German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence
for Public Policy and Good Governance
CPG

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

Asia in Review

(2/3/2018)

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to CPG´s 'Asia in Review' (AiR) with news on law, politics and international relations from large parts of Asia.

Once more, this issue reflects the continuity of a number of recurring and often interrelated themes that have continuously dominated reporting over the last couple of month. Ranking high among them is the formation of new security alliances amidst a steadily intensifying great power competition in Asia as the Great Game of our times as well as domestic constitutional politics in the advent of national elections in quite a number of Asian countries. Almost invariably, these elections will develop significant impacts on the future development of domestic politics and regional order in the respective countries. They are casting their shadows with inclinations of increasingly rigid power politics in many of them. Other ongoing tendencies are the efforts to centralize power in China, and to a certain degree, also in India, and the instrumentalization of legal discourses like those on anti-corruption or fake news for purposes of power consolidation while the South Korean efforts to eradicate the corrupt networks of former President Park might be seen as more genuine attempts to rationalize the political system.

Besides, there are ongoing stories reflected also in this AiR issue, like those of the fierce power struggle in the Maldives, which, at the same time, also mirrors the increasing competition for regional hegemony between China and India. A historically interesting sign of regional attempts to contain the evolution of an increasingly pervasive Chinese sphere of influence is the recent visit of U.S. aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson

(Nimitz class) in Vietnam, representing the largest U.S. military force to Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975.

Lastly, as a newly emerging humanitarian flashpoint adding to the ongoing Rohingya suffering in Southeast Asia, a string of attacks by new hardline Buddhist groups on mosques and churches has caused a domestically weakened Sri Lankan President to declare the state of emergency.

Hoping to serve you well with this AiR issue, we wish you a good read and a great start in the week!

Best regards,

Henning Glaser

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Main Sections

- Law and Politics in East Asia
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Law and Politics in East Asia

China: Expanding anti-corruption campaign

(dql) Reflecting the Chinese government's policy to continue its anti-corruption campaign with unabated determination and force, China's Minister of Supervision announced that the National Supervisory Agency, China's new anti-corruption super-body, will increase threefold the number of targets of existing watchdogs. The statement comes while a bill has been submitted for approval at this and next's plenary sessions of National People's Congress according to which the National Supervisory Agency command commissions at provincial, city and county levels allowed to investigate, question, search, detain and take disciplinary action against not just party cadres suspected of corruption but all public sector employees. The bill also ranks the agency higher than the courts and the procuratorates within the hierarchy of China's state organs. [South China Morning Post]

Since assuming power in 2012, Xi Jinping has made the fight against corruption a signature of his rule. Overseen by the Central Commission for Disciplinary Inspection (CCDI), under the anti-corruption campaign more than 1.5 million officials have been disciplined, among them 35 members of the party Central Committee and nine members of the CCDI itself. [Brookings]

Protest against China's Tibet policy: Self-Immolation of Tibetan man

(dql) According to Radio Free Asia and monitoring organizations, a Tibetan on Wednesday set himself on fire to protest against Beijing's repressive policy towards Tibet. The self-immolation comes just a few days of the 59th anniversary of the March 10 Tibetan uprising in 1959, a rebellion against China's effective rule and control of Tibet established in 1951. [Radio Free Asia]

Japan: Obstacles on Abe's way to constitutional reform

(dql) According to the 2018 action plan of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), to be adopted at the party convention on 25 March, the party and its members are called on to take the lead in deepening public debate on Abe's amendment proposals and to

attempt a broad consensus within the Diet's Commission of Constitution for the constitutional revisions set by Prime Minister Abe as cornerstone of his political agenda shall be attempted. [The Japan Times]

Achieving this consensus, however, seems to be a demanding challenge as Japan's opposition parties currently refuse to join the Diet's Commission of Constitution over diverging positions on the constitutional revisions rendering it in-active. [East Asia Forum]

In a related development, a nationwide survey revealed 48.5% of the respondents rejecting and 39.2% supporting constitutional changes under the Abe government. [Kyodo]

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Japan: Prime Minister Abe under pressure over Finance Ministry's forged land sale documents

(dql) The Abe administration has come under pressure over forged documents of the Ministry of Finance obscuring the sale of an 8,770-square-meter state-

owned plot of land to school operator Morimoto Gakuen in 2016.

In the latest development it has been found out that an entire section containing information about the background of the sale as well as wording about negotiations between the government and Moritomo Gakuen were deleted from a document the Finance Ministry submitted to lawmakers.

Opposition lawmakers had demanded the release of original documents, suspecting the deal was made possible through favoritism involving first lady Akie Abe's connections with the then director of Moritomo Gakuen.

In the light of these findings, Nobuhisa Sagawa stepped down as chief of the National Tax Agency as his repeated claims that there had been prior negotiations with Moritomo Gakuen over the price of the land before its sale and that negotiation documents had been discarded proved inaccurate. Sagawa was director-general of the Finance Ministry's Financial Bureau at the time of the deal. [The Asahi Shimbun]

Complicating the situation, a male official of the Finance Ministry's Kinki regional bureau, who belonged to the department in charge of the land transaction last February, in an apparent suicide was dead on Wednesday at his home in Kobe. [The Mainichi]

Meanwhile, the governing coalition parties LDP and Komeito agreed on setting a deadline for the Finance Ministry to report on the relevant documents by early next week. [Nikkei Asian Review]

South Korea: Former President Lee's close associate indicted

(dql) An indictment has been issued by the prosecution against Lee Byung-mo, President Lee Myung-bak's close associate considered as key to a corruption scandal involving auto parts company DAS which is linked to the former President and his family. Lee Byung-mo, dubbed as the former President's 'wealth manger', is accused of embezzlement, breach of trust and destruction of evidence. He has been suspected of disposing of account books that apparently contained detailed records of the former president's financial accounts, possibly created under borrowed names, and their transactions. [Korea Herald]

Taiwan: Amendment of Criminal Code on the way

(dql) In a move to update the Criminal Code and increase the penalties for a number of crimes, the Tsai Cabinet on Thursday approved a draft amendment. Among others, the changes include removal of the current 30-year statute of limitations on homicide and an increase of the maximum penalty for assault from three years to five years in prison. [Focus Taiwan]

Law and Politics in South Asia

India: Prime Minister Modi's BJP wins key provincial elections

(ls) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Saturday ended the 25-year uninterrupted rule of a communist party in a northeastern state and consolidated its position in two other states in key provincial elections. The clear win is expected to boost the party's prospects when it seeks a second term in national elections next year. Modi's BJP is currently governing 19 of India's 29 states, compared to only five governed by the major opposition party, the Congress. The BJP has been riding a wave of rising Hindu nationalism in the country. [South China Morning Post]

India: Supreme Court to protect inter-faith/inter-caste marriages

(ls) The Supreme Court on Wednesday said it would lay down comprehensive guidelines to protect inter-faith, inter-caste and intra-gotra couples whose marriages are, sometimes violently, opposed by society in the name of tradition. Chief Justice Dipak Misra reiterated the bench's time-tested stand and said: "If two adults get married by consent, whatever be their caste, religion or gotra, no one can interfere in such a marriage, neither the relatives nor panchayats. We will give a detailed judgement on this issue." [Times of India]

India: Army killings in Kashmir spark protest

(ls) Tens of thousands of angry protesters poured onto the streets throughout Indian-controlled Kashmir, centered around the town of Shopian, hurling rocks and shouting anti-India slogans after soldiers killed four civilians and two suspected fighters. The riots began late Sunday night, when officials say a car refused to stop at a checkpoint and fighters inside fired at the soldiers. However, rights activists accuse Indian troops in Kashmir of routinely misusing their power, killing civilians in staged confrontations for promotions or rewards. Kashmir is divided between Pakistan and India, with both nations claiming the entire region. [Al Jazeera]

Pakistan: Muslim League wins Senate elections, as trial against Nawaz continues

(ls) Pakistan's governing party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), gained control of the Senate, parliament's upper house, in a secret ballot on Saturday. The result may revive the political fortunes of the removed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who has clashed with the judiciary since the Supreme Court ended his premiership in July by disqualifying him from office over undeclared assets. Winning control of the Senate could enable the PML-N to change the Constitution to make Sharif eligible to hold office again when the party contests a national election due later this year. [Al Jazeera]

Meanwhile, the corruption case against Nawaz Sharif is to be continued in the Accountability Court. Last September, the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) filed three corruption references against Nawaz and

his family and one against then-finance minister Ishaq Dar. The Supreme Court had disqualified Nawaz and given a six-month deadline to the accountability court to complete the trial against the Sharif family. That deadline is ending on March 13 but is likely to be extended. [www.geo.tvGeo News]

In the afore-mentioned Senate election, Krishna Kumari has become the first woman from the Pakistani Hindu community to enter the Senate. The 39-year-old Hindu Dalit woman is member of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). According to her latest interview, she said that child marriage and forced conversion are the urgent issues, which need to be addressed. [Daily Times]

Bangladesh minister says refugee repatriation unlikely to succeed

(ls) A senior Bangladesh cabinet minister has accused Myanmar of obstructing efforts to repatriate roughly 750,000 Rohingya refugees, saying it was unlikely the displaced Muslims would ever return to their homeland. Finance minister A.M.A Muhith said the repatriation deal signed between Myanmar and Bangladesh in November would likely fail despite his government's official stance that the refugees must eventually go back. Bangladesh insists the repatriation process will go ahead, having submitted to Myanmar last month the names of 8,000 refugees expected to return to Rakhine state where the Muslim minority has been persecuted for generations. Rights groups and the UN have warned that conditions for their return are not close to being in place. [Mizzima]

Sri Lanka: President declares state of emergency

(ca/ik) Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena declared a nationwide state of emergency for two weeks in the wake of communal violence and criminal activity in Kandy. [The Island] Tension has been growing between two communities in Sri Lanka over the past year, with some hardline Buddhist groups accusing Muslims of forcing people to convert to Islam and vandalizing Buddhist archaeological sites. Some Buddhist nationalists have also protested against the presence of Muslim Rohingya asylum-seekers in Sri Lanka. [Nikkei Asian Review] The outbreak of violence caused loss of lives and damages to property. Police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse the and

several arrests were made. [Sunday leader 1]. To crackdown on hate speech all communal posts via social media would be curbed, the government said [Sunday Leader 2].

Law and Politics in Southeast Asia

Malaysia: General Elections Countdown

(jk) Since its formation in 1973, today's ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) won all general elections held in Malaysia. Before that, the same coalition, already under the leadership of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), won under a different name, taking the electoral success to 13 general elections since independence in 1957. The upcoming election will be the 14th, with the most likely outcome to be another win for BN.

The predictability of the outcomes has in part to do the institutionally entrenched advantages of the incumbent party in the electoral contest, including gerrymandering [SEA Globe], which has facilitated the dominance of the UMNO's ruling coalition. Malaysia's economic development and relative social stability under BN leadership has also played a decisive role [ISEAS].

Notwithstanding, this year's election could become a closer contested one than possibly any previous general election. With UMNO leader and PM Najib having survived, although not unscarred, the massive 1MDB corruption scandal and a fracturing of his ruling coalition, partly as a result thereof, BN is facing a stronger opposition under the leadership of former PM Mahathir who at 92 years of age pledges he would not

seek to fulfil a full term as PM should he win the election. The fact that he runs despite not even wanting to serve a full term speaks volumes for the lack of trusted and popular politicians in the opposition, however. The electorate is unsatisfied with Najib, but as of yet, the opposition cannot be sure ignite enough spark in many voters who sit on the fence to bring down the ruling coalition for the first time in history [ATimes; WPR].

In an effort to change exactly that, the opposition is seen to try and rejuvenate itself with more and more new faces in their ranks, including the leader of Malaysia's biggest pro-democracy group Bersih [Channel News Asia; SCMP]. Nonetheless, should the upset take place, it is rumoured that Mahathir would become PM until his foe-turned-ally Anwar Ibrahim is released from prison and pardoned so that he can take over. To steer away from 'old' politics, in addition to the younger blood, they have also included eye-catching proposals in their manifesto, such as the removal of an unpopular goods and service tax as well as a two-term limitation for a prime minister.

Malaysia's King voices support for law against fake news which PM Najib is keen on prior to election campaign

(jk/thn) After a Sabah minister expressed his support for a proposed law against fake news as reported in last week's AiR, Malaysia's King Sultan Muhammad V said that he „greatly supported" the government's efforts in order to fight against „the spread of fake news and lies on social media". He emphasized the significant influence social media has on society by shaping its values and culture and that „no one should politicise or trivialise the issue of national security." In January, the Government announced that a special committee had been formed to look into laws to curb fake news. Opposition lawmakers questioned the necessity for such a law, arguing that the government already had broad powers and many other laws which can deal with these issues. Fears are growing that PM Najib is seeking to use potential laws in this field to guide the discussion in the upcoming election campaign where the opposition is likely to focus on his role in the 1MDB scandal [The Straits Times, Reuters].

Thailand: Thaksin Trial resumed – in absentia; party registration for elections

(jk) Alongside the report of past week's AiR that Thailand´s major opposition party Pheu Thai Party may face dissolution after it was accused of allowing former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra to control its internal affairs, the supreme court in Bangkok has resumed a trial against the latter for alleged manipulation of telecom concession fees 15 years ago. Thaksin, who already faces a prison sentence for abuse of power should he return to his home country, has stayed away from the trial and not appointed a lawyer to represent him either. According to a new law, passed in September last year, trials can proceed in absentia against politicians in cases where trials have been suspended due to the defendants fleeing the country. A new arrest warrant for Thaksin has been issued. [Bangkok Post 1] [The Straits Times].

These developments set forth a years-long battle against the Thaksin camp with two Thaksin dominated parties having been dissolved in 2007 and 2008, three Thaksin related governments having been ousted by constitutional court decisions in 2008 and 2014 and two more by coup d'états in 2006 and 2014. As such they have to be seen against the background of slowly resuming electoral politics ahead of the still not determined first national elections after the 2014 military putsch which are expected for 2019.

Now, for the first time, some of those having been appealed by the Thaksin camp might get alternative choices though as two new progressive parties seem to emerge with the opening of party registrations for the elections. At the same time, a number of newly registered parties has either voiced or is assumed to support incumbent Prime Minister and 2014 coup leader General Prayuth. [Bangkok Post 2]

Philippine's supreme court chief justice (and judicial independence?) under fire

(jk) As we explained in last week's AiR, for not properly declaring assets and problems as to her "integrity" the Philippine's chief justice of the supreme court is under continued fire from the government seeking to expel her from her position. She is currently on leave for an indefinite period. The chief justice, alongside another high profile anti-graft prosecutor who had last year looked into the President's hidden wealth, have long been a thorn in the eye of Duterte's who last year alleged they would discredit his administration. Now, the House of Representatives has launched the impeachment process against her, which she sees as an assault not only on her, but on judicial

independence in her country, reiterating her claim that President Duterte has little respect for the separation of power. In a reaction to the developments, the United Nations human rights chief criticised Duterte for his "authoritarian approach to governance" [Strait Times; ABC News].

Tougher Public Assembly Law in Myanmar likely

(jk) Demonstrations erupted in Yangon on Monday against the government to amend the public assembly law. The law was introduced in 2010 and very much welcomed then, for it provided freedom of expression and demonstration liberties previously unknown. The current NLD government proposed last month to add to amend the law so that anyone who instigates, tempts or persuades others intentionally to join a demonstration that disrupts security, rule of law, tranquillity and public morale by providing money or material support will face a maximum of three years' imprisonment if found guilty [ABC]. On Wednesday this week, the Upper House has approved of the bill which will likely become law [MM Time]. The amendments would also require any protest organizers to provide details of the budget and source of their funds for a demonstration. Nearly 200 civil society groups have signed a petition against the plans and a growing number of observers lament that they see a reverse of the liberalisation trend under the NLD since 2010.

Female lawmakers in Asia

(jk) According to a new report by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, female participation in parliaments worldwide has increased since 1995, when Asia was among the leaders in the percentage of women in such positions.

Today however, most regions have caught up or overtaken Asia, which has remained stagnant. Gender norms continue to discourage women's entry into politics. Some Southeast Asian countries in particular, such as Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia or Myanmar rank strikingly low (sometimes below 11, and in Thailand even below 5 percent), with the Philippines and Laos marking the opposite end of the spectrum for Asia. The world's average of 23.4%, is undercut by Asia's 18.6%, with leaders in Europe and the Americas standing at over 27% [Nikkei].

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

China: World's second largest defense budget set to be approved

(dql) On Monday, the 1st plenary session of 13th National People's Congress began in the wake of the Communist Party's Central Committee publication of its proposal to revise the constitution and remove the two-terms limit of the presidency.

In his opening work report on the past five years Premier Li Keqiang outlined China's defense and national security policy in the years ahead. He announced that China will continue to massively build up its military in order to achieve the goal of a world-class military by mid of the century set by Xi Jinping and advance "all aspects of military training and war preparedness, and firmly and resolvedly safeguard national sovereignty, security and development interests". [South China Morning Post]

For 2018, a defense budget has been submitted to the currently meeting legislature for approval which sees an increase of 8.1% compared to last year's budget to amount to 175 billion USD in total. [Xinhua]

This defense spending makes China's defense budget the world's second-largest after the US (716 billion USD) and raises concerns among China's neighbors about the impact of such defense spending on the military balance in the region. They worry about China's increasing military might which may lead to

even more assertive moves in the region. [The Diplomat]

China-US relations: Tensions on the rise over looming trade war and Africa

(dql) Signs are pointing to rising tensions in Sino-US relations in the wake of a looming trade war between the countries. Following two failed missions to Washington to de-escalate the stand-off in US-China trade by State Councillor Yang Jiechi and President Xi Jinping's most trusted economic adviser Liu He last month [South China Morning Post], President Trump geared up his protectionist policy and signed on Thursday an order for a 25% tariff on imports of steel, and a 10% tariff on aluminium, triggering worldwide concerns over trade wars. [The Guardian]

Reacting on the order and recent tweets of the US President on trade wars, China's foreign minister Wang Yi said at a press conference at the sidelines of the National People's Congress on Thursday that China is ready for "a justified and necessary response" in any trade war. [CNBC]

Meanwhile, ahead of his Africa trip US secretary of State Rex Tillerson voiced harsh criticism against China's model of economic development in Africa, accusing China of encouraging dependency and denying governments long-term democratic growth. Tillerson said China used corruption and predatory loan practices to undermine African governments and mire them in debt. [Quartz]

Marine Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, U.S. military commander overseeing troops in Africa, in a hearing of the Congress warned on Tuesday against 'significant' consequences should China take a key port in Djibouti. If China, he explained, placed restrictions on the port's use, it could affect resupplying the U.S. base in Djibouti and the ability of Navy ships to refuel there. China has already built a military base in Djibouti, just miles from a critical U.S. military base.

Waldhauser's warning follows Djibouti's recent termination of its contract with DP World from Dubai, one of the world's biggest port operators, to run the Doraleh Container Terminal and suspicion that Djibouti seized control of the port to give it to China as a gift. [Reuters]

North Korea: Trump to meet Kim in May and international reactions

(dql) In a stunning development after months of fierce tensions between Washington and Pyongyang over the latter's nuclear missile tests, the White House on Thursday that President Donald Trump agreed to meet North Korean Kim Jong-un face to face in May. Trump will be the first US President to meet a North Korean leader in person. [Express]

South Korean President on Friday hailed the impending meeting as a 'historic milestone' for peace on the Korean Peninsula and 'opportunity that came like a miracle'. [Yonhap] However, during a meeting with party leaders on Wednesday, Moon confirmed that he has no plan to ease sanctions against Pyongyang for the sake of his summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un scheduled for late next month. [Korea Herald]

Less euphoric, Prime Minister Abe warned to be cautious towards the meeting in May as it could be a ploy on Pyongyang's side to buy time and demanded concrete steps toward denuclearization to defuse Tokyo's scepticism. Unless these concrete steps are taken by Kim-Jong-un, Tokyo would continue with using maximum international pressure to denuclearize North Korea. [The Japan Times]

Meanwhile Chinese official and government-backed media outlets report on China welcoming the news on direct talks between the US and North Korea as a chance for a return to peace and stability [Xinhua], but also on China's readiness to 'help protect the rights of North Korea when Pyongyang begins denuclearization talks with Washington' and 'prevent North Korea from being deceived or squeezed by the US once it begins to denuclearize.' [Global Times]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov considers the agreement a 'step in the right direction' towards a dialogue based on mutual respect'. [TASS]

Japan's government to strengthen economic ties to Africa

(jb) Tokyo plans to support partnerships between Japanese companies and firms from nations with economic influence in Africa, such as France and India, to encourage Japanese enterprises to branch out into the continent. Arrangements are on the way to hold in

South Africa in May a first-of-its-kind conference for governments and firms concerned to discuss cooperation. [The Japan News]

Japan: Navy to buy tanker to fuel ships patrolling East China Sea

(dql) Japan's navy plans the purchase of its first oil tanker to carry fuel to Okinawa as it is beefing up operations in the East China Sea to counter a growing Chinese naval presence, according to sources familiar with plan. The procurement plan comes at a time when operations in the East China Sea, where Japan and China are locked in a territorial dispute over the ownership of a group of islands claimed as the Senkaku in Tokyo and Diaoyu in Beijing, are increasing and intensifying in the wake of China's military growing strength in this region. [Reuters]

Bangladesh and Vietnam aim to raise trade to $2b by 2020

(ca/ik) Bangladesh and Vietnam aim to raise their two-way annual trade to $2 billion over the next three years from nearly $1 billion, a business association official said on Monday. Bangladesh mainly imports agriculture products, such as rice and livestock products from Vietnam while it imports textiles and cloths, leather and leather products, plastic products and medicine from Bangladesh. [Prothomalo]

India outpaces Pakistan in trade with Afghanistan

(ls) According to trade statistics, Pakistan has lost almost half of its trade with Afghanistan since India actively began engaging with the Afghan market about two years ago. Pakistan's trade with Afghanistan has decreased to $1.2 billion from $2.7 billion over the last two years. The development comes at a time when the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a global money-laundering watchdog, has decided to put Pakistan on its terrorist financing watchlist, a move that could severely impact foreign capital flow into the country. [Economic Times]

The Maldives: In the middle of Indo-Chinese powerplay – and accused of selling oil to North Korea

(ls) A Chinese naval combat force that entered the Indian Ocean for the first time in four years may have helped deter an Indian intervention in the Maldives after its pro-China president imposed a state of emergency. India, a traditional ally, had received calls from Maldives' opposition leaders last month to use force against President Abdulla Yameen to restore democracy. After the state of emergency was declared, India -moved aircraft and ships to its southern bases and put special forces on standby, two military sources in New Delhi said. In the end, however, no military action was taken. [Channel News Asia]

Meanwhile, in an interview with DW, former Maldives President Mohamed Nasheed accused incumbent President Yameen of suppressing political opponents – and supporting the North Korean regime. A ship under the Maldives' flag allegedly sold oil to North Korea ignoring United Nations sanctions on the country. According to Nasheed, the ship was also funded by the Bank of Maldives. Earlier, Japan's foreign ministry already announced that a Maldives ship was transferring oil to North Korea refines on high seas. [Deutsche Welle]

Nepal: Closer ties with Pakistan, instead of India?

(ls) In a symbolic gesture, Nepal's newly elected Prime Minister K.P. Oli received his first foreign visitor, the Pakistani Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi – instead of his counterpart from long-time traditional partner India. After winning the election on a leftist ultra nationalist platform, having promised to diversify Nepal's relations beyond India and deepen ties with others, particularly China, the move may be interpreted as a demonstration of Nepal's increased independence in international relations. [Hindustan Times]

Meanwhile, as many believe that Nepal has finally entered an era of stability, Raunab Singh Khatri, in the Diplomat, points to a necessary transition in leadership which is soon to take place. Looking at Nepal's recent, political development, while the election has signaled a transition from post-conflict society toward a period of stabilization, he argues that it is also an era of

transition toward a new generation of political leaders from the "old watchdogs." [The Diplomat]

Seychelles: Parliament to ratify deal with India on development of island military facilities

(ls) Seychelles President Danny Faure recommended that parliament ratify an agreement with India to develop military facilities on strategically located Assumption Island in the Western Indian Ocean by next month and emphasized that the land has not been leased or sold to the Indian government. [The Wire]

The government of the Seychelles, based in Victoria on Mahe Island more than a thousand kilometers northeast of Assumption, says the base will help coastguards to patrol its 1.3 million square kilometer exclusive economic zone for illegal fishing, drug trafficking and piracy. But its location is also of strategic importance for monitoring maritime traffic in the Mozambique Channel. The project remains controversial with small weekly demonstrations, seeing an affront to sovereignty and national pride, in the capital. [South China Morning Post]

South China Sea

(jk/ls) The South China Sea remains one of the main flashpoints in Asia, continuing to involve littoral, regional as well as extra-territorial actors. The situation on the ground is changing mainly for two reasons. On the one hand, extensive land reclamation and military build-up of islands and other features in the SCS by the PRC have created new facts on the ground and essentially present the world with a fait-accompli on behalf of China. On the other hand, unsuccessful policies and growing uncertainties regarding the commitment of the US and a significant policy change in what used to be the most forward-leaning claimant state other than China, the Philippines, have led to political circumstances facilitating Chinese actions. For an update on the island-building and reclamation activities of all five claimants, please refer to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative out of the Center for Strategic Studies who have overhauled their Island Tracker. It now includes imagery of every outpost in the South China Sea which amounts to over 90 facilities at nearly 70 features [AMTI].

In more recent developments, the second iteration of the Bilateral Consultative Mechanism (BCM) on the South China Sea between China and the Philippines has made some headlines. The bilateral meeting – the preferred cooperation modus by China who opposes any extra-territorial nations to be involved- is in a way an outcome of the Philippine's softening stance on the SCS dispute since 2016, although the idea of joint development projects – which the meetings discussed – has been around much longer and their success is questionable. Major 'breakthroughs" that are announced more often than not fail to extend beyond very low hanging fruits and carefully worded statements that do not change facts on the ground or go beyond what has already been achieved in an ASEAN wide context [ISEAS, Diplomat 1].

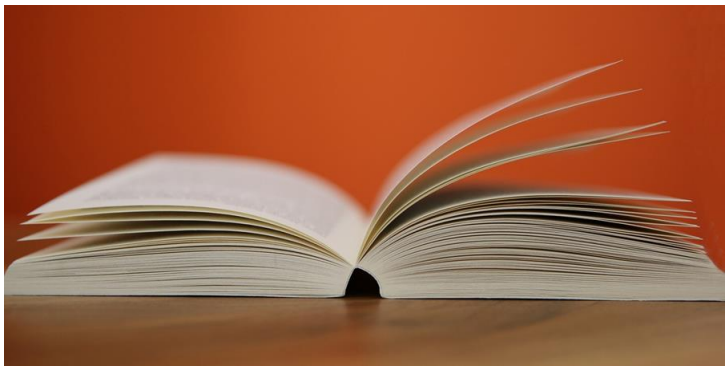
Another relevant development is this week's US aircraft carrier port call to Vietnam – a first since the end of the Vietnam War over 40 years ago. Since the Philippines has changed its stance on the SCS, Vietnam has taken over as the claimant that is seen to challenge China most, with the US intensifying ties to it [NYT].

The response by Beijing to the port call- although critical, was not overly aggressive with the People's Daily acknowledging the fact the Hanoi engages in a hedging strategy and that it long has done so. It did find however that the US move was all but a "waste of money" [A Times].

In a related development India and Vietnam have, in a high-level joint statement, once again affirmed their support for freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, where Vietnam is a claimant along with five other states — China, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, and Taiwan. Hanoi has been particularly pro-active in the dispute in recent years. In addition to approaching India, Vietnam has grown closer to the United States as well. [The Diplomat]

In the meantime, the UK has announced that it will send a Royal Navy vessel to conduct a "Freedom of Navigation" voyage in the SCS [The Times UK].

Background Reading



India: The challenges ahead

(ls) While India is a country of huge potentials and with vast opportunities for economic growth, the South Asian nation also faces major challenges such as wide-spread poverty and inequality, deficient infrastructure and climate change vulnerabilities. Paul Laudicina points to the particular importance of inclusive growth and the necessary involvement of public and private stakeholders in this regard. [Forbes]

The genocide the US didn't see coming

(jk) This article provides a very well-written and detailed look into the Obama years, when it looked like the strategy to engage Myanmar and lift sanctions would result in a liberalisation of their political system and the materialisation of the ideals Aung San Suu Kyi once stood for. The author asks whether todays catastrophic situation with regards to the Rohingya could have been avoided. [Politico]

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