German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance
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Grasp the pattern, read the trend

Asia in Review

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Dear Reader,

Wishing you a good day, we would like to present you the latest updates on major developments on law and (geo)politics in Asia. Your feedback will be highly appreciated.

Best regards,

Henning Glaser

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Law and Politics in East Asia

China's post-Congress institutional reform: More party, less state

(dql) Immediately following the closing of the 13th National People's Congress which further concentrated power in President Xi Jinping [East Asia Forum], the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party released measures of a large-scale reshaping of China's institutional governance structure revealing a concentration of decision-making power in the hands of the party at the expense of the state. [Central Committee of the Communist Party, in Chinese]

One party organ which used to be powerful and - after a short period of being downgraded - now has regained and expanded its powers in the frame of this institutional overhaul is the Central Commission for Politics and Legal Affairs. It absorbs three coordination groups in charge of the maintenance of law and order, social stability and the Falun Gong crackdown. The Central Commission for Politics and Legal Affairs, established in 1958, a had been a power powerful organ before it was downgraded for a short period of time following the sacking of its former head Zhou Yongkang (2007-2012) over corruption charges, including bribery, abuse of power and leaking state secrets in 2012. The regaining of and increase in power of the commission which is responsible to the Central Committee headed by Xi Jinping reflects Xi's push for domestic security and order.The commission is responsible for coordinating inter-agency work on upholding law and order, consolidating information and intelligence related to domestic security, coordinating the handling of major incidents, analyzing and preventing social stability risks, and formulating an anti-cult policy. The police force, prosecutor's offices and courts are to report to the commission. [South China Morning Post]

Another party organ reporting to the party's Central Committee is the United Front Work

Department. Under the new reform measures it is given oversight over the State Ethnic Affairs Commission and absorbs the State Administration of Religious Affairs and the Office for Overseas Chinese Affairs. Created during the civil war and reestablished in the late 1970s under Deng Xiaoping, the main function of the United Front Work Department so far has been the reach out to non-party key individuals and groups with social, economic and academic influence inside and outside China. [Reuters] The institutional changes increases the power and jurisdiction of the Department which Xi Jinping views as "magic weapon" in China's soft power arsenal. [Economic Times] The department is feared outside China for its work to widen China's influence by means of soft power, particularly in regard to Chinese students studying abroad and the Chinese diaspora. Against this background US legislators introduced to the US Congress a bill which requires Confucius Institutes to register as foreign agents in an move strengthen foreign funding disclosure requirements for colleges and universities. [Business Insider]

Furthermore, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Film, Radio, and Television, China's comprehensive media regulator, will be abolished and its functions distributed among two bodies. While the State Administration of Radio and Television, overseeing radio and television, is still to be created, film, press, and publishing will come under control of the Party's publicity department. [The Sixth Tone]

Japan: Ruling bloc yields to opposition calls for Diet testimony by former tax agency head in land sale scandal

(dql) Facing plummeting approval ratings for Prime Minister Abe and protesters demanding his resignation in the context of the Morotomi Gakuen land sale scandal, on which AiR reported in the last issue, high ranking officials of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and Komeito decided to meet demands of the opposition and have Nobuhisa Sagawa testify as a sworn witness before the Diet. Sagawa served as director-general of the Finance Ministry's Financial Bureau when officials of the bureau falsified documents related to the leasing and eventual sale of state-owned land to private school operator Moritomo Gakuen. Sagawa resigned as chief of the National Tax Agency early this month taking responsibility after the Finance Ministry's confessed forged documents submitted to the Diet. While acknowledging the decision on Sagawa's testimony before the Diet, the

opposition insisted that an adequate resolution of the scandal will not be achieved unless Abe's wife will also testify before the Diet given that her name was deleted in the forged documents and her close relationship to the school operator at time of the sale. [The Japan Times]

Japan: Abe's Art. 9 revision proposal accepted by his party

(dql) The month-long dispute within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) over the revision of the war-renouncing Art. 9 of the constitution has ended with a victory for Prime Minister Abe after veteran LDP lawmaker Hiroyuki Hosoda, head of the party's constitutional reform task force, announced after a plenary meeting on the issue on Thursday that the group "will work toward the direction" of Abe's proposal of keeping the article unchanged and adding an explicit reference to the Self-Defense Forces instead of removing from the article the clause stating "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained". The latter has been proposed by Abe's opponents within the party. [Asahi Shimbun]

South Korea: Government's ideas for constitution reform revealed

(dql) The government this week presented its proposal for the revision of the constitution, the first since 1987. The reform ideas focus on an overhaul of the power structure directed in particular at restricting what has been often criticized as "emperor-like" presidential powers.

They include a change from the current one five-year term of the presidency to a one time renewable four-year term and a distribution of the power of the president by dropping the president's right to name the chief of the Constitutional Court and having the court's justices themselves elect their chief; requiring the president's special pardon plans to undergo a review by an independent pardon committee; and bolstering the power of prime minister by eliminating the phrase stating that the prime minister conducts his duties "under the orders of the president."

The National Assembly is vested with greater oversight rights including the right to name three members of the nine-member Board of Audit and Inspection who under the current system are all named by the

president as well as legislative and budget oversight rights.

The public is given the right to propose bills, and to "summon parliamentarians that courts find guilty of wrongdoing" to increase public participation in state affairs.

The government's proposal also calls for a change of the parliamentary election law from the current single member constituency system to a more balanced one to ensure that the number of ballots cast for a party is fairly represented by the number of parliamentary seats the party wins.

The proposed changes include also replacing the term "citizens" with "people" regarding parts of basic rights, such as freedom of religion and the guarantee of equal rights. The term "citizens", however, will be maintained for rights pertaining vocations, rights to property, education and others related to social welfare linked to economic and national security issues. The current constitution determines only rights and duties of citizens.

President Moon Jae-in announced that he will submit the his administration's constitutional revision bill to the parliament on Monday next week. The main opposition Liberty Korea Party has voiced objections to the proposal, accusing the Moon administration of misusing the constitution revision for gaining advantages in the local elections in June. The party criticizes especially that the government is acting unilaterally arguing that such a proposal should be jointly negotiated and worked out by all parties. Liberty Korea Party (LKP) leader Hong Joon-pyo went even so far to warn party members of expulsion from the party in case of voting for the government's revision bill, if submitted to the National Assembly next week. Given the opposition's stance, the proposal is unlikely to make it through the National Assembly since approval requires a two-thirds majority of all 293 lawmakers. The ruling Democratic Party has only 121 parliamentary seats whereas 195 votes are required. [Yonhap] [Korea Herald] [Korea Times]

South Korea: Decade-old garrison decree to be abolished

(dql) South Korea's Ministry of National Defense announced this week that it will abolish the garrison decree. The decree, dating back to 1950, gives the President the right to mobilize the military to crack down on protests in certain areas without the need for

approval by the parliament. It has often been criticized as an excuse to suppress democratic protests, such as during the authoritarian administration of the 1970s.

The announcement comes amid allegations that Ministry had planned to suppress by force protesters demanding the ouster of then-President Park Geun-hye last year. The allegations came up after a Democratic Party lawmaker presented military papers documenting such a consideration in the Ministry. [Korea Times]

South Korea: Former president Lee imprisoned on graft charges

(dql) On Friday former president Lee Myung-bak was detained on nearly 20 charges involving suspicions that he unlawfully accepted around 10.28 million US from various institutions and individuals. Lee, who had served as president from 2008 to 2013, denies any misconduct and denounces the case as politically motivated by prosecutors under the incumbent liberal administration. [Reuters]

Law and Politics in South Asia

Bangladesh: Opposition leader Zia remains imprisoned

(ls) Bangladesh's Supreme Court on Monday rejected the release of opposition leader Khaleda Zia on bail, deepening a political crisis ahead of a national election due in December. The 72-year-old Bangladesh

Nationalist Party (BNP) leader and three-times former prime minister was convicted and sentenced to five years imprisonment last month on charges of embezzling money intended for an orphanage. Zia is a former ally turned arch-foe of Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Her party boycotted the 2014 national election in which Hasina was re-elected, but is expected to contest the upcoming election. [Straits Times]

India: Party politics and the role of Muslims ahead of next year's elections

(ls) Party politics in India is becoming more volatile ahead of next year's general elections. The Telugu Desam Party (TDP) pulled its two ministers out of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government on Thursday in a dispute over concessions to attract investors into their southern state. The TDP has not withdrawn support from the ruling coalition, but the resignations may weaken the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), ahead of general assembly elections in 2019. [Reuters]

Moreover, the Shiv Sena party, a longtime BJP ally, said there was an "environment of distrust" with the federal government and predicted the BJP would not win a majority in 2019. In addition, some regional parties have also floated the idea of a third front without the Congress or BJP. Though Modi's government is not destabilized by these developments, analysts noted that the ruling party would find it difficult to replicate its landslide win next year without the help of allies. [Straits Times]

In recent weeks, also the role of Muslims in Indian politics was discussed again. As former Congress President Sonia Gandhi recently clarified that the Congress was not a "Muslim party", her statement was largely seen as further confirmation to the Indian Muslim community that they were not welcome to any political party. In fact, the BJP is the first ruling party since India's independence without a single Muslim MP in the Lok Sabha, India's parliament. It also did not nominate any Muslim candidate for elections in Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat in 2017. Sanjana Ray analyzes the discussion in The Quint. [The Quint]

Maldives: State of emergency lifted as ex-president faces charges

(ls) Maldives President Abdulla Yameen lifted a 45-day state of emergency on Thursday imposed amid political upheaval. [Straits Times] The Maldives have been in political turmoil since 1 February when the Yameen government refused to obey a court order to release nine opposition MPs. The government arrested former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and the chief justice of the Supreme Court.

On Wednesday, authorities charged Gayoom and several senior judges, including the former chief justice, with terrorism for attempting to topple the president. [South China Morning Post]

India welcomed the lift of emergency, however, also pointed to various concerns expressed by the international community. India has traditionally viewed the Maldives as within its sphere of influence. [Livemint]

Pakistan: First woman to lead the opposition in the Senate – as sexual harassment in academia continues

(ls) Pakistan People's Party's (PPP) Sherry Rehman was appointed as leader of the opposition in the Senate on Thursday, making her the first woman to be given the position in the Upper House. In the 1990s, the late Benazir Bhutto had served as leader of the opposition in the National Assembly during the two PML-N governments. [Daily Times]

However, women in Pakistani politics and academia are still often the subject of sexual harassment. With regard to the situation at Pakistan's universities, a group of authors researched multiple cases of sexual harassment and abuse. They hold that such incidents have long been considered routine experiences, tolerated by those in authority, and describe how most women continue to put up with harassment and misconduct, believing that the consequences of taking action are more damaging than staying silent. [Dawn]

Pakistan: The Supreme Court's verdict against Nawaz Sharif revisited – and an examination of current Pakistani politics

(ls) In the Daily Times, Sheraz Zaka defends the recent verdict by Pakistan's Supreme Court that disqualified former prime minister Nawaz Sharif from heading a

political party. The apex court barred him on the basis that any person who suffered from lack of qualification to be an MP is prohibited from holding the position of party head and from exercising any other power in such capacity under any law, rule, regulation, statute, instrument or document of any political party. Zaka examines the constitutional reasoning and holds that it is a landmark decision that upholds the rule of law and principles of morality. [Daily Times 1]

On the occasion of this week's Pakistan Day (23 March), M Zafar Khan Safdar examines the current state of Pakistan politics. In particular, he points to Pakistan's mixed experiences with constitutionalism, going back to the country's first constitution of 1956. He holds that the deviations from constitutionalism and the four military interventions have done enormous harm to Pakistan's soul, pointing out that the effects are seen in the weakening of the federal structure and the rise of ethnic, sectarian and parochial forces. [Daily Times 2]

Sri Lanka: State of emergency ended, but role of social media in riots under scrutiny

(ls) Sri Lanka's president announced on Sunday that he was lifting a nationwide state of emergency, citing improvements in the security situation. The state of emergency was imposed to stop anti-Muslim riots in Kandy in which three people died and hundreds of shops were destroyed. This was the first state of emergency imposed in Sri Lanka since the end of a decades-long Tamil separatist war in 2009. Sri Lanka's parliament issued an apology to the Muslim minority, which constitutes 10 per cent of the country's population. Sinhalese account for about three quarters of the population. [South China Morning Post]

The clashes in Kandy are among several incidents throughout Southeast Asia that have allegedly been aggravated by the use of social media, in particular Facebook. During the riots in Kandy, the Sri Lankan government took the unprecedented step of blocking the app across the country, fearing incendiary content would incite further damage. But also the Rohingya crisis as well as political trolling on behalf of Philippine President Duterte appear to have been supported by Facebook messages. [Asian Correspondent]

Law and Politics in South East Asia

Indonesia: MD3 law an example of a dysfunctional Jokowi government?

(jk) AiR has been reporting on a recently passed law in Indonesia hampering criticism of legislators and reducing their accountability. The law, known as the MD3 law, as we have argued previously, reflects a general decline of Indonesia´s constitutionalism, complemented by calls for Islamic and national purification and a strong leader [see AiR Web Archive > Indonesia].

However, the law, or rather the path it has taken coming into force, could also be seen as sign of a dysfunctional Jokowi government, according to this recent piece on [New Mandala]. Jokowi was initially shy about signing the controversial law, stating that he would refuse to do so. But, similar to the US, a law will automatically be enacted even without the President's signature after a certain time-period. In line with the legislative process in Indonesia, the administration in Jakarta could have stopped or stalled the legislation long before this stage. The fact that it hadn't, according to the author, shows that Jokowi is either not genuine about his motives or indeed runs a dysfunctional government. Refusing to sign the law was largely symbolic for he had no actual veto power over the law. Now that the law has been enacted, Jokowi is quoted to "understand and know that [...] the law will remain valid even without my signature. Therefore, to solve the issue, the public is welcomed to file a judicial review with the Constitutional Court." [Jakarta Post] That he is calling on the public to question and challenge a law his own government has implemented is worth pointing out.

Indonesia's New Parties for 2019

(jk) With reporting on the formation of a new, progressive party in Thailand over the last couple of weeks [AiR Web-Archive > Thailand], we thought it is also worth mentioning that Indonesia's Election Commission is allowing four new parties to contest next year's legislative and presidential elections [Jakarta Post].

Three of those, The United Indonesia Party (Perindo), the Berkaya Party and the Garuda Party have close links with the establishment. The first is headed by U.S. President Donald Trump's business partner in Indonesia, Hary Tanoeseodibjo. The Berkaya Party is led by Suharto's youngest son, Tommy, who has spoken in favour of a return to the "New Order" values of his late father and the Garuda Party is allegedly linked to the Suharto family and the Gerindra Party.

The fourth, the Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI), headed by a young former television journalist, is decidedly progressive and aims to break into Indonesian politics with a progressive policy platform based on virtue, diversity, openness and meritocracy [Reuters/ PSI Party]. We have already mentioned the formation of this party back in October 2017, but it will be interesting to keep an eye on this young party amid the developments that AiR readers are aware of. The trust in the political process and most constitutional institutions seems low while military and more radical Islamic groups gain substantially in influence in a growingly conservative environment.

Cambodia: UN End of Mission statement, no improvement of Human Rights situation

(jk) The UN expert on the human rights situation in Cambodia, Professor Rhona Smith, has unsurprisingly expressed her serious concerns regarding restrictions on the media, freedom of expression and political participation ahead of the July national elections [UN End of Mission Statement].

After the closure of the newspaper *Cambodia Daily*, about which we reported in September last year, another major English newspaper has now been hit with a major tax bill. The reputable *Phnom Penh Post* is allegedly facing closure and might share the same fate as the Cambodia Daily did if they default on the payment as reported by some media outlets [UCA].

The paper states a contrasting view however, claiming the tax audit was “routine” and that the paper does not face closure [PPP].

In Australia, where Cambodian PM Hun Sen recently visited for the Australia-ASEAN summit, the PM was met by an increasingly critical Cambodian diaspora, led by a Cambodian-born Australian lawmaker who is not shy about his views on the state of democracy and human rights in Cambodia [NYT].

A recent issue also picked up by the UN Special Rapporteur was the shooting by security forces at protesters on 8 March over a land dispute with a rubber plantation in Snuol district, Kratie province [PPP 1]. The alleged human rights abuse here was investigated by the state but the police quickly ended the investigation clearing the security personnel [PPP 2]. An independent investigation into the incident is unlikely and what exactly happened and how is difficult to ascertain. Whilst the official investigation found the allegations that security personnel had killed demonstrators to be untrue, Voice of Asia journalists who have interviewed villagers involved in the incident claim that a security force comprised of 150 police, soldiers and military police opened fire on hundreds of protesters, killing at least three. Furthermore, their investigation scrutinizes a link between a company involved in the incident and the family of PM Hun Sen [VoA].

Myanmar: President and Aung San Suu Kyi confidante resigns

(jk) Myanmar’s first president since the 1960s to have no connections to the military and a close friend and political ally of ASSK has stepped down amid health concerns and an upcoming period of health treatments and surgeries. [Frontier Myanmar]

The timing of the resignation is difficult due to the widely condemned and continuing Rohingya crisis the government is facing. The President, who according to the constitution, holds executive authority, needs to be willing to follow ASSK’s lead for her to be in the de-facto leadership position she is in. This was provided with her longtime friend and ally in the position but is more uncertain now. [The Guardian]

For now, the presidency will be held by the military-nominated vice-president Myint Swe. He is an ex-military officer who oversaw the brutal crackdown of the Saffron revolution in 2007. Parliament is expected to vote in a new President this week. It is possible that

a different President will take back some authority from ASSK, which would presumably please critics who have pointed out that despite her being formally banned from leading the country, has centralized way too much power in her own hands within her party.

Singapore's fake news and media blackout legislation, Cambridge Analytica in Malaysia?

(jk) A parliamentary committee in Singapore has questioned tech firm representatives on the feasibility of legislations against fake news and micro-influencing amid growing concerns over national security. Unsurprisingly, the companies do not recommend harsh legislation as especially Singapore already has a number of laws on hate-speech and defamation. Singapore, at the same time, does not rank highly in international press-freedom rankings as it is and tough laws could worsen the situation. The tech firms advocate more support for vigorous and independent journalism as counter-measure against fake new [SCMP I].

Increasing concerns of an over-reaching state and curtailed press-freedom was a controversial law that has been passed overwhelmingly by the parliament in Singapore this week. The "media blackout law" allows the government to block electronic communication and any kind of video or live recording in the case of a "serious incident". Critics have pointed out that a "serious incident" is only very vaguely defined in the law [SCMPII].

In Malaysia, speculation is rife since footage has emerged showing Cambridge Analytica (CA) executives naming Malaysia as an example for successfully influencing elections in 2003. PM Najib has rejected the allegations. CA is currently under investigation for having used illegal means to influence elections in a number of countries [SCMP III].

Malaysia/ Thailand border: Planned wall a political matter

(thn) Last week, it was announced that Thailand and Malaysia agreed on a plan for a border wall in Songkla. Though stated as efforts to strengthen security operations and fight transnational crime, according to ASEAN today, it is based on more of a „political calculation", with an eye on elections that will

eventually be held in Thailand. Critics are questioning the impact of the wall, particularly on smuggling efforts. There are already walls along the border but these are ineffective. Often, smugglers and traffickers cut holes in the fences and break holes in the walls. Moreover, the Thai PM is seen to use the wall in order to demonstrate progress and actions he is taking on the issue in the south [ASEAN today, The Straits Times].

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

Indian-Pakistan relations: Attacks in Kashmir, tensions in diplomatic relations

(ls) In disputed Kashmir, violent attacks took place in recent days. On Wednesday, five Indian soldiers and five suspected militants were killed in a gun battle near the de facto border between India and Pakistan in the disputed region of Kashmir. India accuses Pakistan of training and arming militants and helping them infiltrate across the Line of Control that divides Kashmir. Pakistan denies those allegations. [Straits Times 1]

On Sunday, five members of a single family were killed when a mortar bomb allegedly fired by Pakistani soldiers landed on their home in Indian-administered Kashmir. There have been intense skirmishes this year along the so-called Line of Control. Last month, more than 1,000 villagers were evacuated to safer places in

the northern Uri sector amid a heavy exchange of fire. [Straits Times 2]

Moreover, diplomatic tensions have reached new heights in recent weeks as both countries mutually accused each other of mistreating diplomatic personnel. India on Thursday issued its fourth protest this week to Pakistani authorities over incidents of harassment and intimidation of its diplomats stationed in Islamabad. Conversely, last week, Pakistan had called back its high commissioner Sohail Mahmood to Islamabad for consultations following alleged instances of harassment of its diplomats in New Delhi. [Livemint] However, he returned to New Delhi on Thursday after Indian authorities partially addressed Pakistan's concerns. Tense relations between the two countries have also affected the issuance of visas and the traffic of pilgrims between them. [Dawn]

India and China: Competition over influence in South Asia

(ls) India and China remain tight competitors over influence in South Asian countries. While India is making inroads by providing development aid, China, in turn has adopted a more capitalist approach and has made significant investments in the region. The Times of India compares Indian and Chinese development aid and investments in numbers and geographical distribution, concluding that China has started to wield considerable military power and economic leverage to reorder the region. [Times of India]

Meanwhile, China has sold Pakistan a powerful tracking system in an unprecedented deal that could speed up the Pakistani military's development of multi-warhead missiles. China is the first country to export such sensitive equipment to Pakistan. It has been a long-held notion that Beijing is supporting Islamabad's missile development program, but solid evidence can seldom be found in the public domain, making the official confirmation of the deal on the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) website a rarity. [South China Morning Post 1]

However, the Indian ambassador to China, in a more reconciling tone, said that there were silver linings in Sino-Indian after a "challenging" 2017. Though the dispute over territorial limits in the Doklam region and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) remain the top sources of friction between India and Beijing, the Indian ambassador said, "if the 'boundary question'

as India calls it could be resolved, I don't see other difficulties between India and China." [South China Morning Post 2]

China-US relations: Tensions over trade and Taiwan increase

(dql) The trade dispute between China and the USA tightens in a tit-for-tat development. Reacting on President Trump's signing on Thursday of an executive memorandum targeting Chinese imports to the USA with tariffs up to 60 billion USD [CNBC], China's Ministry of Commerce announced plans to increase tariffs of close to 3 billion USD on US goods. [Xinhua] Prior to the Ministry's announcement, the Chinese embassy in Washington expressed strong objection against Trump's protectionist measure and vowed, in case of a trade war, to "fight to the end to defend its own legitimate interests with all necessary measures" [Chinese Embassy Washington]

Two developments this week further complicate the situation. First, just a day after Trump's signing of the executive memorandum the guided-missile destroyer USS Mustin carried out a freedom of navigation operation in which it came within 12 nautical miles of an artificial island built by China in the Spratly Island chain in the South China Sea. China's Defense Ministry strongly objected the move arguing that it "harmed Chinese sovereignty and security, violated basic rules of international relations, and harmed regional peace and stability." [Asia Times]

Second, two senior US government officials visited Taiwan this week after the Taiwan Travel Bill, which encourages visits between U.S. and Taiwanese officials, was signed into law by President Trump last week. After Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Alex Wong on Tuesday, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Manufacturing Ian Steff arrived in Taipei on Thursday. [South China Morning Post] The implementation of the Taiwan Travel Act triggered fierce reactions in state-run media in China. Global Times' editorial demanded from Beijing to "strike back against strike back against Washington's implementation of the Taiwan Travel Act" and demanded that the "mainland must also prepare itself for a direct military clash in the Taiwan Straits", making clear "that escalation of US-Taiwan official exchanges will bring serious consequences to Taiwan." [Global Times] Prior to these statement, Xi Jinping warned in his closing speech at the National People's Congress that "all actions and tricks to split our country are doomed to fail and will face the condemnation of

the people and history's punishment." [National People's Congress China, in Chinese]

Meanwhile, Taiwan's Defense Ministry confirmed that China's sole operational aircraft carrier of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) Liaoning entered Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) on Wednesday. [The Diplomat]

China's reach to Europe

(dql) On Thursday China's State Councillor Wang Yi hosted a meeting with vice foreign ministers from the four Visegrad countries - Slovakia, Hungary, Czech Republic and Poland – at which he expressed that China views the Visegrad alliance as the most dynamic force within the European Union and is ready to further develop the 16+1 cooperation. [Reuters]

Wang's statement comes at a time when the European Union is facing challenges to its unity in the wake China's increasing investments and influence in Europe, especially among the smaller member states in Eastern and Southern Europe which are eager to align with Beijing to lure investments. [Politico]

Meanwhile, Ireland's Foreign Minister Simon Coveney stated in an interview during his China visit this week that Ireland is ready to step into the post-Brexit gap and to replace Britain as China's new "trusted friend" in promoting the One Belt, One Road Initiative. [South China Morning Post]

China: Advancing military capabilities with AI

(dql) Considered by defence experts as China's latest progress in the field of unmanned technology as part of the modernization of its armed forces, a state-run newspaper Global Times reported on Wednesday about tests of driver-less tanks which could be equipped with artificial intelligence. China's state television presented images this week of a Type 59 tank being driven by remote control, in what was the first time a Chinese-made unmanned tank has been shown in a public forum, according to Global Times. [The Telegrapgh]

Japan-Russia: Uncertain times ahead of Abe-Putin summit in May

(dql) Visiting Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in a joint press conference with Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono warned that the deployment of a U.S. land-based missile defense system in Japan could impede negotiations on the return of islands off northern Japan, occupied by Russia since the end of World War II, but claimed by Japan. Lavrov's warning refers to Tokyo's plans to introduce the US-made Aegis Ashore anti-missile system. Kono assured his counterpart that the system "will not pose a threat to any neighboring country, including Russia." Both reached an agreement to hold bilateral talks between vice foreign ministers or other high-ranking officials twice in the period from April to May to discuss security matters before Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Putin are scheduled to meet at a bilateral summit in St. Petersburg in late May. [The Mainichi]

Japan, South Korea and China agree upon trilateral summit

(dql) South Korea, Japan and China have agreed to hold a three-way summit in May and discuss ways to strengthen economic, environmental and cultural cooperation. Chaired by Japan and attended by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, South Korean President Moon Jae In and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, the summit is planned for 8-9 May, the same month proposed for meeting of US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. [The Straits Time]

South Korea-Vietnam relations: Bilateral trade to be increased

(dql) Vietnam and South Korea agreed on Friday to seek to boost their bilateral trade to from $63.9 billion to100 billion USD by 2020. A memorandum of understanding, signed in Hanoi during a visit by South Korean President Moon Jae-in, also lays out guidelines for aiming to reduce Vietnam's deficit in bilateral trade. Since the free trade agreement in 2015, trade between Vietnam and South Korea has risen rapidly resulting in South Korea replacing the United States as Vietnam's second largest trading partner in 2017, second only to China. It is also the largest source of foreign direct

investment in the Southeast Asian economy. [The Korea Times]

Brunei: PRC writing checks and advancing its interests

(jk) The Sultanate of Brunei sits on finite reserves of oil and gas which have long guaranteed the countries well-being. Prices for oil have been low however and resources become scarcer making Brunei feel the squeeze and realising its over-reliance on the energy sector. Despite HSBC and others banks closing down their business in Brunei recently [The Scoop], the Bank of China (BOC) has opened up shop there in 2016 with an eye on facilitating foreign direct investment from China. Brunei has a neglectable domestic market and with dwindling resources has become less attractive to HSBC and other international actors. Clearly, China is happy to fill the void and engage in more "check book diplomacy", which Brunei undoubtedly is happy about. For China, Brunei is a strategically important country in its OBOR project, as well as a claimant in the South China Sea which the PRC would like to convince to engage in joint-development programmes to its on liking. Surely, writing checks will make the Sultan more agreeable [A Times].

Dragon Gold: Cambodia – PRC joint military exercise

(jk) After the first instalment in 2016, the 2nd joint military drill between the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), "Golden Dragon 2018", begun this week in Cambodia. The two-week military exercise is being conducted under the theme "Counter-Terrorism and Humanitarian Works".

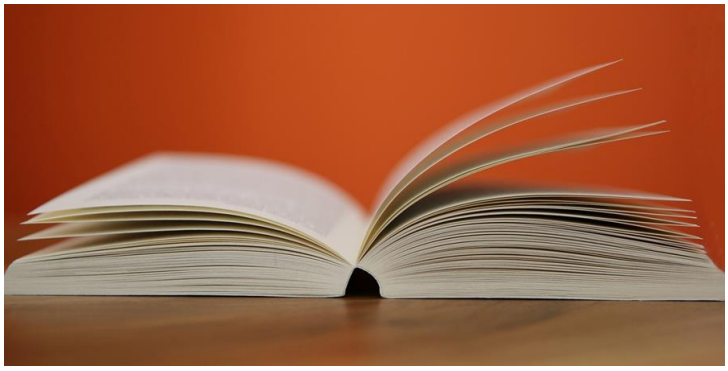
Whilst Cambodia continues to deepen its relationship with China, US joint military drills have been postponed indefinitely last year, claiming it was too busy holding elections (!) [Reuters].

Myanmar: New breeding ground for Terrorist Networks?

(jk) The ongoing and relentless persecution of the Rohingya could prove fertile ground for terrorist

networks recruiting members in Southeast Asia. A number of terror organisations, e.g. the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, have already claimed to avenge the atrocities committed against Muslims in Myanmar [RSIS]. While the Rohingya themselves, by and large, have not yet radicalised despite the continuous onslaught on the minority, it is crucial to monitor the situation and resolve the crisis also to prevent radicalisation [KAS].

Background Reading



Who is a terrorist? The politics behind labeling

(ls) Against the background of Nepali Maoists' fight against monarchy and the fact that they were declared terrorists by the old royal regime, Dhruba Raj Adhikari argues how supporting the "war on terror" was the most convenient way for unpopular dictators in the Global South to gather legitimacy and support for their actions from the global hegemon, the US. In his commentary, he holds that terrorism committed by states and their agents has been responsible for millions of deaths worldwide in the last two centuries, but that state terrorism remained an under-theorized and under-studied concept as compared to non-state terrorism. Adhikari urges the reader that the politics behind labelling someone as a terrorist needs to be interrogated thoroughly. [Economic & Political Weekly]

Nepal: How to eliminate caste-based discrimination

(ls) In this piece, Raj Pariyar examines how Dalits, who make up 13.8 percent of Nepal's population, seem to have been forgotten over time, remaining underrepresented in mainstream politics and governance of Nepal. Due to elections conducted

under the first-past-the-post system, Dalits, who live scattered around the country, won very few seats in comparison to their population. Also, the major political parties were not interested in Dalit candidates. Against this background, Pariyar demands more inclusive politics in Nepal. [Kathmandu Post]

The state of human rights and the rule of law in Asia

(jk) For a great overview of the state of human rights and the rule of law in Asia, please read CPG friend and colleague Kingsley Abbott's speech at the Asia News Network's (ANN) international symposium on upcoming elections in Asia in Bangkok. Kingsley is Senior International Legal Advisor at the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ).

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