/ek) The Philippines have vowed to crush the ‘weakened’ Abu Sayyaf terror group in the south of the

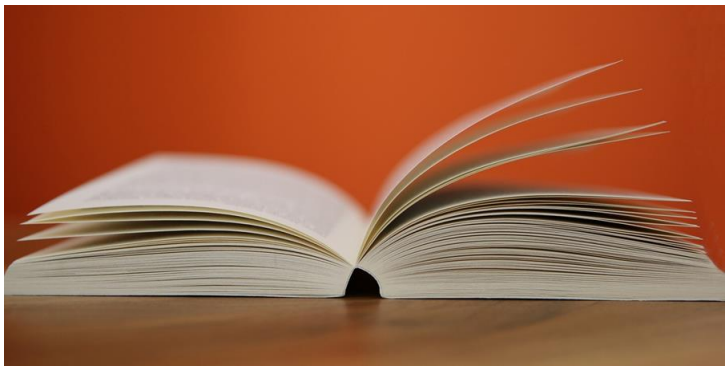
country. Military operations will continue against the Islamic State-inspired militants, officials said Monday, claiming the enemy's strength has been weakened with over 350 members killed since last year. In May 2017, Abu Sayyaf and other Islamist groups attacked Marawi City in a bid to establish an Islamic province there. The five-month war displaced more than 350,000 civilians and killed some 1,100 individuals. [Asian Correspondent 1]

In a 10-5 decision, the Philippine Supreme Court on Tuesday approved a one-year extension of President Rodrigo Duterte's martial law decree covering Mindanao, home to a population of 20 million people. Opponents argued that extended martial law violated a constitutional provision limiting the initial period to 60 days. However, the Supreme Court said the constitution was "silent" on how many times Congress may extend martial law. Martial law is a sensitive issue in the Philippines, after dictator Ferdinand Marcos used military rule to hold on to power a generation ago. [Straits Times 1]

Meanwhile, the largest Moro rebel group in Mindanao has called on legislators to approve a law creating an autonomous area, the new Bangsamoro region, to prevent violent further Islamic extremism. A senator from Mindanao who chairs the Senate subcommittee on the issue said they are hoping to approve the measure before Congress goes on break by the end of March. President Rodrigo Duterte urged the bill to be passed, which he said seeks to address the historical injustices committed against the Moro people. [Asian Correspondent 2]

Meanwhile, Singapore will boost its security spending to tackle terror threats in 2018. Terror and defense have always been important issues for Singapore's government. In the last few years, Singapore spent a up to 30 percent of the state budget on defense. About 65,000 public cameras have been installed throughout the city state. The police also trained specialist teams, who would be the first to respond in the event of attacks. [Straits Times 2]

Background Reading



Is liberal democracy a threat to itself?

(ls) In the light of current global anti-democratic trends, Sheri Berman examines whether there is any merit to Fareed Zakaria's twenty-years-old but still influential claim that democracy itself is to blame for its own decline. She argues that, while concerns about illiberalism, populism, and majoritarianism were certainly well-founded, blaming such phenomena on an "excess" of democracy was not. She holds that such arguments rest on a fundamental misunderstanding of how liberal democracy has historically developed and how liberalism and democracy actually interact. [Dissent]

Who Killed More: Hitler, Stalin, or Mao?

An illuminating piece by Ian Johnson on Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward 1958-1962 which explains how Mao's plan to catch up with the Soviet Union's launch of the Sputnik satellite and regain the no. 1 position within the communist world would end up in the worst famine in history with more than 40 million deaths. [The New York Review of Books]

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