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Asia in Review

(2/4/2018)

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to the second issue of CPG's *Asia in Review* in April 2018, updating you on the latest developments in law, politics and international relations in Asia.

I hope you enjoy reading!

Very best wishes for a Happy Songkran and best regards,

Henning Glaser

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Law and Politics in East Asia

Control of religious life in China: Bible online sales stopped

(dql) In a move of the Chinese government to close a loophole in its system of control over religious affairs, Bibles have been removed from the assortment of big online retailers, with searches for the book on China's largest e-commerce platforms, such as Taobao, JD, Dang Dang or Amazon.cn, ending up in 'no result' or recommendations for other Christian books. [South China Morning Post]

This move is line with new laws regulating religious affairs which came into force on 2 February and have been criticized by Chinese religious leaders for allowing too much oversight and control of the state over of religious life, including discussion of religious matters on social media, religious gatherings, the financing of religious groups, the construction of religious buildings and religious education. [The Table]

But the ban on online Bible sales also comes amid a recently intensified dialogue between the Vatican and Beijing towards a highly disputed agreement on the appointment of bishops in China. Critics of these negotiations denounce the potential deal for selling out the Catholic underground worshippers who have remained loyal to the pope and defied the official state-sponsored Catholic Church. [Air 1/4/18]

Meanwhile, the China's State Council on Tuesday released the White Paper "China's Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief" reassuring that China's 'religious education system has been further improved.' It identifies 200 million of religious population with Protestants numbering over 38 million and state-organized Catholics about 6 million. Catholic underground worshippers believed to amount to the same number are not covered. The White Paper also states that China has printed over 160 million copies of the Bible in more than 100 different languages for over 100 countries and regions, including 80 million copies printed in the Chinese language, 11 ethnic minority languages and braille for churches in China. [Xinhua 1 for the complete White Paper in Chinese] [Xinhua 2 for a summary of the White Paper in English]

Japan: Land sale scandal continues to pressure Abe administration

(dql) Fearing repercussions of the Abe administration's handling the cronyism-centered Moritomo Gakuen land sale scandal [AiR 1/4/2018] in the 2019 nationwide prefectural, municipal, and town assembly elections, local governments and assemblies have voiced dissatisfaction with the central government arguing 'that the government's explanation of the facts, including who ordered the deletions, when they ordered them, under whose orders, and why, is completely insufficient' and that the 'rewriting of documents by the bureaucrats ... could greatly shake the foundations of democracy and the Diet process.' The municipal assembly of Kyoto Prefecture went further and demanded the prime minister's wife and others named in the documents to testify over suspicion of their involvement in the scandal. [The Japan Times 1]

Prior to these announcements, the opposition in the Diet also called for sworn testimonies of Abe's wife Akie as well as Hidenori Sakota, director-general of the Financial Bureau at the time of the negotiations with Moritomo Gakuen on the land deal, and Saeko Tani, a government bureaucrat serving as Akie's aide when the negotiations were taking place. [The Asahi Shimbun]

Meanwhile, on Sunday, the first day of the 2018 fiscal year, and amid the ongoing document-forgery investigation, new government rules for managing public documents came into force, requiring agencies and ministries to keep administrative documents

needed for examinations of decision-making processes for at least a year in principle. Pressured by the investigation, Abe already a week before the new rules took effect announced a thorough review of the management of public documents in the past to adjust the new rules. [The Japan Times 2]

In a latest related development, the Defense Ministry revealed that daily logs from Ground Self-Defense Force units dispatched to Iraq have been found making then Defense Minister Tomomi Inada's statement in the Diet in February 2017 that the logs 'no longer exist' incorrect. The logs cover 408 days of the GSDF mission to Iraq from January 2004 to September 2006, amounting in total to around 14,000 pages. The files are believed to contain details about GSDF personnel's daily activities and the security situation in the area. [The Japan News]

South Korea: Opposition constitutional revision bill promises tough negotiations

(dql) Following President Moon Jae-in's submission of the government's constitutional revision bill on Monday last week [Air 1/4/2018], on Tuesday this week the main opposition Liberty Korea Party (LKP) made public its proposal for a constitutional revision.

Core of the LKP-proposal is a power- and jurisdiction-sharing government model under which the president takes control of security, diplomacy and other external affairs, while the prime minister, elected by the parliament, commands domestic affairs. The proposal also seeks to limit the president's authority to appoint the heads of powerful state entities such as the prosecution, police and spy agency by giving independent panels the right to recommend the candidates and have them undergo parliamentary approval procedures. Furthermore, the pproposal calls for a restriction of the presidential special pardoning authority by subjecting special pardons to parliamentary approval after deliberations by an independent panel.

Contradicting the government's bill in essential points, the LPK proposal and especially the power- and jurisdiction-sharing, which the ruling Democratic Party (DP) party opposes, foreshadow tough negotiations among the parties in the parliament. Further complicating the negotiations are the different preferred timelines for the national referendum on the constitutional revision among the parties. While the DP wants to hold the referendum on the day of local

elections in June, the LPK's proposal schedules it for September. [Korea Herald]

South Korea: Ousted President Park sentenced to 24 years in jail

(dql) Seoul Central District Court in a much anticipated, televised trial on Friday sentenced former President Park Geun-hye, who assumed power in 2013 and was ousted in 2017 over an influence peddling case of a close aide, to 24 years in prison and almost 17 million USD in fine. The court found her guilty of a number of charges including bribery to coercion, abuse of power and the leaking of state secrets. [Yonhap]

Meanwhile, the prosecution is seeking to freeze the assets of former President Lee Myung-bak registered under "borrowed" names. The move is an attempt to speed up the return of what the prosecution views as wealth acquired by illegal means, following a judgment that an earlier decision to have only Lee's personal assets frozen would be not enough to recover "illicitly secured" assets. Lee is facing a trial on 12 charges including bribery and embezzlement amounting to more than 43 million USD. [Korea Times]

Mongolia: Arrests in high-profile graft probe

(dql) Mongolia's Independent Authority Against Corruption announced this week the arrest of former Finance Minister Bayartsogt Sangajav in the frame of an investigation into alleged abuse of power in the context of investment talks for the Oyu Tolgoi copper mine, Mongolia's giant mining joint venture between Turquoise Hill Resources, a majority owned subsidiary of Anglo-Australian Rio Tinto, and the Mongolian Government with the former holding 66% ownership and the latter 34%.

The arrest of Bayartsogt comes amid an ongoing criminal investigation of the Swiss Office of the Attorney General into a seized bank account which according to court documents had been used to transfer 10 million USD to Bayartsogt in September 2008 who on behalf of Mongolia signed an agreement with Canadian Ivanhoe Mines in 2009 to develop the giant mine. [Reuters]

In a related investigation into a 2015 financing deal for the mine's underground expansion between Turquoise

Hill, Rio Tinto and the government of Mongolia former Mongolian Prime Minister Saikhanbileg Chimed, in office for two years until 2016, has been asked to return from the US to justify himself to the prosecutors while the former chief executive of the state-owned entity holding Mongolia's stake in Oyu Tolgoi, who signed the deal, and the former director general of the General Department of Taxation were arrested. [Financial Times]

Law and Politics in South Asia

India: Massive violence erupts in Kashmir

(ot) The latest series of clashes between Indian soldiers and suspected insurgents near the city of Srinagar in disputed Kashmir have resulted in at least 21 deaths. On 1 April, hostilities between Indian soldiers and suspected militants broke out as securities forced conducted anti-militant operations, leaving 3 soldiers and 13 suspected militants dead. Four civilians were also killed, and dozen other injured, when police reportedly open fire on thousands of demonstrators demanding an end to Indian rule. Another civilian was also killed after he was shot by government forces on Tuesday.

Pakistan has strongly condemned the violence, and expressed solidarity with Kashmiris. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a statement on Monday that he is "very concerned" over the situation, and urged all member states to protect their civilians. [The Diplomat]

India: Indian caste protests turn violent

(ot) On Monday, ten of thousands of Dalits took the streets to demonstrate against a recent Supreme Court ruling that weakens protections for the Dalit community. The protests took place across the country and turned violent in at least seven states. Ten deaths have been reported.

The Dalits are traditionally considered the lowest in Hinduism's caste hierarchy, and continue to face caste-based discrimination, exclusion, and violence, despite being outlawed by the constitution. In addition, the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act prosecutes anyone who commits hate crimes against lower-caste people and people belonging to tribal communities.

On 20 March, the Supreme Court ruled that, in order to prevent misuse of the law, police are prohibited from carrying out instant arrests, and that preliminary inquiry must be conducted into the alleged incident before beginning a formal investigation. However, the Dalit said the judgment would increase obstacle to prosecute people who commit crimes against lower castes. According to the latest national data, over 47,000 cases of such crimes were registered by police in 2016. [CNN 1]

As a result of the unrest and fierce opposition from the critics, the Supreme Court on Tuesday has agreed to hear an appeal against its ruling after a request by the government. [CNN 2]

India: Fake news crackdown withdrawn following critics

(ot) On Tuesday, the Indian government has withdrawn the plan to penalize distribution of "fake news" by journalists less than a day after it was announced. A new set of rules to have journalists' accreditation revoked if found to have written or broadcast "fake news" were proposed by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting announced on Monday evening, and immediately met with critics and opposition. The move was seen by the press as an effort by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to curb media coverage of a general election, due to take place by next year. Rajat Sharma, president of the News Broadcasters Association, one of India's main media regulatory bodies, said the organization had not been consulted prior to the ministry's announcement. [New York Times]

Pakistan: Political party added to US terror list

(ot) On Tuesday, the USA placed the Milli Musline League (MML), a small Pakistani political party, on its list of foreign terrorist groups. The U.S. State Department called the MML an alias for militant organization Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which is also on the United States terrorist list and blamed by the United States and India for being behind a deadly attack on Mumbai in 2008.

In response, MML president Saifullah Khalid called the U.S. decision a human rights violation and an intervention in Pakistan's internal affairs. He has vowed to continue his political parties and participate in the upcoming elections. [Reuters]

Bangladesh: University professor suspended for alleged defamation of Prime Minister's father

(hg) Dhaka University, Bangladesh's most prestigious university, has suspended a professor for writing a column critical of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's father, as the ruling party, the Awami League, increases to crackdown dissent before the elections upcoming this year.

After the student wing of the governing Awami League staged angry rallies on campus, the professor, Morshed Hasan Khan, was "suspended until further notice". Referring to an article published in a Bengali daily the university leadership alleges him to have defamed Bangladesh's first post-independence president Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who is Prime Minister Hasina's father, and having "distorting the history" of Bangladesh's war of independence in 1971.

In his column, Khan said it was military strongman Ziaur Rahman the husband of BNP opposition leader Khaleda Zia - not Hasina's father - who declared Bangladesh's independence, suggesting also that most of the Awami League's leadership, including Hasina's father, fled Bangladesh when the war broke out.

Last year 13 high school teachers were detained and remanded in custody ahead of a trial after being accused of sedition for remarks about Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. [Channel News Asia]

Sri Lanka: After defeating the no-confidence vote government remains instable

(hg) Following increasing tensions between President and Prime Minister, Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has resoundingly defeated a no-confidence motion on Wednesday by 122 votes to 76, leaving the coalition government, however, deeply divided.

The motion was initiated by the 'Joint Opposition' consisting of loyalists of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, whose opposition party won 225 out of the 340 directly-elected local councils in February. He has since then demanded that the government step down and call early elections, currently scheduled for 2020 and now attempted to capitalize on the intra-coalition tensions. Constitutionally, the current Parliament can only be dissolved before February 2020 with a two-third motion of the 225 member assembly in favor of snap elections.

PM Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) has 81 MPs in the 225-member Parliament leading a coalition of 107 MPs depending heavily on President Maithripala Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and smaller coalition members such as the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, the All Ceylon Makkal Congress and the Tamil Progressive Alliance. But the coalition has been plagued by the animosity between the president and the PM.

After both major governing parties, UNP and SLFP, fought the February local elections separately, 13 SLFP members voted against the PM in the no-trust vote, while President Sirisena blamed the Prime Minister, a free-market champion, for mismanaging the economy, unemployment and voter discontent. A central bank scandal led the President to furthermore strip the finance portfolio from the Prime minister - the central-bank governor is a trustee of the PM who was seen protecting him when his son-in-law allegedly made profits of $72 million from bond dealings while the state lost about $55 million -, while a sudden outbreak of communal violence targeting Muslims even worsened the political climate with accusations that supporters of former President Rajapaksa were involved. Another reason for intra- coalition tensions was Sirisena's attempts to extend his presidential term by a year until 2021, a move that was eventually rejected by the Supreme Court. [New Indian Express] [The Hindu] [News Observer]

The defecting SLFP Ministers who voted in favor of the no confidence motion convened two separate media briefings on April 5 saying they offered the President to step down if necessary. [News First] The smaller coalition parties, the All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC), the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA) and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) each led by a cabinet minister, voted against the motion. [Daily Mirror] [Colombo Page]

Meanwhile, the three-bipartite competition among President Maithripala Sirisena, Prime minister Wickremesinghe and their common rival, former president Mahinda Rajapaksa remains to define the political process´ center. [The Hindu] Noteworthy, Sirisena had been an ally of Rajapaksa until 2015 when he quit his government to join hands with Wickremesinghe, the then main opposition leader, to end Rajapaksa´s 10-year rule in the elections. [NDTV] It will have to be seen if President and Prime Minister might be able to reunite against a common adversary and reformulate a sustaining, workable and convincing political agenda of change.

Whereas Wickremesinghe has already announced talks with President Sirisena, the task seems difficult due the personal difficulties between the two leaders but also the fact that SLFP ministers were among the defectors who voted against the government. [South China Morning Post] This group of defecting SLFP Ministers has, however, offered the President to step down if necessary. [News First]

Maldivian constitutional crisis lingering on

(hg) The Maldivian parliament - the People's Majilis - while expected to resume sittings this week remains in uncalled recession. Since the lifting of the controversial 45-day state of emergency, no special committee meetings or parliament sittings have taken place with no further sittings having been scheduled so far while the last sitting took place on March 14 to approve amendments to the Judges Act and Anti-Defection Law seen by the opposition as legislative maneuvers of the ruling party to exert its control. [Avas 1]

Meanwhile, the Maldives Judicial Services Commission (JSC) has suspended the salaries to both Chief Justices having been officially suspended after their arrest on charges of being bribed to initiate an attempted overthrow of a constitutionally elected government

leading to the declaration of the state of emergency on Feb. 5. [Avas 2]

Law and Politics in Southeast Asia

Indonesia to open university sector to 100 percent foreign ownership

(ls) Indonesia's President Joko Widodo has instructed his cabinet to open up the university sector to 100 percent foreign investment. The move could help raise lagging education standards in the country of more than 250 million people, where students often opt to study abroad if they can afford it. Under Indonesian law, the government has to allocate a fifth of its budget to education-related spending. But the increased spending had not led to a meaningful improvement in the quality of education. [Reuters]

Malaysia: Election within 60 days as Mahatir's party is temporarily dissolved

(ls) Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak on Friday announced the dissolution of parliament, paving way for the widely-anticipated 14th General Election likely to be held in early May. Najib's five-year term officially ends on June 24, but the prime minister can dissolve parliament any time before the end of his term with the king's assent and call an election that needs to take place within 60 days after the dissolution. The Election Commission is expected to announce the dates for nomination and polling by next week. [Asian Correspondent]

On Thursday, former premier Mahathir Mohamad's new political party was ordered to be temporarily dissolved because of missing paperwork. The Registrar of Societies said in a letter that Mahathir's Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia had failed to meet a 30-day deadline to hand over paperwork proving the party had complied with registration requirements. The party can appeal against the ruling or reverse the order if it provides the required documents within 30 days. [South China Morning Post]

In the New Mandala, Clive Kessler describes how democratic transition under electoral democracy is not easily achieved in Malaysia. He holds that, while it is not easy for an opposition to win an election in Malaysia, it is far harder for them, even having done so, to assume power and rule. He writes that an opposition must not only win but win decisively, in a compelling manner, so that the outgoing ruling bloc will really leave office. [New Mandala]

"Fake news" vs. freedom of expression and free elections in Southeast Asia

(ls/thn) As expected, Malaysia's parliament has approved the law prohibiting fake news. As AiR reported last week, it is the first measure of its kind in the world and would allow for up to six years in prison for publishing or circulating misleading information – this means „any news, information, data and reports which are wholly or partly false, whether in the form of features, visuals or audio recordings or in any other form of capable suggesting words or ideas." This also concerns fake news generated outside the country, as long as Malaysia or Malaysians are affected. [New York Times 1]

"This law is not intended to restrict freedom of speech but to restrict the dissemination of fake news," said de facto law minister Azalina Othman Said. Human Rights Watch Asia Director Brad Adams said that "the Malaysian government has no monopoly on the truth, but it is attempting to be the arbiter of what can and can't be said and written." [Straits Times 1]

In an intriguing piece, Alwyn Lau examines the new fake news legislation from a Zizekian perspective, holding that the fight against fake news may prove fatal to reality itself as the social world cannot survive without its fictions. Against the background of the fact that most observers suspect that the primary motif behind the law to be the suppression of news critical of the ruling regime, he writes that, ironically, in order to

protect its own lies, the government employs a law about ensuring only the truth is disseminated. [New Mandala]

Certainly, the Malaysian law needs to be seen in a wider Asian context. Reuters has compiled a factbox about actions by Asian governments to crack down on fake news. [Reuters]

The Indonesian Communications Minister threatened to shut down Facebook and other social media platforms if there is any evidence that the personal data of citizens is being harvested or if the platforms fail to crack down on "fake news" during upcoming elections. [Straits Times 2]

In Myanmar, civil society groups on Thursday criticized Facebook's chief executive, Mark Zuckerberg, arguing that he mischaracterized his company's effectiveness at detecting and quashing messages encouraging violence in the country. Facebook has become a major channel for the spread of hate speech and propaganda in Myanmar that has encouraged and obfuscated ethnic cleansing of the country's Muslim Rohingya, according to human rights groups. [New York Times 2]

Moreover, the parent company of Cambridge Analytica allegedly helped put the Philippines' president Rodrigo Duterte into office, according to media reports and information pulled from the firm's website. The company said on their website that in the run up to the 2016 election its client, Duterte, was perceived as kind and honourable, but that the firm rebranded him as a strong, no-nonsense man of action to win. [South China Morning Post]

Philippines: Justice minister resigns – new national police chief – release of drug war records – peace talks with Maoists

(ls) Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said on Thursday that he has accepted the resignation of his justice secretary, Vitaliano Aguirre, the eighth member of his Cabinet to leave since last year. Duterte gave no reason, but it is speculated that Aguirre, a close friend of Duterte, was made to leave over his performance. Duterte also named Metro Manila police chief Oscar Albayalde as the new head of the national police force, replacing Ronald dela Rosa, whose extended tenure ends soon. The outspoken strongman dela Rosa was instrumental in Duterte's war on drugs. [Straits Times 1]

The Philippine Supreme Court on Tuesday ordered the police to hand over full records of thousands of deadly encounters in the country's war on drugs. The ruling thwarts the government's efforts to keep operational details of the bloody crackdown secret. The move comes just a few months after the International Criminal Court (ICC) announced it had started a preliminary examination into the drug war for crimes against humanity. Duterte has since withdrawn the Philippines' membership of the court in protest. [Straits Times 2]

In an unexpected move, Duterte on Wednesday asked his cabinet to work on a ceasefire with Maoist rebels in order to resume peace negotiations, four months after he called off talks and vowed to crush the insurgents. The defence ministry and the military said in separate statements, they would support the resumption of talks provided the rebels agreed to a truce and to stop extortion. [Reuters]

Singapore: Police warns against using Singapore as a platform for foreign politics

(thn) Due to Malaysia's upcoming general election the Singaporean police issued a warning against the importing of politics from other countries into Singapore. The reason were calls encouraging Malaysians living in Singapore to support political activities in the lead-up to the general election. This included the call by a coalition of Malaysian NGOs seeking to reform the country's electoral system. The police said in a statement that foreigners, who live or work in Singapore or visit the country should not use Singapore as a platform for any political activities. Non-Singaporeans will not be granted permits for any political assemblies. [Straits Times]

Thailand: A party for Prayut – Pheu Thai distancing itself from the Shinawatras

(ls) Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister Somkid Jatusripitak has hinted the formation of a new party is under way to support Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha to keep his office after the general election. The party, the "Pracharath Party", is expected to include key figures from the government as well as the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). Instead of hoping that Prayut will be chosen as an "outsider

prime minister" (one who has not been nominated by any of the parties beforehand), the new strategy to keep Prayut in power thus appears to include his name on one of the parties' lists of prime ministerial candidates. [Bangkok Post 1]

Meanwhile, the Pheu Thai party is publicly distancing itself from the Shinawatra family in a move to prevent dissolution on charges of third parties' influence. The party not only decided that former prime minister Thaksin will not take part by video conference from overseas during the party's traditional Songkran ceremony. [Bangkok Post 2] More importantly, Yaowapa Wongsawat, the sister of Thaksin and Yingluck, has left the Pheu Thai Party and quit politics. Yaowapa once held significant influence and bargaining power in the party. [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: First cross-border class-action lawsuit over alleged human rights abuses

(ls) Farmers from Cambodia have filed a lawsuit in a Thai civil court against Asia's largest sugar producer from Thailand, accusing it of rights abuses after it allegedly kicked farmers off their land. It is the first class-action lawsuit filed in a Thai court by plaintiffs from another country against a Thai company operating outside Thailand. [Reuters]

Vietnam: Human rights lawyer sentenced to 15 years in prison

(ls) Vietnamese human rights lawyer and activist Nguyen Van Dai was jailed for 15 years on Thursday along with five other activists who were given prison terms of seven to 12 years. Dai and others were charged with activities "aimed at overthrowing the people's administration" by having formed the "Brotherhood for Democracy" which conducted pro-democracy activities in Vietnam. [Reuters]

The trial was conducted under heavy security. A group of supporters were blocked by uniformed and plainclothes police as they marched toward the courthouse in central Hanoi. Some of them were hauled into unmarked vans by plainclothes security agents and others put on a bus. Dai has long been a thorn in the side of the communist authorities and served four years in prison for anti-state activity from 2007 to 2011. [Straits Times]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

Asia: US interest/US concerns

(hg) An interesting perspective on the US strategy towards Asia has been taken in the [National Interest]. With a view on an economical primate, it highlights the high stakes the US still have in the larger region. Irrespective of having pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) free trade agreement, the US are in fact decisively seeking to balance against a rising China under the label of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Strategy and especially by leveraging a growing India as a counterweight to China. In doing so, the US continues established Western strategies in its commitment to a normative conception of freedom that is substantially underpinned by Western values centered at good governance as manifest in terms of fundamental rights, transparency and anti-corruption. At the same time, so the article, it has become clear that parts of the Trump administration do effectively frame American grand strategy by national economic interest which would render a trade deal that has strategic value but no benefit for the American economy of only limited value. [National Interest]

As much as this reflects an obvious 'American business first' strand in President Trump´s foreign policy, it might, however, be doubted that economic benefit would ultimately trump security. Contrary, the new US national security strategy regarding great power competition, not terrorism, as the central challenge to US security and prosperity looking at China and Russia as the major adversaries will arguably develop the

decisive momentum in engaging the Indo-Pacific, not a 'business first' policy.

Secretary of the US Army, Mark Esper, a former vice president for government relations at Raytheon, a major US defense contractor company, stated last week: "The future we face is increasingly uncertain. China and Russia, which have been identified as our strategic competitors, as part of this era of great competition … are modernizing. They are eroding our overmatch, and they are improving their ability to threaten our interests." [Daily Signal] and for a video clip [Heritage Foundation]

The weight and implications of the present shift in security strategy are huge. A recent article of Michael T. Klare in [The Nation] claims "The screaming headline you should have seen in any paper (but haven't) is this: The US military has made up its mind about the future. It has committed itself and the nation to a three-front geopolitical struggle to resist Chinese and Russian advances in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East". For the Indo-Pacific theater, PACOM Commander Adm. Harry Harris Jr., has just painted a grim picture of America's strategic position in the region, highlighting that China was emerging as a formidable threat to America's vital interests with People Liberation Army´s capabilities "progressing faster than any other nation in the world, benefitting from robust resourcing and prioritization." [The Nation]

At multiple points along the Eurasian maritime zone – at the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea – US forces "are already in significant contact, often jostling for position in a potentially hostile manner. At any moment, one of these encounters could provoke a firefight leading to unintended escalation and, in the end, possibly all-out combat. From there, almost anything could happen, even the use of nuclear weapons." [The Nation]

Against this background, two recent assessments of risk scenarios concerning the South Pacific and the East China Sea are interesting.

Being less in focus of conventional risk assessments, the South Pacific remains strategically vital to the US for two key reasons that are lastly forming two sides of the same coin, the interests "to prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon" and the maintenance and expansion of the US sphere of influence under the label of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'.

Interestingly, Charles Edel, a senior fellow at the United States Studies Centre and former associate professor of strategy and policy at the US Naval War College, has

voiced concern that the three Pacific Island nations of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau which are joined with the US in Compacts of Free Association that are allowing the US a strategically highly important military presence in the Pacific might come under eventually disruptive stress. [War on the Rocks]

More manifest, however, seem concerns of increasing conflict in cross-strait relations and the Est China Sea as recently expressed by a panel of maritime experts from the US, Japan and Germany hosted by the Atlantic Council in Washington. From this perspective, China is seen as stepping up both its submarine presence in the East China Sea and its use of aerial drones for intelligence collection operations, while it is also said to engage in almost daily probes of Japan's air defense including simulated cruise missile attacks on Japanese mainland. The said panel expressed in particular concern that President Xi Jinping could act towards Taiwan as President Putin did towards Crimea. Such a perception is even more significant as President Trump's new national security adviser, John Bolton, is a strong opponent of the US 'One China' policy anyway (and one of Washington´s most hawkish security experts). [Asia Times]

South China Sea: China tries to counterbalance US influence in Vietnam

(ls/dql) China and Vietnam vowed to keep the peace in the South China Sea. "Both sides should not apply unilateral measures that would complicate the situation," China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in Hanoi during an official visit to Vietnam. His Vietnamese counterpart Pham Binh Minh said, "we are ready to work with China to resolve arising issues." The meeting came at a time when Vietnam has publicly promoted deepening security ties with the US in recent weeks. Earlier this month, a US aircraft carrier made a historic visit to Vietnam and last week Washington handed over six patrol boats and equipment to Hanoi. [Straits Times]

Meanwhile, Beijing in a latest show of military might launched on Thursday an unprecedented week-long series of live-fire exercises in the South China Sea, involving the aircraft carrier Liaoning and up to 40 other vessels, which will converge with three US aircraft carrier battle groups Washington has sent to the South China Sea to prepare for their own exercises. [Nine News]

Furthermore, sources close to the military revealed this week that China's first home-built aircraft carrier, the Type 001A Shandong, is ready for its maiden sea voyage, possibly scheduled for April 23, just before the 69th anniversary of the founding of the PLA Navy. With a capacity to carry up to 24 Shenyang J-15 multirole fighter jets as well as around ten rotary wing aircraft, the Shandong is believed to serve in the PLAN's North Sea Fleet or East Sea Fleet and deployed for regular carrier strike group operations. [The Diplomat]

China-US trade tensions escalating

(dql) The tit-for-tat escalation of the US-China trade dispute is gearing up. In the latest development of trade tensions between Beijing and Washington, China warned on Friday that it was fully prepared to retaliate with fresh trade measures after US President Trump on Thursday instructed the United States Trade Representative to consider 100 billion USD in additional tariffs against China. Trumps' threat of theses new tariffs itself followed a list of 106 U.S. goods including soybeans, whiskey, frozen beef and aircraft targeted by the Chinese government for tariffs, revealed on Wednesday just hours after the Trump administration proposed duties on some 1,300 Chinese industrial, technology, transport and medical products. [Global Times] [Reuters] [Financial Times]

Meanwhile, California-based cyber-security company Fire Eye reported on Wednesday increased attacks of state-controlled Chinese hackers against U.S. companies for financial espionage, aiming at acquiring information related to bid prices, contracts and mergers and acquisitions. [Bloomberg]

Japan: New defense era?

(dql) In major ocean policy shift, the Abe administration has come up with a proposal shifting the focus of Japan's basic ocean policy from resources to security and elevating coastal security and remote-island defense to top policy priority. The proposal identified as reason for the shift from the current focus on maritime resources development and management repeated intrusions of Chinese government ships and warships into Japanese waters as well as North Korea's firing of missiles into Japan's exclusive economic zone. The draft highlights the importance of the creation of a maritime domain awareness system for

sharing information collected by Japanese government agencies and other countries used for monitoring unidentified vessels and handling natural disasters. More specifically, it seeks to strengthen radars set up on Self-Defense Forces aircraft and along coasts and utilizing advanced satellites belonging to the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA). [The Japan Times]

The announcement of the policy shift plan comes after Japan's Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) on Wednesday celebrated the launch of its first ever full-fledged amphibious force with a ceremony as Japan grapples with the task of defending its remote islands in the southwest amid China's growing maritime assertiveness. The Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade, dubbed the Japanese "Marines," starts with around 2,100 members is part of the GSDF's largest-ever organizational overhaul [AiR 1/4/2018] made in an attempt to deal more flexibly with the shifting regional security environment. [NHK News]

Asia and UK/US-Russian tensions: China to support Russia

(hg) The poisoning of the former Russian military intelligence (GRU) colonel Sergei Skripal, who became a British spy, and his daughter with a nerve agent that has been invented in the Soviet Union in Cold War times has triggered one of the worst crises in East-West relations since the end of the Cold War. While the unprecedented expulsion of Russian diplomats highlights an intensifying Russian isolation in large parts of the Western world, the affair seems to have developed in a different direction in other parts of the world, including Asia. This could be observed on occasion of the 7th 'Moscow Conference on International Security' that has just taken place on April 4-5. As a sort of Russian pendant to the Munich Security Conference it hosted delegations from 95 countries, including 30 defense ministers and 15 chiefs of general staff, including Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe, Indian Defense Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and Iranian Defense Minister Amir Hatami as speakers.

The Russian defense minister underlined that "our strategic relations with China, India, Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar look indicative. We are getting a new impulse in our interaction with Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines both on a bilateral basis and within multilateral ASEAN formats". Addressing the Russian-Chinese notion of a confrontational Western

course, he stressed that there would be no military solution to problems on the Korean peninsula, whereas any further instigation of the situation might lead to an armed conflict. [Tass]

Most notably, Gen. Wei Fenghe, China's new defense minister, announced: "I am visiting Russia as a new defense minister of China to show the world a high level of development of our bilateral relations and the firm determination of our armed forces to strengthen strategic cooperation". And, surprisingly direct: "The Chinese side has come (to Moscow) to show Americans the close ties between the armed forces of China and Russia ... we've come to support you." [CNN]

Also related to the British-Russian Skripal affair, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson called on the relevant countries to find out the truth in the Skripal case, discard their Cold War mentality and refrain from confrontation. [China Daily]

Indian Defense Minister Sitharaman observed more carefully that a key facet of the current international situation is the “continued and rising unpredictability” in relations between major powers, which was both “unprecedented and a matter of concern” with the “current deterioration of ties between Russia and the West” being “a reflection of this trend”. [The Wire]

Moreover, the foreign ministers of Russia and China jointly denounced what they described as protectionist US-unilateralism which is currently only adding to both countries´ growing rapport on global issues. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi strongly criticized Washington's move to hike tariffs on Chinese products and warned it would hurt the global economy and international trade Calling it as "typical unilateralism and an undisguised attempt at hegemony", he requested that "the international community must jointly oppose such unilateralism and violation of rules." Russian foreign minister Lavrov declared: "It has nothing to do with diplomacy. It's an attempt to enforce its own interests while completely ignoring the interests of others". [NY Daily News]

Another international platform for Russia to garner international support last week, was the Ankara summit gathering the leaders of Russia, Turkey and Iran. Presidents Putin, Erdogan and Rouhani focused on the situation in Syria, where especially Iran and Turkey pursue the central goal to curb any Kurdish leverage in the border regions.

Positive for Moscow is not only the unity against American positions that includes a key NATO member state but also the fact that Russian S-400 missiles are

on order to Turkey, a move of high symbolic importance notwithstanding the S-400´s actual military impact. [Forbes]

Concerning the Skripal case, it will be interesting over the coming weeks to observe how the quick, concerted and harsh diplomatic reaction of the countries having followed the UK suit against Russia will be received in broader leadership circles in Asia. For the Maldives, N. Sathiya Moorthy raises the question in how far the UK/US-led West's "current engagement/disengagement with Russia", might lead to a deflection of Western engagement to the disadvantage of the Maldivian opposition. According to him, parts of the joint opposition in the Maldives seem to be in doubt how the scenario might develop in terms of continued Western support for their cause. The implicit notion is that the Western show of diplomatic force in the Skripal case will effectively rather strengthen than weakening anti-Western voices in the local discourse, seen as bolstering the incumbent administration in the Maldives. [ORF Online]

Another Asian country involved in the affair albeit in a different, rather indirect way is Bangladesh as Sheikh Mohammed Belal, the country's ambassador to Netherlands, is currently the chairman of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) executive council with the OPCW being in charge to verify the UK´s allegation that the poison is of Russian origin.

This has put Bangladesh for a short time in the focus of the major players. During an emergency meeting of the OPCW last Wednesday on Moscow's bid for a joint investigation, Joel Reifman, the chargé d'affaires of the US Embassy in Dhaka, met Bangladesh´s Foreign Secretary Md Shahidul Haque to discuss the matter after Russia had handed over a note to Bangladesh on March 22 explaining its position on the incident. The UK had also informed Bangladesh in detail about the incident several days after it had taken place in its bid to build international support for retaliatory measures against Russia. The British High Commissioner to Dhaka, Alison Blake, met Bangladesh's foreign secretary at least twice over the matter, on March 29 and again on April 2.

A bilateral meeting between the foreign ministers of Bangladesh and Russia in Moscow on Monday also discussed the OPCW investigation into the poisoning . [Dhaka Tribune]

Moreover, to take another angle, interesting is also how Pakistan and India have just responded to the Russian proposal for a joint probe into the Salisbury

Attack at the OPCW. While India has abstained from voting, Pakistan has supported the Russian motion, indicating how the strategic relations have already changed in the region. [The Wire]

Philippines President Duterte: 'If my plane explodes, ask the CIA'

(hg) President Duterte announced that he turned to China and Russia for firearms after US blocked his request for supply. Duterte has been seeking to acquire assault rifles to step up the fight against Islamists which the US refused amid concerns over human rights violations.

Russia 'donated' instead around 5,000 Kalashnikov rifles and around a million rounds of ammunition as well as 20 military trucks, China thousands of rifles and ammunition too. Yet, Duterte insists that there is no military alliance between the countries: 'To this day, Russia and China have yet to even ask for a piece of paper or pencil.' He is reported to have added in dramatic fashion, 'If my plane explodes, ask the CIA', a quote resounding rather vague allegations previously made at CIA´s address that nevertheless has been widely spread in the Southeast Asian press. [Daily Mail]

Vietnam: Russia or US?

(hg) The ongoing deterioration of Russian-American relations put stress on old Russian allies orienting now at the US to contain China. This applies in particular to India and Vietnam with India fostering also strategic ties with Iran.

As much as India and Vietnam seem to have taken a clear anti- China stance, as much is Russia a traditional defense partner and friend to them, - a status which will become increasingly difficult for all sides due to the increasing US-Russian tensions and the corresponding Russian-Chinese accord.

In the Vietnamese case, the link to Russia is the even closer, even if it seems to fall short of the facts to see US-Vietnamese relations as a delicate plant and relating more to the realm of "public relations rather than strategic dialogue"

Yet, that diminishes not the Russian factor as thoroughly described by Nate Fischler. When the US maintained a decades-long arms embargo until 2016,

Russia provided weaponry unrestrained to the extent that 93% of Vietnam's procured armaments from 2011-2015 were delivered by Russia with Vietnam being Russia's third biggest arms market worldwide at current, trailing only India and China.

In terms of inter-operability and familiarity, Russian arms are still unbeatable for the foreseeable future from a Vietnamese perspective, while a switch to American systems would come with high costs and a complicated process of weapons integration. Despite recent visits and lobby efforts by US President Trump and more recent Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, there are no indications for a significant momentum for such a turn. Not long ago, the Vietnamese Deputy Defense Minister declared that thanks to Russia the Vietnamese Navy can now "fully master the technology and techniques of modern military shipbuilding", a significant boost to its naval combat capabilities in the strategically important South China Sea. Since 2011, Vietnam has acquired a total of 129 missile systems, 36 aircraft and eight naval vessels from Russia. [Asia Times]

In February, Vietnam has received two Russian-built *Gepard*-class frigates joining two others that had been delivered in 2011 as part of a $350 million contract. [Newsweek]

Beside these vital links, however, Russia is an old friend, deer to not a few party cadre and older officers as well as a predictable ally that has no ideological demands such as the US.

While relations to Russia are valued with the top designation of a "comprehensive strategic partnership", the US and Vietnam share only a "comprehensive partnership", a term first employed after an upgrade in bilateral ties in 2013 which is used for links to 11 other countries as well.

However, Russia has on the other side also refrained from destabilizing the maritime region's balance of power to the disadvantage of Vietnams adversary China by not offering relevant weaponry to Vietnam. [Asia Times]

Now, Russia has nevertheless agreed to a new military cooperation roadmap with Vietnam signed by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and his Vietnamese counterpart General Ngo Xuan Lich in Moscow last Wednesday on the sidelines of the 7th Moscow Conference on International Security.

As part of the agreement, Russia will deploy a rescue boat from its Pacific fleet to Vietnam, which will take

part in search and rescue operations, send a delegation to continue work on a draft deal on search and rescue operations for disabled submarines and both countries will conduct joint military training including 176 Vietnamese soldiers supposed to travel to Russia for instruction. [Newsweek]

What might serve as a restrainer in the increasingly complicated situation however, is the dedication of Vietnam's defense and foreign policy to the "three no's": no military alliances, no foreign military bases on Vietnamese soil and no relationships directed specifically against third parties. [Asia Times]

India's interest in Russian S-400 missiles/Kalashnikov rifles

(hg) New Delhi has firmed up plans with Russia to manufacture Kalashnikov rifles (AK-103) in India to be used for the Indian Army after discussions during defense minister Nirmala Sitharaman's visit to the 7th Moscow Conference on International Security. [Economic Times]

More important, India's defense minister on her visit to Moscow also worked to finalize the long-planned purchase of five Russian S-400 missile air defense system, a deal that would fall under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). India has already been flagged the issue to Washington which signaled to opt not for punishing India for violating the sanctions but rather granting an exemption. [The Wire] However, there is still a realistic possibility that Delhi would in fact face sanctions which would definitely put a stain on US-Indian relations. [New York Times]

The potential purchase demonstrates India's continued reliance on Russian military hardware at a time when the US is also trying to increase its weapons to Delhi with Washington's arms sales to India having increased from nearly zero around fifteen years ago to some $15 billion today. Over the past five years, the US has even edged up to become India's second largest arms supplier, just behind Russia covering 62% of arms sales during the same period, down from 79 percent from 2008 to 2012. [National Interest]

The S-400 would, however, be a particular problem. First, for its class of air defense systems it represents the gold standard whose implementation is considered to be a game changer due to its capability. Second, and resulting from this quality, the S-400 has a certain

symbolic value indicating the limits of US hard ware dominance.

Nepalese PM Oli in Delhi amid soured relations

(hg) Nepal's Prime Minister KP Oli, together with a high-level delegation, went to India for a three-day state visit on his first visit abroad after assuming office for a second time after fighting an ultra-nationalist election campaign much focusing on Indian interference in Nepali politics. During Oli's first term, India-Nepal ties had reached their lowest point when Delhi pressured for the interests of Indian-origin Madhesis in the context of crafting the current Nepali constitution, allegedly supporting a blockade to put pressure on Kathmandu which, however, created widespread suffering in Nepal and caused bitter anti-Indian sentiments. Nepal has joined China´s Belt and Road Initiative in the meanwhile and is expected to formalize a number of projects under the scheme in the coming months. [Daily O] [Kathmandu Post 1] [The Hindu] See for an exclusive interview with PM Oli on his India trip, bilateral relations and Nepali foreign policy [The Hindu].

For the legacy of the blockade of the Indian-Nepali border see [Nepal Times].

When Nepal promulgated its constitution in 2015 to mark lasting peace after years of civil war, India exerted pressure on Nepali leaders, who are mostly from the northern hills, to accommodate the demands of the plains, especially regarding the said Indian-origin Madhesis and to reverse the decision for a secular constitution. To comply with the Indian pressure from PM Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and declare Nepal as a Hindu state or to refrain from declaring it as secular was regarded by the leftist Nepali counterparts as an automatic invitation to the monarchy to return as the king is considered in Hindu political theology a reincarnation of a god. When dissenting minority groups started to block cargo trucks from India, Delhi used its border forces and customs to further block goods traffic in a time when Nepal still suffered tremendously from the consequences of a disastrous earthquake that had ravaged the poor country only month before. When PM Oli approached China for critical fuel supplies, Beijing promptly reacted, neutralizing the effects of the blockade which began then to be slowly lifted after five months in February 2016 as Nepal agreed to a few minor changes in the constitution. The very next

month PM Oli visited China to engage in a dense partnership whose heart piece was a transit agreement allowing Nepal access to Chinese sea ports. But the anti-Indian resentment goes way beyond the episode as well reflected by Nepali editor quoted by the SCMP: “India wants to micromanage Nepal. They have to control all government appointments, they have to know everything. Their ambassadors behave like viceroys. Aren’t we a sovereign nation?” [South China Morning Post]

Significantly, even the Nepali, traditionally pro-Indian opposition, expects PM Oli to be treated respectfully during his visit. [The Hindu]

Now, China accounts for nearly 60 per cent of foreign direct investment (FDI) with India being a distant second with US$36.63 million, followed by the US and Japan. [South China Morning Post]

According to recent news a Chinese company will finance a Nepal's private sector-led Hydropower Project and comprehensively coordinate all design, procurement, construction and finance after another Chinese company has signed an agreement with Nepal's People's Energy Limited to develop another Hydropower Project. [Steel Guru]

Another Chinese financed energy project, a – currently only planned - dam project, the $2.5-billion Budhi Gandaki plant in central-western Nepal, has become a major issue in the Delhi – Kathmandu – Beijing relations with PM Modi expected to refuse to buy the energy produced if it would be realized. The project had been initiated by former Nepal Prime Minister and Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, or ‘Prachanda’, but soon cancelled by his successor in office from the pro-Indian Nepali Congress, Sher Bahadur Deuba. [Kathmandu Post 2]

The current Indian – Nepali talks are held after Pakistan has surprisingly advanced to reach out to both the Maldives and Nepal after Pakistan´s Prime Minister Abbasi has just headed to Kathmandu for a two - day visit only three weeks after Oli has taking over as Prime Minister. Abbasi was the first high profile foreign visit to Nepal´s new leader reportedly discussing also the Chinese Belt and Roads Initiative which Pakistan prominently joins. [Asian Tribune]

Maldives shifting away from India – now towards Pakistan

(hg) The Maldives, traditionally part of the Indian backyard, are shifting away from what India would like to see as its sphere of great power influence, coming closer not only to China but now also to India´s arch enemy Pakistan.

For a long time, India was the island state´s big brother, sometimes helpful, sometimes dominating. Thirty-year ruling autocrat Gayoom, now one of the leaders of the joint opposition, has received crucial military support as a pro-Indian leader for instance when he was threatened by an attempted coup d'état led by Maldivian separatists and assisted by PLOTE, a Tamil secessionist group from Sri Lanka.

When the Gayoom dictatorship came to an end with the 2008 elections, first democratically elected President Nasheed, representing the other wing of the Maldivian opposition, continued good relationships with India until he had to resign in 2012, while Chinese investment started already to flow in. Current President Yameen, a half-brother of Gayoom, turned then decisively to China since 2014. Since then, Yameen has helped China to continuously beef up its presence economically but also by allowing the Chinese navy to dock in the archipelago. The Indian – Chinese rivalry has strongly influenced the present domestic power struggle with former President Nasheed having called for a military intervention by India to protect his country to be sold out to China. [International Policy Digest]

China has warned, however, that it would resist any Indian military intervention which has been ruled out by Delhi, while the Indian relationships to the Yameen government even worsen.

At a time when bilateral relations "are clearly in a free fall", the Maldivian government has asked Delhi now to take back one of two naval helicopters it had gifted to the Indian Ocean archipelago saying that Male wanted a Dornier maritime surveillance aircraft instead of the "Dhruv" Advanced Light Helicopter it has received. Male is said to be also considering asking India to remove the other Indian chopper too which operates in an atoll where China is said to be considering building a port. [Times of India] Moreover, has declined an invitation by India to send a ministerial-level delegation to the Defence Expo, a biennial exhibition of weapons and military hardware, to be held in Chennai next week, after having declined India's invitation to participate in the eight-day major naval exercise "Milan" from March 6-13 too. [Global Village Space]

Now, the surprising visit of the Pakistani army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa is another step in the

Maldives´ shift away from India. The most worrisome outcome for India are reported discussion about joint patrol by Maldivian and Pakistani naval forces in the vast exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of the island state, which is regarded as a 'redline' for India. So far, India has been the only country with whom the Maldives have conducted such joint patrols of its EEZ. Not too long ago, India and the Maldives have still been defense partners - even when China became already economically increasingly important already - leading to the conclusion of a significant MoU on defense cooperation in 2016. The latter formalized a process of setting up a coastal surveillance radar system for "real-time surveillance of the EEZ of Maldives". Back then, India has supported the surveillance of the EEZ of the Maldives, Mauritius and the Seychelles unrivaled. [The Wire] A Pakistani – Maldivian joint patrol of the Maldivian EEZ would mark a major setback, seen as an intervention in the Indian backyard and a dangerous encircling of the sub-continent.

Another potential issue of Pakistani – Maldivian cooperation will be counter-terrorism with a team from the Maldives´ National Counter Terrorism Centre said to soon travel to Pakistan to further cooperation. In fact, Maldivian nationals received scholarships for religious study in Pakistan which seems to have contributed not only to their radicalization in general but also to the high number of Maldivians joining the Islamic State. [First Post]

Bangladesh PM invited by Saudi King to join joint military exercise

(hg) Saudi King Salman Bin Abdul Aziz has invited Bangladesh Prime Minister Hasina to attend the concluding ceremony of the 23-country month-long joint military exercise 'Gulf Shield-1' that was participated by Bangladesh as well. A similar exercise led by Saudi Arabia, "North Thunder", has been held in 2016, with the participation of 20 Arab and Islamic countries.

On March 3 this year, Bangladesh Chief of Army Staff General Abu Belal Muhammad Shafiul Haque visited the Armed Forces Exhibition for Diversity of Requirements and Capabilities (AFED 2018) in Riyadh where he expressed hopes of increasing military cooperation between the two countries. [DhakaTribune]

China: Threat of returning jihadist fighters increased

(dql) According to analyses of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations China is facing an increased threat from trained jihadists re-entering the country, with the number of such people intercepted by Chinese authorities in 2017 6 times as high as in 2016. Jihadists return to China via Russia or central Asia, and their options had been broadened Beijing's has been intensifying ties with Central Asian countries in the frame of its One Belt, One Belt Initiative. [South China Morning Post 1]

Meanwhile, local media outlet Pajhwok Afghan News reported that two Chinese militants were among seven killed in an operation by Afghan military forces in the country's northeast on Friday last week. The operation was part of a offensive conducted along Afghanistan's 76 km border with China's Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region which is home to about 10 million people, mostly Muslims. [Pajhwok Afghan News] [South China Morning Post 2]

Inter-Korean relations: Search for dialogue formats after Kim Jong-un accepts return to six-party talks

(dql) After Nikkei Asian Review on Thursday reported that Kim Jong-un told Xi Jinping during his visit to Beijing that he was ready to resume six-party talks to discuss denuclearization [Nikkei Asian Review], Seoul's reaction to the news reflects cautiousness as it on Friday reaffirmed that negotiations on denuclearization should be discussed first among the two Koreas and the US during planned summits, before involving other nations. [Korea Times]

The six-party talks involving the two Koreas, the US, China, Russia and Japan began in 2003. However, they failed in 2008, largely because the North refused to allow inspectors to verify that it had shut down its nuclear programs.

International Court of Justice to hear Malaysia-Singapore island case

(ls) The International Court of Justice (ICJ) announced that it will hear arguments "concerning the revision of

the judgment of 23 May 2008 in the case concerning sovereignty over Pedra Branca/Pulau Batu Puteh" between Malaysia and Singapore, starting on 11 June. Malaysia lodged its case in February 2017, calling for the court to overturn its 2008 ruling granting Singapore sovereignty over the rocky islet. The Malaysian government said that new documents had been discovered in British archives backing its territorial claim. The island is in a strategically important position, 14 kilometres off Johor on the eastern approach to the Singapore Strait from the South China Sea. [South China Morning Post]

Rohingya crisis: UN Security Council to visit Myanmar – Duterte speaks of "genocide"

(ls) Myanmar has agreed to a visit by the UN Security Council after months of resistance. Peruvian Ambassador Gustavo Meza-Cuadra, who holds the council's rotating presidency, said details of the itinerary had yet to be finalized, including whether the government would allow the council to visit Rakhine state. [Straits Times 1]

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said on Thursday that "genocide" was taking place in Myanmar and he was willing to accept Rohingya Muslim refugees fleeing from it, though Europe should help too. So far, other ASEAN countries have refrained from referring to the incidents in Rakhine as genocide, following ASEAN's policy of non-interference with internal affairs. [Straits Times 2]

Indonesia-Thailand Defense Pact

(hg) A closer look at the status of an agreement reached by both sides back in 2015.

Late last month, Thailand and Indonesia have agreed to ratify a new defense pact which has be seen against the background of a series of developments indicating intensifying bilateral relationships in general and regarding security ties in particular and is based on an initial MoU from May 2015

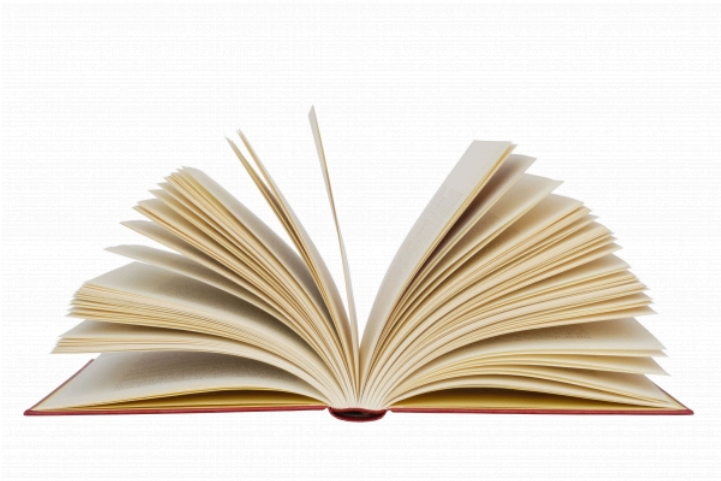
Both countries are Southeast Asia's largest economies and among the initial founding members of ASEAN have long had a bilateral relationship that includes a security component. While substance and pace of the bilateral defense cooperation seem to remain still

modest, it is highlighting the fact that Thailand and Indonesia could be decisive for the future of ASEAN amidst the changing geopolitical chess board in Asia. [The Diplomat]

Belarusian couple held in Thailand still claims to have U.S.-Russia secrets

(ls) The Belarusian couple who has been detained in Thailand insists that it has evidence demonstrating Russian interference in the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States. They say they have offered it to the F.B.I. in exchange for a guarantee of their safety. The two were arrested with the help of a "foreign spy," according to the Thai police, and jailed on the minor offense of working without a permit. The F.B.I. did try to talk to the pair, suggesting that American investigators had not dismissed their account out of hand. The New York Times has compiled the unusual circumstances of the case. [New York Times]

Background Reading



Complexities of Constitutional Change in the Philippines

(ls) Cheryl Saunders and Michael Henry Yusingco provide useful background on current efforts in the Philippines to change the constitution in order to adopt a federalist system. They hold that the future of constitutional change under President Duterte is uncertain for a series of constitutional and political reasons. In particular, some of the most pressing of

these concerns is the process of constitutional change itself. [Verfassungsblog]

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