German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence
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Grasp the pattern, read the trend

Asia in Review

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to CPG´s fourth *Asia in Review* (AiR) issue in February providing an update on the latest developments in law, politics and regional order across Asia.

We wish you an enjoyable read and great start of the week!

Very best regards,

Henning Glaser

Director, German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance (CPG)

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!

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Law and Politics in East Asia

China: Securitization in Xinjang and Tibet on the way to perfection?

(dql) The un-abating determination with which the Chinese government continues to push for security in Tibet and Xinjiang, massive staffing of police force and extensive use of state-of-the-art surveillance technology indicate that China is about to perfect securitization in both regions. Chen Quanguo, a Henan soldier-turned-politician who was Party Secretary in Tibet from 2011-2016 before assuming the same post in Xinjiang in 2016, plays a key role in implementing Beijing's securitization efforts, writes Adrian Zenz. [China Policy Institute: Analysis]

China: Worrying numbers of arrests in campaign against organized crime since launch in January

(dql) One month after the launch of the nationwide campaign against organized crime in January, first results have been delivered. According to CCP's People's Daily, at least six provinces have submitted reports revealing more than 1000 arrests and more than 9000 suspects rounded up across the country. Analysts called the campaign worrisome in the light of the high numbers and prosecution quotas set by some provinces. [South China Morning Post]

Meanwhile, in Transparency International's 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), released on

Wednesday, China is ranked 77 among 180 countries with a low CPI score 41 out of 100 (with 100 being "very clean" and 0 "very corrupt"), moving up two places since 2016 when China was ranked 79 with a score of 40. [Transparency International]

China: Economic portfolios to be under new rising star

(dql) Liu He, Xi Jinping's trusted chief economic advisor to the Chinese government since 2013 and member of the Politburo of the CCP elected at the Party Congress in October 2017, is likely to be promoted to become one of four vice premiers at the upcoming National People's Congress. According to analysts, Liu will rise to one of the country's most powerful vice-premiers in two decades, reigning over China's economic management. Continuing to head the Office of the Central Leading Group on Financial and Economic Affairs he will probably also become chairman of the Financial Stability and Development Commission, a new financial regulatory agency under the State Council established in November 2017 and superseding all financial regulators [South China Morning Post], and is also tipped to become the next governor of the People's Bank of China. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, Liu, a graduate of Harvard University's Kennedy School, is scheduled to meet President Trump's trade envoy Robert Lighthizer in Washington next for talk on trade disputes at a time where US-China trade relations are at critical juncture. [The Wall Street Journal]

Japan: Government concedes erroneous labor reform study

(dql) Government's push for a parliamentary approval of its labor reform plans have stagnated after the Labor Ministry conceded flaws in a study used to promote the planned reform bills on the expansion of the 'discretionary contract system' and acknowledge more than 100 abnormal figures related to overtime hours or other working conditions at 87 company offices or factories. Ministry Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for a second time this week apologized for the faulty study on Thursday during a speech at the Lower House Budget Committee. At the same time he indicated that he would not withdraw the bills, but still try to pass the bills within the current Diet session. The flaws in study have reinforced the opposition camp's calls for the

ruling parties to scrap the reform bills. [The Asahi Shimbun]

Japan: Investigation reveals sterilization of children

(dql) An investigation has brought to light sterilization of children under the Eugenic Protection Law, in force from 1948 to 1996. Acquired records show at least 13 prefectures documented the sterilization of children aged 15 and below due to mental disabilities and other reasons, with the youngest having been aged 9 at the time of the surgery. The release of the investigation findings comes at a time when two adult victims have sued the government and sought damages over their forced sterilization. [The Japan Times]

South Korea: Bumpy road to constitutional revision bill

(dql) In an attempt to speed up preparations for a parliamentary backed bill for constitutional revision to ensure its preferred schedule of national referendum in June, the ruling Democratic Party (DP) this week came up with a proposal for five-way talks between DP and opposition parties. However, the prospects for a swift joint bill are bleak as the opposition Liberty Korea Party (LKP), while agreeing on constitutional revision in general, disapproves of the schedule. A constitutional revision bill requires approval by two-thirds majority of the parliament. With 293 lawmakers in the parliament, DP with 121 seats needs the cooperation of LKP (116 seats). [Korea Herald]

South Korea: Ex-president Lee's asset manager arrested

(dql) Lee Young-bae, manager of former President Lee Myung-bak's assets under borrowed names, has been arrested as part of a probe into a corruption scandal surrounding auto parts maker DAS. Chief of a DAS subcontractor, Lee Young-bae is facing allegations of embezzling company money to accumulate 6.1 million USD in black funds. Prosecutors suspect money laundering money for the former president of whom the prosecution said that it is considering summoning him for questioning in early March. Lee Young-bae's arrest is the latest in a string of arrests related to

corruption cases in which the former president is allegedly involved. [Korea Herald]

Taiwan: Tsai's Taiwan-Straits related reshuffle amidst pressure from within the party

(dql) Amidst surveys revealing nearly 60 percent of respondents dissatisfied with the President's China policy and doubts about her stance towards China among sovereignty supporters within the ruling Democratic Progressive Party, President Tsai in Friday reshuffled her cabinet. David Lee has been replaced by Presidential Office Secretary-General Joseph Wu, former chief representative of Taiwan to the United States, as foreign minister. Lee himself will head the National Security Council (NSC), replacing Yen Teh-fa who was tipped to become defense minister. Also, Chen Ming-tung was appointed as head of the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), Taiwan's top agency in charge of China policy, replacing Chang Hsiao-yueh. Chen already held this office from 2007-2008.

Among the Cabinet members dubbed "blue" technocrats, Lee received harshest criticism from pan-green supporters suspecting him of delaying sovereignty issues, such as Taiwan's bids for participation in the United Nation and other international organizations. [Focus Taiwan]

Law and Politics in South Asia

Maldives: President extends state of emergency, court flips once again

(jk) In a continuation of the unfolding constitutional crisis in the Maldives, on which AiR has provided background and updates in the previous two issues, President Yameen has on Monday sought to extend the state of emergency by a month, which was approved of by parliament on Tuesday. However, with the opposition boycotting the vote, only 38 lawmakers were present. Opposing forces and observers believe that according to the constitution, 43 votes are needed as a minimum requirement for this to be lawful. This interpretation is doubted by the speaker of the parliament, and of course the president, who argue that a vote on a state of emergency does not fall under this general rule. [Maldives Independent]. Also, the state of emergency was extended despite a clear message from India's Ministry of External Affairs not to do so. [Times of India]

The President is emboldened by a new decision of the supreme court to reverse its initial February 1 decision to re-instate 12 opposition lawmakers. Now, the lawmakers are not to re-join parliament, giving Yameen a majority in the 85-member legislature. [SCMP]

Bangladesh: National Stock market shares sold to China, but India needn't worry and elections will go ahead as planned

(jk) The Bangladesh stock exchange decided in 2013 that it would sell a quarter of its stake to strategic foreign partners, looking for both financial input as well as technological and knowledge transfer from a potential partner. Two serious bidders for the stake were India's stock exchange as well as a consortium from China. With China making a financially more generous offer, the exchange now voted in favour of selling the consortium, but observers also see politics and China's overall growing influence at play. [Caixin]

At the same time, although unrelated to the sale, PM Hasina has assured visiting Indian journalists that India need not to worry about Chinese influence as her country only seeks aid for her country's development but will not favour China over India. Relations to India were indeed and remained "excellent" [The Hindu].

With regards to the story of now convicted former three-time prime minister and party leader of the

biggest opposition party Khaleda Zia, which AiR has covered previously, Zia has appealed the 5 year sentence, with her lawyers arguing that the case was politically motivated. [WP]

PM Hasnia in the meantime has reassured that the election which is to be held by the end of the year will go ahead as planned and that Zia's opposition party, the BNP, were free to boycott the election as they have done previously if they so wished [Arab News]. The BNP had brought up a potential boycott recently, sowing doubts of the election taking place as scheduled.

India: Massive bank fraud highlights problems in India's banking system

(jk) Last week, Punjab National Bank (PNB), the second-largest state-run bank in India, stated that it lost $1.77 billion in a scam running for over seven years. Nirav Modi, the accused and in no blood relation to India's PM, is reportedly on the run after the biggest bank fraud in the country's history. The government blamed auditors and poor management for the failure, but this is in fact not the only case and trust in India's banking system is eroding. [BBC, Bloomberg, Quintwww.thequint.com] India's state bank stock assets have fallen over 22% as a result with fear spreading more banks could be involved and that the problem is indeed systemic. [Business Standard]

Pakistan: Arrogance of power vs rule of law II

(jk) Following on from previous sections in AiR [AiR 1/2/12 and 2/2/18], power-competition among the branches of power in Pakistan continues with the chief justice stating that whilst parliament is supreme, the constitution stands above it and has to be recognised in the legislative progress [Dawn I]. The remarks are a rebuttal to the PM's comments in parliament this week, in which he severely criticised the judiciary for interference into the legislative process and making it difficult for the current administration to govern. He also complaint about justices' alleged derogatory comments and questions about political representatives [Dawn II], likely to be another response to the recent case of a senator who was banned from office for contempt of court as reported in [AiR 1/2/18].

Pakistan: Police nab prime accused in Musharraf suicide attack case

(dql) Lahore police on Friday announced the arrest of Salman Dar, a prime accused in a case pertaining to a suicide attack on former military dictator Pervez Musharraf in Rawalpindi. Salman Dar was part of the most wanted list on the Red Book and wanted for nine years. [Geo News]

Pakistan: Pakistan Supreme Court bans ex-PM Sharif as party head

(dql) The Supreme Court of Pakistan on Wednesday issued a ruling prohibiting former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from heading the country's ruling party. The court's decision follows the ruling last in which Sharif was "deemed unfit to hold public office" over corruption allegations and forced to step down. While supporters of Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz party called the judgment politically biased, analysts voiced concerns over the impact of the court's decision of the stability of country's political system. [Aljazeera]

Nepal: Historic Merger – The Communist Party of Nepal

(jk) Last week, Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli was sworn in as new prime minister after his communist alliance won a landslide victory in the country's first general election under a federal constitution. The alliance jointly commands 174 seats, almost a two-thirds majority in the 275-member lower house. Now, the alliance has announced a historic deal on a merger and plans to form The Communist Party of Nepal, based on Marxist-Leninist ideology. Whilst the details of the deal are not finalised, observers believe this could be a game changer in Nepalese politics and provide much needed stability in the future. [NDTV]

China, having advocated this move for long, will be pleased. Beijing will also be happy to hear the new PM restarting a hydropower project with the Chinese in an effort to reduce energy dependency on India. Oli was expected to look to China to the detriment of Nepal-India relations. Far from an all-out diplomatic upset, he is nonetheless keeping relations with India smooth as he is pursuing a fairly balanced hedging strategy, trying

not to fuel zero-sum assumptions. Few doubt however, that under new leadership, China is now the preferred partner and it will increase its footprint in the country. [South China Morning Post]

Meanwhile, Nepal's newly formed government has started informal talks with Rastriya Janata Party- Nepal (RJP-N) about the latter's joining the government. Decisive question of these talks will be whether RJP-N's demands of constitution amendment can be met. Ever since the constitution's promulgation in 2015 Madhesh-based parties who later would merge into RJP-N demanded its revision to tackle marginalization of the Madhesi people. [ANI]

Law and Politics in South East Asia

Brunei: The reasons behind the latest cabinet reshuffle

(lh) After the replacement of six prominent ministers by the Sultan of Brunei at the end of January, the cabinet reshuffle indicates a crackdown on high-level corruption. The fact that the new Deputy Minister is the former director of the Anti-Corruption Bureau together and that the Sultan after the reshuffle reinforced the importance of ministers being integer, avoiding corruption, has been the background of this unforeseen shakeup. [ASEAN Today]

Cambodia: Germany ends preferential visa treatment for Hun Sen's family and

high-ranking officials

(ek) With the end of the preferred visa grant, Germany responds to the fact that the Cambodian government has banned its political opposition and depressed media und NGOs. The German government made clear that the dismantling of democracy and human rights in Cambodia cannot remain without consequences. On February 26, the European Union will decide on potential actions regarding Cambodia. In December, the EU had suspended funding for Cambodia's 2018 general election because it did not view an election without a main opposition party as legitimate [Phnom Penh Post].

Cambodia: Pretty prisons for wealthy inmates

(ls) Cambodia's chronically overcrowded prisons soon are to find relief by "outsourcing" the correctional facilities of wealthy inmates. According to recent plans, inmates could pay to use the facilities, which would have much higher standards than typical Cambodian prison cells, where numerous inmates often share a single latrine and ailments like nutritional deficiencies, abnormal physical weakness, diarrhea and scabies are common. Critics say, allowing prisoners with disposable incomes to live more comfortable lives was concerning and would make existing informal economic divides in the prison population official. [Phnom Penh Post]

Indonesia: Islamic conservatism and diversity

(hg) With the kick-off of regional elections on 15 February and the 2019 presidential elections approaching [Nikkei Asian Review], the public role of Islam and the expression of Islamic identities take center stage in contemporary political debates in the world´s biggest Muslim community country. This gives reason enough to take a look at some of the facets of contemporary Islam in Indonesia as reflected in latest developments and news.

As diverse Indonesian Islamic discourses are as much is their center of gravity shifting to its more conservative strata [Deutsche Welle]. This is in line with a general trend towards an unruly conservatism which is anxiously advancing against all kinds of alleged 'pollutions' of national integrity, with the LGBT

community and ‘foreign influences’ leading the way. At the same time, trust in the political process and almost all constitutional institutions seems low and lower while military and more radical Islamic groups gain markedly in influence.

The general trend is put in a nutshell by a female comedian who is portrayed in a South China Morning Post article for her struggle against religious extremism, quoted: “I found that many urban Muslims in Indonesia, who grew up with far more freedom than I did, suddenly started adopting the closed-minded attitudes of people in my [rural] community. I escaped the desert only to find a whole other desert waiting for me. Something in Indonesia is definitely changing, and under this hijab I am worried.” [South China Morning Post 1]

Another article deals with the still small but growing number of woman wearing the face covering niqab as an indicator for an increasing religious conservatism and a sharper division between those with more accentuated Islamic leanings and those who favor a moderate Islam or an even secular way of life in a country where open secularism is a sensitive issue.

The report refers to the many reasons for women to choose more restrictive forms of Islamic dresses, citing among others uncomfortableness with indecent male behavior and the turn to a more pronounced Islamic lifestyle as a reaction to perceived injustices suffered by Islamic countries and a rejection of Western values. [South China Morning Post 2]

An interesting facet of the more diverse Islamic discourses is reflected by recently reported critical remarks on Saudi Arabia by representatives of the Muslim Students Association's (HMI) blaming the kingdom for using the pilgrimage to Mecca to treat Muslim fellows from neighboring countries along political friend and foe lines. At the reported event, the general secretary of the Muslim Student Organization of India, accused Saudi Arabia moreover also of destroying religious sites, such as the birthplace of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, referring to estimations that 95 percent of Mecca's historical buildings have been destroyed in the past two decades. The accusation notably includes the role of Western influence: "What are there now? American companies [like] McDonald's, Starbucks, and so on." [Aljazeera]

A much more influential Islamic organization than HMI that has exerted strong influence on the development of political Islam is Muhammadiya, whose chairman has just pledged in a lecture at Monash University, Melbourne, his organization would continue to uphold

the idea of progressive Islam amid rising religious extremism. [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia is home to two huge Muslim organizations, in fact, the biggest in the world, namely Nahdlatuul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiya with 40 and 30 million members respectively. Muhammadiya which fosters a version of Salafi Islam that defies the simple equation of Salafism and extremism, currently operates 9200 schools, 170 universities and 500 hospitals and nursing homes. Both, NU and Muhammadiya have successfully functioned as bulwarks against claims for an Islamic state and expressions of religiously motivated violence. With the country´s creeping Islamization, the top leadership seems, however, to face mounting pressure by elements of the middle and lower echelons of the organization orienting themselves in parts to more radical Islamic leanings. This became visible for instance on occasion of last year´s demonstrations against Jakarta´s Christian mayor Ahok who had been accused and eventually sentenced for blasphemy.

Indonesia: New control system blocks more than 70,000 'negative' sites

(hg) Indonesia steps up its efforts to block unwanted Internet content. Only within the first month after having introduced a new system helping to purge the internet of harmful material, the responsible ministry has blocked more than 70,000 additional websites displaying “negative” content such as pornography or extremist ideology. Among the almost 800,000 sites having been blocked altogether, more than 90 percent were targeted due to their pornographic content. After Google has removed 73 LGBT-related apps from its Play Store last month, nine tech companies, including Google and Facebook, have also announced to fight fake news and hate speech during the upcoming elections in the world’s third-biggest democracy. [Reuters]

Indonesia’s military expanding its role in counter-terrorism?

(hg) Regarding amendments to the anti-terrorism law new armed forces chief Hadi Tjahjanto advocates an increase of the military´s role regarding matters of internal security, in particular anti-terrorism.

By proposing to define terrorism not any more as a law enforcement but state security issue as well as a threat

to territorial integrity, the aim is clearly to place anti-terrorism within the domain of the military, which lost its internal security role when democratic reforms made it solely responsible for external defense in 1999.

The proposal is seconded by Maritime Coordinating Minister Luhut Panjaitan, a former commander of the army special forces' (Kopassus) counterterrorism unit, the elite Detachment 81. He pointed in particular to the involvement of the British Special Air Service (SAS) as an example for successful military counter-terrorism. According to him, the government wants to create a crisis center at the presidential palace that would be separate from the existing National Anti-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) to make decisions on threat levels and whether to involve the military in any given situation.

With the new proposals, the army´s Kopassus Detachment 81 could effectively challenge the lead role of its police counterpart, the Detachment 88, which was created in the wake of the 2002 Bali bombing to develop into a widely recognized anti-terror force since then and whose former commander is Indonesia´s current police chief. Other planned changes aim at bolstering the policy and coordination powers of the BNPT which is staffed by around 100 military and police officers and a reform of the prison system especially regarding convicted militants to improve discipline, the recidivism rate and the degree of radicalization. [Asia Times]

Indonesia´s struggle with corruption

(hg) Corruption and money politics are still endemic in the Indonesian society, pervading state institutions and dominating electoral politics. Regarding to the coming regional elections, politics are described to be essentially determined by "a constant stream of payments": To be fielded as candidates by political parties, candidates have to pay considerable sums to the party whose amount is dependent on the office the candidate is running for. If candidates want to run in a specific electoral district they have to pay extra. Moreover, during the election race, they will also need to make payments to the community by which they want to be elected.

Oppositional Gerindra Party Chairman Gen. (ret.) Prabowo Subianto for instance allegedly asked a candidate for the 2018 East Java gubernatorial race to pay US$2.8 million in exchange for his nomination. The same practices are described for all other parties

including President Jokowi´s PDP-I or the Islamic Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) which presents itself as an anti-corruption party.

The instruments to tackle the influence of money politics, that naturally continues after the candidates´ investment pays out in form of a public office, are limited: the submission of asset declarations by candidates ahead of the elections, state financing of political parties on the basis of acquired votes, public education and consequent law enforcement. [Asean Today]

The limits of the latter have, however, just been exemplified when an investigator of the respected Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) who had been blinded by an acid attack returned to office after months of medical treatment.

The officer investigated a major graft scandal that has implicated prominent politicians when he was attacked last April as he left dawn prayers. Allegedly 80 people are involved in the corruption casehe investigated which is centered at the introduction of a $440 million electronic identity card system with more than one third of the amount having been stolen.

A senior Golkar party politician and former speaker of parliament is currently on trial for his alleged role in the scandal. Regarding the blinded KPK officer, no one has been arrested yet. Returning to office, he called on his colleagues to continue the fight against corruption against all odds: "Whatever happens, God will show the path of truth, even though many people are trying to cover it," [...] "I call on my friends, activists, law enforcers and people in charge of eradicating corruption, let's stay focused, stay brave. Don't be afraid, don't hesitate, stay strong." [US News]

After the formerly highly esteemed Constitutional Court has been haunted by two subsequent corruption scandals, the KPK, which is vested by considerable investigative powers, is one of the last publicly trusted offices. After having become under growing pressure in recent years it is presently facing legislative efforts to shield politicians from its reach (see below).

Indonesia: Law to curb criticism of politicians?

(hg) The house of representatives has quietly passed a controversial Law on Representative Assemblies, known as the MD3 law, which would hamper criticism of legislators and reduce their accountability. For the

meanwhile, it has been stopped by President Joko Widodo who delayed the signing suggesting the law could violate the democratic principle. [Reuters]

The law would allow legislators to press charges against those who "undermine [the house`s] honor or that of its members." It also stipulates that investigations into members of parliament must be approved by the House Ethics Council effectively limiting the reach of the Corruption Eradication Commission, KPK. The amendments were supported by eight political parties, including the ruling Democratic Party of Struggle, PDIP, of President Jokowi while representatives of two smaller parties in the present governing coalition, the United Development Party (PPP) and National Democratic (NasDem) party walked out in protest when the votes were cast. The house of representatives is one of the most powerful and least trusted constitutional bodies.

In the past, when the Constitutional Court was seen as a much more trustworthy institution than it is today, the house weakened the Court´s power by an institutional reform law that invalidated in parts by the Court later on. Likely, the bill, if finally signed by the President, might be reviewed by the Constitutional Court as well.

In the meanwhile, with a weakened Constitutional Court which had a major corruption scandal last year itself and a President fighting for his reelection, the MD3 law is an attempt by the legislators to consolidate their power while their public perception is at a historic low. [Voice of America]

The MD3 law reflects a general decline of Indonesia´s constitutionalism that is complemented by calls for Islamic and national purification and a strong leader.

Malaysia: Amnesty International denounces guilty verdict against government critic

(lh) Amnesty International Malaysia raised doubts and deep concerns about the Ipoh Sessions Court's decision punishing graphic designer Fahmi Reza to a one month's jail and a fine of RM 30,000 for publishing a clown sketch of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak online, calling it another crackdown on dissenting voices by governmental powers. According to the Executive Director of Amnesty International Malaysia, it was "absurd" to sentence Fahmi with prison and a fine over a "cartoon drawing", urging the

authorities of Malaysia to end their practice of persecuting government critics and human rights activists. [Malay Mail]

Myanmar: Updates on the Rohingya crisis, ethnic tensions and the war on drugs

(ls) The Myanmar government announced that it needs about two weeks to verify the first list of more than 8,000 Rohingya refugees sent by the Bangladeshi government, said the minister of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, U Win Myat Aye, on Wednesday. Last November, Myanmar and Bangladesh signed a memorandum of understanding to repatriate Rohingya starting in January, but the process has been delayed. [Myanmar Times] Overall, about 650,000 Rohingya fled Myanmar in face of violent persecutions that the U.N. described as a "textbook example of genocide".

In an interesting piece in the New Mandala, two authors question the often-made claim that there is a wide-scale radicalization going on within the Rohingya community. Mohd Nawab bin Mohd Osman and Aida Arosoaie conducted interviews with Rohingya refugees in Malaysia which indicated, rather, that Rohingya in Malaysia and Bangladesh disapprove of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army's (ARSA) violent approach to the crisis. The authors say that the larger concern among Rohingya appears to be the political fragmentation in their community and the lack of effective leadership. [New Mandala]

Meanwhile, a bomb exploded at a bank in northern Myanmar on Wednesday, killing at least two people and wounding 22 others. The explosion occurred in the city of Lashio, in northern Shan State, which has been torn apart by ethnic strife and battles to control smuggling networks. Such violence occasionally strikes Myanmar's frontier region, where armed groups from a patchwork of ethnic minorities, including the Kachin, the Shan, the Ta'ang and the Wa, have battled the Myanmar military for decades. [New York Times]

In still another development, Myanmar, which remains one of the world's largest drug-producing countries, on Tuesday launched the new National Drug Control Policy after years of deliberations. In The Diplomat, Prashanth Parameswaran argues that, though the document does signal a shift to a more comprehensive approach to addressing a chronic problem, the true test will how that approach is implemented in the coming years. [The Diplomat]

Myanmar: Business and human rights in conflict in Dawei

(ls) Civil society organizations have demanded the authorities in Myanmar to reconsider the plans to revive the controversial Dawei Special Economic Zone (SEZ). They argued that a site-wide environment impact assessment must be carried out. The SEZ has been accused of grave human rights violations including forced evictions, a lack of transparency and environmental disruption as the land lease contract for its initial phase is expected to be signed before April. Experts say that the project has already destroyed farmlands, polluted rivers and is threatening the lands and livelihoods of communities. [Myanmar Times]

Philippines: Inside the political trolling industry

(ls) In the Philippines, influential online personalities and troll armies are credited with winning Rodrigo Duterte the presidency in 2016. Even after carrying Duterte to victory, trolls, or “Dutertards” as his fanatic supporters have been dubbed, continue to vociferously share fake news and silence dissenters. Jonathan Corpus Ong and Jason Cabanes describe how anonymous influencers are in charge of building their politician client’s image on social media and creating artificially trending hashtags. Followers then amplify messages until mainstream news outlets pick them up. Other tasks might involve digital black ops such as seeding revisionist history narratives or sowing divisiveness in online communities. [Open Democracy] These developments reflect a global trend toward a weaponization of information.

Philippines: Government pursues designation of Communist Party as terror organization

(ls) The Philippine government on Wednesday asked a court to formally designate the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People's Army, as terrorist groups. The development shows that chances of a resumption of stalled peace talks are at their lowest point. President Rodrigo Duterte resumed peace talks with the guerrillas and granted concessions by appointing three left-wing activists to his Cabinet in

2016, but the cordial relations rapidly deteriorated as rebel assaults on troops and policemen continued. Last year, Duterte canceled the peace talks and signed an order declaring the rebel groups as terrorist organizations in a prelude to his government's formal move on Wednesday. [ABC News]

Thailand: Support for government plunges as old rivals pull strings in the background

(ls) Pro-election activists in Thailand on Wednesday petitioned the Constitutional Court to strike down the regime's ban on political gatherings, which they said violates their rights. According to the motion, investigators charged members of the group with violating a National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) order which bans political gatherings of five or more people. The group said the order runs counter to the constitution which guarantees the right to peaceful assembly. [Bangkok Post 1]

The constitutional complaint is an interesting case in two respects. First, the Court will have to address whether the individual complaints against the NCPO order are admissible. According to Section 213 of the new constitution of 2017, a person whose rights or liberties recognized by the constitution are violated is entitled to file a complaint with the Constitutional Court. Second, if admissible, the Court would have to define the limits of freedom of assembly. According to the constitution's Section 44, this right may be limited to maintain the security of the state, public safety, public order or good morals, or for protecting the rights or liberties of other persons.

Meanwhile, the "Watchman" saga involving Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan is dragging on, as the National Anti-Corruption Commission extended the deadline for Prawit to explain his apparent possession of more than two dozen luxury watches without declaring these assets to anti-corruption authorities. [Bangkok Post 2] Public support for the military government has dropped significantly within recent weeks, as public polls clearly demonstrated. For instance, asked to name the areas in which they were least satisfied, 53.05% of respondents in a recent poll cited the government's poor management of economic problems, and 37.28% its handling of corruption. [Bangkok Post 3]

At the same time, it has been reported that Suthep Thaugsuban, core leader of the now-defunct People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), plans to found

a political party to support Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha to remain in this office after the next general election. Suthep, having been the secretary-general of the Democrat Party until 2013, sharply differs from his former party which declared that it could not accept the prolonged power of the military junta. [The Nation]

Meanwhile, in the Pheu Thai party, former Prime Minister and patron in the background, Thaksin Shinawatra, met with Pheu Thai representatives in Hong Kong to determine the party's new leadership. Thaksin favors deputy party leader Khunying Sudarat Keyuraphan for the post, while a considerable number of party representatives support ex-transport minister Pongsak Raktapongpaisal. [Bangkok Post 4] The leadership question will be an indicator of Thaksin's continued influence within the party.

Vietnam: Draft cybersecurity law a sign of progress or a step backwards?

(ek) In May 2018, the National Assembly will vote on an Internet bill that has both proponents and opponents within the country. Proponents of the law emphasize that local data centers would improve access to online services for the Vietnamese people and would generate high demand for highly skilled IT professionals. Critics, however, point to the fact that data localization would harm privacy and open a way for a more comprehensive censorship by the government [East Asia Forum].

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

China-US relations: Beijing angered over US sanction package against North Korea

(dql) China voiced it dissatisfaction about a new package of US sanctions against North Korea Washington announced on Friday. The sanctions target among others Chinese shipping and energy firms by blocking assets the firms and individuals hold in the United States and stopping U.S. citizens from dealing with them. Beijing sternly denounced the unilateral targeting of Chinese firms and people and warned against risking to harm cooperation on Pyongyang. [Channel News Asia]

The sanctions come at the time when both countries' relations are strained by trade disputes. In a latest statement, David Malpass, U.S. Treasury's top diplomat, accused Beijing of "patently non-market behavior" and demanded stronger counter-responses from the US. [CNBC]

China-India relations: Indian Foreign Minister's visit to Beijing amidst strained bilateral ties

(jk/dql) India's Foreign Minister Vijay Gokhale visited this week Beijing to hold across-the-board talks with top Chinese officials on advancing ties between India and China amidst rising New Delhi's concerns over Beijing's assertive foreign policy in the Indian Ocean. His visit is also viewed as part of preparations for talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping scheduled to meet at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) June summit. The Foreign Minister met Politbureau member and State

Councilor Yang Jiechi, China's top foreign policy official, as well as Foreign Minister Wang Yi. [The Hindu]

Meanwhile, PM Modi, who has stated that India is the net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and therefore responsible for order and security there, has reacted to an increased activity of Chinese PLA Navy ships [India Today 1]. Eight warships have been deployed around the entry points to the Indian Ocean Region, in order to keep an eye on adversarial powers (read: China) [India Today II].

A number of news outlets have also circulated that the PLA Navy has deployed a significant amount of ships (11) to the IOR and close to Maldivian waters to deter India from interfering in the constitutional crisis on the island. However, all quote the same source, the Chinese news portal sina.com.cn, and so far, this report was not confirmed. In fact, the Indian Ministry of Defence has denied it and the PLA Navy has not commented. Fake news? [Financial Express]

For a more detailed strategic explainer of the IOR, see [Brookings].

On the other side, the People's Liberation Army's newspaper Global Times refers to a senior military specialist according to whom the Chinese military is advancing its military airspace defense of Western Theater Command to confront any threat from India. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) released photographs of a J-10 jet and J-11 fighter jets conducting aerial combat training exercises in Western China last week. They belong to an aviation brigade of the air force under the PLA Western Theater Command, responsible for mountain warfare at the border area with India. [Global Times]

Indonesia unlikely to join US-led coalition to contain China

(hg) In late January, U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis visited Indonesia to begin the implementation of the new U.S. National Defense Strategy, which calls for forging a "networked security architecture" in Asia/Indo-Pacific to prepare for the "great power competition" with China. Observer as Joshua Kurlantzick and Mark J. Valencia note the U.S. seems to win Indonesia as a key partner in this endeavor, an assumption they assess unlikely to happen.

True is, Indonesia has serious issues China where it comes to the Natuna islands area in the South China Sea and potentials of increasing domestic Chinese

influence in a country that has always fostered strong anti-Chinese sentiments.

This would on the other side hardly be enough that there will be a long-term alignment of national security interests between the countries.

First, Indonesia has been one of the driving forces of the nonaligned movement since the Bandung conference 1955. Just recently when President Jokowi has visited Pakistan, both countries´ nonaligned status has been an important issue in mutual assurances of friendship. Secondly, there is the growing Islamization and the perception of the U.S. as a deeply biased friend of Israel, a prescription which has been prepared by the recognition of Jerusalem As Israel's capital. Then, third, there is a difficult history of relations between the U.S. and Indonesia, starting with American role in the 1965 military countercoup against the communist coup attempt leading to a mass slaughter which is still a taboo that nevertheless comes with subtle skepticism against America and its supportive role in the course of events for many Indonesians. The other side, the American suspension of military cooperation with Indonesia's elite unit Kopassus because of its human rights violations have widely been regarded as hypocritical.

Key ministers with military background in Pres. Jokowi ´s cabinet have proven their profound skepticism towards the US engagement in the region. Defense Minister Gen. (ret.) Ryamizard Ryacudu has suggested that "if regional countries can manage the South China Sea on their own, there is no need to involve others" while Gen. (ret.) Luhut Panjaitan, the coordinating minister for political, legal and security affairs, has said that, "We don't want to see any power projection in this area." In sum, no Indonesian governments seems currently to be in the position to sell the close rapprochement with the U.S. to the countries´ elites or the bulk of voters. [The Diplomat]

The mere fact that the Trump administration is downplaying democracy and human rights as core components of U.S. foreign policy currently, might help with other countries in the region but does not really help to improve relations with Indonesia as long it is inclined to be received against the background of an alleged anti-Islamic U.S. foreign policy.

The best American strategy seems to stabilize a more transactional relationship which, as Kurlantzick notes, would suit the leadership style of the presidents of both countries. Such a transactional relationship could focus on strategic ties regarding three major security threats: China's growing assertiveness in the South

China Sea, the rise of Islamic extremism in the region, and, the ongoing issue of piracy in Southeast Asian waters. In terms of economic strategy toward Southeast Asia the U.S. have to recognize furthermore that Indonesia is the largest economy in the region, its only G20 economy, and the biggest untapped market for U.S. firms in Southeast Asia. Regarding economic relations there are also the obstacles for revamped relations as both countries have a tendency to focus on economic nationalism. [Council of Foreign Relations 1] [Council of Foreign Relations 2]

The ensuing risks for bilateral relations have already manifested as Indonesia is the latest Asian country to face American trade curbs after the U.S. Department of Commerce said it planned to slap anti-dumping duties of 92.52% to 276.65% on biodiesel imports from the country, a decision Indonesia will challenge before the WTO dispute settlement panel. [Nikkei Asian Review]

Just recently, the European Community Shipowners' Association, ECSA, has described the new Indonesian legislation aiming at reserving cargoes as protectionist and worrying to give a current example for Indonesian protectionism. [Shipping Watch]

North Korea: U.S. prepares high-seas crackdown on North Korea sanctions evaders

(dql) According to senior US officials, the US and key Asian allies, including Japan, South Korea, Australia and Singapore, are preparing to expand interceptions of ships suspected of violating sanctions against Pyongyang, in an attempt to beef up the crackdown on North Korea sanctions evaders. The plans call for closer tracking and possible seizure of suspected ships and would possibly include the deployment of U.S. Coast Guard forces in Asia-Pacific waters. Analysts see the move as an increasing urgency on the side of the Trump administration to force Kim Jong-un into negotiations over the abandonment of his weapons programs. [Reuters]

Inter-Korean Relations: Rallies against planned visit of North Korean official

(dql) Members of the main opposition Liberty Korea Party (LKP) on Friday held a protest rally in front of the President's office expression their oppose to a planned visit to South Korea by Kim Yong-chol, a vice chairman

of the Central Committee of North Korea's ruling Workers' Party, who is accused of masterminding the deadly 2010 sinking of a South Korean warship that killed 50 South Koreans. He is scheduled to cross the border on Sunday for a three-day visit as the head of an eight-member delegation to the closing ceremony of the Winter Olympics. The protest is the latest development of an ongoing dispute within South-Korea between the ruling Democratic Party and LKP on the response to Pyongyang's diplomatic 'charm offensive' surrounding the Olympic Games. [Korea Herald]

Pakistan – Russia ties deepen amid feared IS surge in Afghanistan

(jk) Against the background of ongoing tensions in US-Pakistan relations, about which AiR has reported previously (LINK), the foreign ministers of Russia and Pakistan have announced more economic cooperation on energy matters, as well as military cooperation, including the set-up of a new joint military commission and continuation of joint military drills [TASS]. Russia has pledged to further its counterterrorism support for Pakistan amid worries about neighbouring Afghanistan where they see a surge of IS fighters, allegedly, according to Pakistan's foreign minister, already outnumbering the commonly quoted number of Taliban in the country [Dawn].

Whilst Pakistan-Russia ties are deepening – a 33 percent year-on-year increase in trade according to a Russian diplomat for example, or the opening of a new consulate in Pesahwar [www.thenews.com.pkThe News], European powers such as Britain, France and Germany have supported a US-led initiative to add Pakistan to a "grey list" of countries suspected of financing terrorism. Pakistan has been given three months to reprieve allegations. [Reuters]

Indonesia gets Russian Sukhoi fighter jets

(hg) Indonesia has signed a US$1.14 billion deal to buy 11 Sukhoi Su-35 jets from Russia. The Su-35 is a Russian-made multipurpose generation 4++ super-maneuverable fighter jet. It can develop a speed of up to 2,500 kilometers per hour and has a flying range of 3,400 kilometers and a combat radius close to 1,600 kilometers. The fighter jet is armed with a 30mm gun and has 12 hardpoints for carrying bombs and missiles.

Russia has delivered weapons worth more than $2.5 billion to Indonesia over the past 25 years including BTR-80A armored personnel carriers and BMP-3F infantry fighting vehicles, 100th series Kalashnikov assault rifles, Su-27SK and Su-27SKM, Su-30MK and Su-30MK2 planes, Mi-35 and Mi-17 helicopters, and other weapon systems and military hardware.

After the EU and US have targeted Russia with sanctions for the alleged meddling in the US presidential election and the Crimean crisis, Russia is forced to seek new markets to import from which became the basis for the Indonesian deal which might be designed in parts as a barter business. [Channel news Asia] [Tass]

Indonesia expanding defense business with Bangladesh

(hg) Indonesia and Bangladesh plan to expand their collaboration in the defence business and industrial engagement according to the Indonesian Ministry of Defence following meetings between defence officials from the two countries in Jakarta. In a press release the MoD said that "Bangladesh is interested in buying military products from Indonesia's defence industry". [Jane's Defence Weekly]

Indonesia obtaining a non-permanent membership of UNSC?

(hg) Indonesia is optimistic about its membership candidacy for non-permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) according to statements of its Ambassador to the UN having declared that many countries had announced their support. [The Jakarta Post]

Philippines: U.S. intelligence report considers Duterte a threat to democracy

(ls) A report produced by the United States Office of the Director of National Intelligence has placed Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte alongside Cambodia's Hun Sen, the Rohingya crisis and Thailand's military-backed constitution as impediments to democracy. Reacting to the report, presidential spokesperson Harry Roque said, "we view this

declaration from no less than the intelligence department of the United States with some concern." [Reuters]

House Speaker Pantaleon Alvarez responded by demanding the Philippines shall file a diplomatic protest to the United States. At the same time, he called for the abolition of the United Nations, arguing that instead, the Philippines should join a "United Nations of Asia" that will protect the interest of the region. [Rappler] As AiR reported last week, the International Criminal Court has opened a preliminary examination into Duterte's anti-drugs campaign.

Meanwhile, after a helicopter purchase from Canada was subjected to heightened scrutiny by the Canadian government last week, possibly axing the deal, the British government has come under fire for selling spyware to the Philippines that most likely was used in Duterte's war on drugs. The equipment purchased by Duterte's government included IMSI-Catchers, which are used to eavesdrop on telephone conversations, and surveillance tools to monitor internet activity. [The Guardian]

Philippine claim on Sabah may undermine regional security efforts

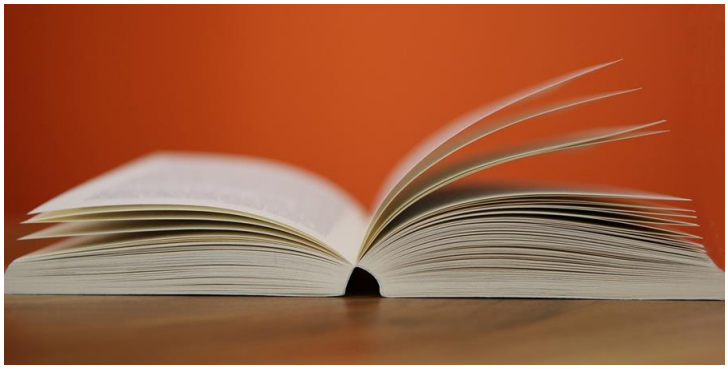
(ls/lh) A recent proposal in the Philippines' Consultative Committee on constitutional reform to include the Malaysian state of Sabah within a federal system may, though unlikely to be realized, risk unsettling Malaysia-Philippine bilateral relations, argues Alexander Mcleod. Malaysian Foreign Minister Anifah Aman criticized the proposal, reiterating that Malaysia does not recognize the Philippines' claim. Sabah is recognized under international law as part of Malaysia since it was formed in 1963. The committee's proposals, however, resonate with members of the southern Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a strong advocate of federalism. MNLF champions an independent 'Bangsamoro Republik' – covering Sabah, Sarawak, Mindanao, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Basilan and Palawan. [Global Risk Insights]

President Duterte has vowed in recent weeks and months to provide more autonomy for the southern parts of the country, which are his political strongholds. Whether the Philippines are indeed ready for the adoption of a federal system, however, remains doubtful. Even Duterte himself, speaking in December last year, said "the problem is the Filipinos are not ready for a federal type." [Philippine Star] The plans for

constitutional reform have often been described as a mere political campaign to please Duterte's supporters in Mindanao, his home.

Meanwhile, Malaysia's counter-terrorism police have detained ten people – seven Filipinos and three Malaysians – suspected of helping terrorists enter the southern Philippines from Sabah. The smuggling of militant Islamic State (IS) fighters aims at facilitating efforts in conducting military trainings to set up an IS cell in the southern Philippines. [Channel News Asia]

Background Reading



Myanmar: Nationalist media voices on the rise

(ls) In an extensive background piece, John Reed describes the current media situation in Myanmar as a time when many of the democratic forces that successfully challenged military rule in Myanmar are closing ranks around a nationalist and apologist script that increasingly puts them at odds with the Western world. He argues that a uniquely unsettling moment in the country's history is currently playing out in the press and social media, where new internet freedoms have enabled both incisive journalism and the spread of hate speech and false reports. Against the background that some journalists have been arrested or received death threats while others are preparing to leave, Reed examines how Myanmar's determination to tell its own story on its own terms is becoming more and more visible. [Financial Times]

Indonesia´s Education Market

(hg) Indonesia's high-volume education market is marked by low-quality standards hampering the country´s competitiveness. After having increased

access to education, the quality deficit lingers on with inadequate funding, human resource deficits, perverse incentive structures, and poor management as main problems. The situation and potential strategies of improvement are thoroughly analyzed by the Lowy Institute. [Lowy Institute]

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