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

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

Asia in Review

(4/4/2018)

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to the for fourth issue of CPG's *Asia in Review* in April 2018, providing you an update on the latest developments in law, politics and international relations in Asia.

I hope you enjoy reading!

With very best regards,

Henning Glaser

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Law and Politics in East Asia

China: National security whistle-blower website launched

(dql) China's Ministry of State Security on Sunday launched its online 'State Security Reporting Platform' and established a 'hotline' telephone number providing the public channels to report potential threats to national security, including - among others - bribery of state officials, fomenting armed riots or ethnic separatism, leaking state secrets, and foreign espionage. Under the guidelines of the platform, those delivering successful tip-offs will be rewarded and those giving false information punished. [South China Morning Post 1] [Business Insider] For the complete list of targeted actions see [State Security Reporting Platform, in Chinese]

Meanwhile, President Xi Jinping at a closed meeting of the Central National Security Commission, China's national security strategy agency headed by himself, on Tuesday voiced satisfaction about the work of the Commission in the past years saying that it successfully "improved the strategies of national security, and established mechanisms for coordinating relevant work" and urged the agency to continue "to fully implement a holistic approach to national security and break new ground in national security in the new era."

[Xinhua] A number of national security related laws have been passed since the establishment of the Commission in 2014 raising concerns over the party's tightening grip on human rights and social control as well as Beijing's assertive foreign policy. [South China Morning Post 2]

Among those laws is the 2015 National Security Law which imposes on Chinese citizens an obligation to contribute to the protection of national security on the basis of a very broad notion of national security covering not only traditional areas of political of military security, but also nuclear security, social, economic and ecological development, as well as cultural and ideological control over the public. [National Security Law 2015, in Chinese]

Japan: Prime Minister Abe's faces resignation demands

(dql) Battered by ongoing investigations into two cronyism cases in which he is suspected to be involved [AiR 3/4/2108] and an approval rate at 31% against a disapproval rates at 52% [Asahi Shimbun], Prime Minister Abe is facing demands to step down. While 50000 people last weekend took their anger over the cronyism scandals to the streets and demanded his resignation [The Japan Times], former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi from the same ruling Liberal Democratic Party i n an interview suggested Abe to step down at the end of the parliamentary session in June to prevent damage on the party in the 2019 Upper House election. [The Economic Times]

South Korea: Ruling Democratic Party under pressure over online scandal

(dql) Shortly ahead of local elections in June a online scandal threatens to affect the chances of the ruling Democratic Party (DP) in the elections after Seoul Metropolitan Police arrested an influential Democratic Party (DP) blogger and two other DP members suspected to have run an online comment manipulation campaign used in January to increase the number of "likes" or "feel the same way" clicks for two comments critical of the government on a news article. Their reported aim was to make it appear that the opposition Liberty Korea Party manipulated the comments. The DP has especially come under pressure as a DP lawmaker and a close confidant of President Moon Jae-in is suspected to be involved in

the case. In a move to prevent a political backlash of the case the party expelled two of the arrested party members and agreed with the opposition parties to form a fact finding panel. [Yonhap]

Law and Politics in South Asia

Bangladesh/Myanmar: Repatriation of Rohingya paralyzed

(ls) The Bangladeshi government and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) disputed Myanmar's claim it had repatriated five members of a Rohingya family, saying neither the government of Bangladesh nor the aid agency had any involvement in any such repatriation. Myanmar and Bangladesh agreed in January to complete a voluntary repatriation of the refugees in two years. [Reuters]

Bangladesh: Concerns over proposed digital security law

(ls) A proposed law in Bangladesh aims at creating harsher punishments for defamation committed online. In the Daily Star, Shakhawat Liton points out that the law would create different standards for traditional media and the internet. Whereas for cases of defamation allegedly committed in traditional media only the persons aggrieved by the content may sue the offenders, in cases of online defamation anybody on behalf of the alleged victim can file a case. In addition, the punishment for online defamation would be higher than for defamation in traditional media. Liton argues

that further shortcomings in the bill create a danger for freedom of expression. [Daily Star]

India: The political dimension of the rape cases

(ls/ot) During the past week, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been battered by a nationwide storm over two rapes. One involved the abduction, gang rape and murder of an eight-year-old Muslim girl by Hindus in Jammu and Kashmir state, where two BJP ministers in the provincial government were forced to resign after initially offering support for the accused rapists. In the other case, a BJP legislator in Uttar Pradesh state, India's most populous, stands accused of raping a teenager. [Reuters]

On Sunday, thousands of people took the streets. The cases have put pressure on the conservative government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is seeking reelection next year. The party has been heavily criticized for attempting to protect the men implicated in both cases, while failing to protect women and minority groups. A statement by PM Modi was released last Friday, promising justice for "our daughters." [CNN]

The rape of the Muslim girl has seen protests reflecting religious tensions: Thousands of members of a radical Hindu group with links to the ruling party have marched to demand the release of the six men accused in the repeated rape and killing of the girl inside a Hindu temple. Hundreds of Hindu lawyers have protested that the men, two of them police officers, are innocent. Police say the attack on the girl was rooted in religious politics. Conflicts between Muslim nomads and local Hindus had been brewing in recent years over land disputes. [Washington Post]

In the New York Times, Mitali Saran notes that, instead of uniting India in horror, the incident has deepened religious, political and ethical divides. She argues that is has also made clear that there is no automatic political cost to crime or falsehood if it furthers the hegemonic political narrative, as the politicians involved were sacked only after a huge public outcry. [New York Times]

Maldives: U.N. demands former president Nasheed to be admitted to elections

(ls) The Maldives rejected a demand by the U.N. Human Rights Committee, a panel of independent experts overseeing states' compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, that former president Mohamed Nasheed be allowed to stand for office, including in a presidential election later this year. Nasheed was sentenced to 13 years in jail in 2015 but went into exile. He was disqualified from running in presidential elections for 16 years. The current president Abdulla Yameen imposed a 45-day state of emergency in February to annul a Supreme Court ruling that quashed the convictions of nine opposition leaders, including Nasheed. [Reuters] The Los Angeles Times published a portrait of Nasheed and his past and present political aspirations. [Los Angeles Times]

Nepal: A letter to the Prime Minister from Human Rights Watch

(ls) In a letter to Nepal's Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Oli, Human Rights Watch pointed to several human rights issues in the country, including transitional justice, violence in the Terai region, rights of children and young women, impunity and security sector reform, gender and sexual minority rights, citizenship as well as refugee and migrant worker rights. [Human Rights Watch]

Pakistan: Human rights under pressure from encounter killings and human trafficking

(ls/ot) The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) slammed the nation's deteriorating human rights record in a report released on Monday, highlighting extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances across the country. "A study shows more Pakistanis died in incidents described as 'encounters' than in gun violence or in suicide attacks," the HRCP said, pointing to research showing that, in 2017, 495 people died in what law enforcement called shoot-outs. The issue of encounter killings has made headlines for months in Pakistan following the death in January of a young social media star and ethnic Pashtun. [South China Morning Post]

On another human rights-related issue, Pakistan's National Assembly passed a law designed to tackle human trafficking to European and other countries.

Under the law, passed on April 12, the traffickers and those who help them will face a jail term of up to 14 years and a fine of up to two million rupees ($17,000). Earlier, it had been reported that the United States could cut civilian aid worth tens of millions of dollars this year to Pakistan if the country failed to do enough to combat human trafficking. [Arab News]

Pakistan: TV channel back to air after Sharif's political career has ended

(ls/ot) On Tuesday, Pakistan's largest and most popular TV station, Geo TV, was allowed back on the air at some major cable operators following negotiations with the military who demanded changes to the station's political coverage. The channel was taken off air at the end of March and reportedly pressured by the military to cease favorable coverage of ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and to stop any criticism of the Supreme Court and negative portrayal of the military. Geo News has been one of the few broadcast stations extensively covering former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's defiant rallies around the country criticizing the military. [Reuters] As reported in AiR, Pakistan's Supreme Court last week effectively ended Sharif's political career, voting unanimously to ban him for life from holding any public office. [Reuters]

Sri Lanka: Parliament suspended after failed no-confidence vote

(ls) Sri Lanka's president Maithripala Sirisena has suspended parliament until May 8, days after a failed no-confidence motion attempt against the prime minister and the defection of several ministers forced a cabinet reshuffle. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe survived the confidence vote which was sponsored by opponents who blame him for failing to prevent an alleged scam in the bond market and anti-Muslim riots last month. But 16 lawmakers, most of them ministers, from Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) voted in favor of the no-confidence motion. They resigned their portfolios and decided to sit with the opposition, weakening the SLFP's coalition with Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP). [Reuters]

In The Print, Taylor Dibbert argues that Sri Lanka's widely acclaimed democratic transition has fallen far short of expectations, citing anti-Muslim destructions and the strong performance of the new Sri Lanka

People's Front (SLPP) in local government elections in February which reiterate that Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism is an important political force in Sri Lanka. [The Print]

Law and Politics in Southeast Asia

Malaysia: Party dissidents ask court to suspend governing party UMNO ahead of elections

(hg) Sixteen dissident members of United Malays National Organization (UMNO) – Malaysia´s dominating governing party since independence in 1957 – asked a court on 20 April to order suspension of all activities for allegedly breaching the party's statutes.

The move comes after two former Malaysian cabinet ministers raised the question if UMNO could take part in the upcoming May 9 general election, as the party had twice postponed its internal party polls – way beyond a three-year period imposed by the party´s statutes. In fact, UMNO held its last internal votes in October 2013. After the responsible Registrar of Society (ROS) had accepted the delay last year ordering to hold polls until Thursday, April 19, 2018, the ROS last month gave UMNO another deadline. This time, the RoS allowed the governing party to postpone its polls again by one more year to April 19, 2019. Allegedly, UMNO had postponed its internal elections in the past few years as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib faced severe allegations in context of what seems to be a major corruption scandal.

The issue is even more sensitive as the ROS last month temporarily suspended opposition Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM) for failing to abide by its constitution on a matter the registrar would not disclose. PPBM is led by former Prime Minister and ex-UMNO leader Tun Mahathir Mohamad who is challenging UMNO President and Prime Minister, Najib Razak in coalition with jailed Anwar Ibrahim. [Straits Times]

Only one day after the 16 UMNO dissidents applied for judicial review, arguing they had been deprived of their right to choose the party leadership, they have been dismissed with immediate effect by the party. [Free Malaysia Today]

Indonesia: Weakening the freedom of expression and the struggle against corruption in a single legislative move – MD3

(hg) Last month, Indonesia's House of Representatives (DPR) passed a controversial legislative amendment to the 2014 Legislative Institutions Law known as MD3, that curbs public criticism of lawmakers and isolate them from the Corruption Eradication Commission´s (KPK) oversight.

The bill makes the Parliament's own ethics council responsible for allegations of corruption of lawmakers and allows it on the other side to bring charges against individuals or organizations that 'disrespect the dignity of the House or its members'. [Global Risk Insights]

The MD3 bill reflects two noteworthy trends.

First, the bill is in line with similar legislative barriers to free speech in Southeast Asia and Indonesia as well, characterized by laws employing broad and vague terms that will inevitably instill fear in discourse communities to freely express opinion on political issues as well as carrying the potential to target journalists, social activists or ordinary citizens expressing discontent with government conduct. In Indonesia, there is additionally a draft for a new Criminal Code in preparation, which will contain for example imprisonable offenses such as 'verbal attacks' against the president or vice president; public defamation of the government, president or vice president; and dissemination of defamatory anti-government material. More than 200 persons are currently also prosecuted for defamation under the 2008 Electronic Information and Transaction Law – a

law originally aimed at combatting cybercrimes and enforcing cybersecurity which reflects that these kinds of legislation tend to expand their scope if implemented once.

Second, the bill represents another blow against Indonesia´s efforts to establish cleaner politics. In the past, anti-corruption has proved to be a powerful tool to gain public attention and legitimacy used for example by some Islamist parties and the Constitutional Court, which both, however, quickly developed their own corruption scandals. The parliament which had already weakened the Constitutional Court when the institution enjoyed a reputation of being one of the cleanest public bodies, is consistently perceived to be among Indonesia´s most corrupt public institutions, which just experienced another major corruption scandal some months ago. Now, it is weakening the Corruption Eradication Commission´s (KPK) oversight grip on the parliament with the KPK being widely considered to be the last bastion in the country's fight against corruption.

The way how a broad coalition government brought forward such a blatant move against both the freedom of speech and the fight against corruption in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice reflects a polity in which major actors are increasingly putting the gloves off in preparing for local elections this and national elections next year, fully irrespective of the global trend to increase and focus anti-corruption efforts. [Global Risks Insights]

Indonesia: Bill proposed to limit cash transactions in fight against corruption

(hg) Indonesia's government has proposed a draft bill to limit cash transactions to a maximum 100 million rupiah (S$9,520), for the sake of curbing bribery and money laundering.

Some 85 per cent of transactions in Indonesia are in cash, much more probably in terms of corruption. The bill is introduced with elections for mayors and governors set for June this year. [Straits Times]

Indonesia: 'Islamization' of women's movement as pars pro toto

(hg) Farid Muttaqin provides an interesting account of “overwhelming efforts” to Islamize Indonesia´s

women's movement, a development which has to be seen in context with a continuous rise of political Islam that is working on replacing more “secular” and “liberal” ideas by – various – agendas of more Islamic and Islamic- nationalistic provenance in an ongoing struggle to increase Muslim dominance in Indonesia’s social and political life. [Jakarta Post]

Besides, the discourses driven by a multifaceted Islamic activism, a creeping Islamization of public culture and social interaction is perceptible almost everywhere in the country, increasingly setting norms not only for those favoring a more secular way of life but also those being more indifferent Muslim believers. [Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: After landmark decision on religious freedom indigenous beliefs still at the margins

(hg) Joe Cochrane reports on indigenous religions - “traditional beliefs” - that predate the arrival of world religions in Indonesia which, nevertheless have a hard time amid a climate of increasing religious intolerance and against the background of a state that is not secular but considering the belief in one god as part of the social contract. With an estimated followership of altogether 20 million believers, there are in fact hundreds of different forms of traditional beliefs (aliran kepercayaan) spread across the vast archipelago, sometimes purely indigenous religions, sometimes eclectic variations of animist, Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic notions.

Last November, the Constitutional Court affirmed in a landmark ruling the rights of followers of traditional beliefs outside of the six state-recognized religions, which has yet not been implemented by the government. Given widespread resistance against the ruling among some of the less moderate Muslim groups and an increasing political role of an Islamic mainstream orthodoxy which seems to be in constant flow of redefinition, Indonesia’s Ministry of Home Affairs is careful to respond to the Constitutional Court ruling interpreting it as acknowledging the traditional beliefs “only as a culture, not a religion”. [New York Times]

Indonesia: Rooting out red light districts by 2019?

(hg) Throughout the country, national and local governments have shut down “prostitution sites” – red light districts, where authorities turn a blind eye to blatant sex trade which is illegal –, claiming to have returned some 20,000 sex workers to their families with the Social Ministry vowing to continue its crackdown program pursuing the target to make Indonesia entirely free of prostitution sites by 2019. [Coconuts Jakarta]

Philippines: President Duterte´s goes on to blatantly neglect international human right standards

(hg) Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who compared himself to Adolf Hitler and vowed to kill millions of drug dealers, has shown his disregard for the international human rights discourse more than clear since he is in office.

After his War on Drugs prompted the International Criminal Court to announce in February that it would begin a preliminary examination, President Duterte responded by withdrawing the Philippines from the Court's Rome Statute. Now he has threatened to arrest the International Criminal Court's prosecutor if she enters the Philippines to begin investigating.

Last month the Duterte administration compiled a list on which more than 600 socialist activists are designated as terrorists after the government had already declared the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People's Army, to be terrorist organizations in December last year. [The Wire]

See the corresponding interview with leftist intellectual and former Senator Walden Bello on the human right situation in the Philippines on Youtube [Walden Bello Interview]

Meanwhile, the newly appointed commander of the Philippines´ police pledged to keep up President Duterte's bloody anti-drug war one day after having entered office. [Chanel News Asia]

Facebook in SEA

(jk) News on Facebook this past week have much focused on its CEO’s testimony before the US congress. A lot is happening in Southeast Asia as well:

Authorities in Indonesia recently threatened to ban Facebook unless the company gets a handle on privacy and fake news. The government may be worried about fake accusations about President Joko Widodo's alleged communist sympathies or collusion with China ahead of next year's elections [Bloomberg]. Much like Zuckerberg in the US Congress, Facebook employees in Indonesia had to face tough questions from lawmakers [Straits Times 1].

In the Philippines, where Facebook has appointed two online news platforms (Rappler, which continues to operate pending an appeal over its shutdown, and VERA Files) for a joint project to monitor and stop the spreading of fake news, its choice has been criticized by the government, alleging the selected news organisations are biased against President Duterte [Strait Times 2]. The government also said it is investigating the social media firm over reports information from more than a million users in the Philippines was breached by British data firm Cambridge Analytica [VoA].

In Cambodia, Facebook is in the middle of a lawsuit (filed in California in February) by former leader of the now-dissolved opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), Sam Rainsy alleging that Prime Minister Hun Sen has used the social network to deceive Cambodia's electorate as part of a broader campaign to destroy the political opposition and free media [Reuters].

Moreover, in Myanmar, Facebook was accused of facilitating the incitement of hatred and spreading hate speech during the genocide. A recent UN Fact-Finding Mission concluded that social media has played a "determining role" in the crisis [The Crunch].

EU and Human Rights in SEA

(jk) The European Parliament adopted a resolution on the Philippines this week, calling for an end of extrajudicial killings under the ongoing war on drugs. The resolution also calls for the release of detained Senator Leila de Lima, and to take human rights defenders off its list of terrorists. It furthermore urges the President to stop banning the entry into the country of persons who are perceived as critics of his policies. Some days ago, the Philippines blocked an EU party official from entering the Philippines, and Duterte admitted ordering a probe into an Australian nun who fights for human rights [Inquirer, Rappler, SCMP].

On a more general note, Fraser Cameron from the EU-Asia Centre argues that whilst the European Union has a long tradition of promoting democracy and human rights in Asia, often in informal cooperation with the United States, the fight has become a lone battle and the Presidency of Donald Trump is detrimental to its efforts [EAF]. The efforts have over the last years in Asia become even more of an uphill battle, and while methods and strategies need to be assessed regularly, the normative mission remains unchanged.

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

China-US relations further strained: US Department of State 2017 Country Reports of Human Rights Practices and trade dispute

(dql) The US Department of State 2017 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices [US Department of State] released on Friday describe China (along with other countries) as 'morally reprehensible" and undermining US interests arguing that the "Governments of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, for example, violate the human rights of those within their borders on a daily basis and are forces of instability as a result".

The Reports come amid increased tensions between Beijing and Washington over an ongoing trade dispute in a latest development of which the Trump administration has announced that it is considering

declaring a national economic emergency and invoking the International Emergency Economic Powers Act to curb Chinese investments in U.S. technology companies. [The Financial Times]

China-EU relations: Uncertainties ahead

(dql) Relations between China and EU are facing uncertainties after 27 out of 28 European Ambassadors to China signed a report denouncing China's One Belt, One Road (BRI) project as aiming at hampering free trade and putting Chinese companies at an advantage. [Handelsblatt]

The Hungarian Ambassador refused to sign the report, an understandable move given Hungary's reliance on a BRI-loan to finance the Belgrade-Budapest railway project. [The Economic Times]

Meanwhile, officials of European Union and Italian authorities confirmed investigations into a suspected massive tax evasion case by Chinese criminal gangs importing goods via Greece's largest port of Piraeus, a trade gateway between China and Europe majority-owned by China's state-owned COSCO Shipping since 2016. [Reuters]

Cross-Strait relations worsen over Beijing's naval drills

(dql) In a move further souring the already strained relations between China and Taiwan, the People's Liberation Army navy this week conducted military exercises in the Taiwan Strait and in the Western Pacific Bashi Channel between Taiwan and the Philippines. [The Washington Post] [South China Morning Post]

This move comes a week after China's navy held its largest parade ever in the South China Sea involving 48 ships, among them the aircraft carrier Liaoning, around 50 other vessels as well as more than 10,000 troops and close to 80 aircraft, including jets, bombers and early-warning planes. [AiR 3/4/2018]

In a related development, China Aerospace Science and Technology Corp, the state-owned main contractor of China's space program, revealed that China is working on drones capable of taking off from and landing on aircraft carriers as part of a move to

bring the country's drone and aircraft carrier programs together. [Popular Science]

Meanwhile, four-star Admiral Phil Davidson, nominated to become the new commander of the US Pacific Command, warned that China has the capability of controlling the South China Sea after it has deployed electronic attack systems and other military facilities on disputed islands in the South China Sea. [The Washington Free Beacon]

Japan: Diplomatic missions to US and China with mixed results

(dql) Prime Minister Abe's visit to Washington this week brought mixed results. While he was reassured by Trump that Japan's security concerns would be communicated during his impending meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, he failed to achieve his main economic and trade related goals, name an exemption from new U.S. tariffs on steel and aluminum and the USA's return to the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal. [The Washington Post]

Meanwhile, during the visit of Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Japan, both Foreign Ministers agreed to increase efforts to improve economic ties between both countries and to stick with U.N. resolutions aimed at putting pressure on North Korea's denuclearization.

Wang's visit is the first visit of a Chinese foreign minister to Japan in a bilateral context in the nine years and reflects recent developments of improving Sino-Japanese ties. [The Diplomat]

Inter-Korean relations: Pyongyang freezes nuclear tests ahead of landmark meeting between Kim and Moon

(dql) According to North Korean state media, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has announced to suspend nuclear and missile tests and shut down a nuclear test site. Pyongyang's move comes less than a week before the summit between Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, and ahead of the much-anticipated meeting between Kim and US President Donald Trump, scheduled for May. [Yonhap]

Meanwhile, President Moon's office announced the establishment a direct telephone line between the

Korean leaders who have agreed hold telephone talks before the summit. [Korea Herald]

India's deepening security cooperation with the West

(ls/ot) On Wednesday, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had a meeting with British Prime Minister Theresa May prior to his participation in the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in London. Following the meeting, India and Britain have laid ground for a possible post-Brexit bilateral free trade deal and signed off on a series of commercial agreements worth up to 1 billion pounds. The bilateral deal covers cyberspace, technology sharing, solar energy, sustainable urban development, water management, animal husbandry, safe use of nuclear energy, artificial intelligence, and big-data analytics. [The Guardian]

In March, India and France signed a series of agreements to strengthen their strategic and commercial relations. The deals aim at deepening cooperation on a wide range of issues, especially defense, space technology, climate change, nuclear energy, urbanization and counterterrorism. Considering France's military presence in the Indian Ocean through the island of La Reunion, Mayotte and the French Antarctic Lands, as well as Djibouti and Abu Dhabi, the partnership could significantly facilitate India's desire for influence in the Western Indian Ocean. [Global Risk Insights]

The United States plan to continue to expand its defence and security cooperation with India and support New Delhi's growing relationships throughout South Asia. The head of the South and Central Asia Bureau of the State Department said that the ties "had never been stronger, never been better". [The Tribune]

India and Sweden signed agreements to begin a strategic innovation partnership. The partnership covers several areas, including smart cities, transportation and eMobility, energy, clean technologies, new materials, space, circular and bio-based economy, and health and life sciences. Indian Prime Minister Modi said, "A key pillar of our bilateral ties is our defence and security cooperation. (...) I have faith that in future also in this sector, particularly in defence production, there will be plenty of opportunities for bilateral cooperation. We have decided to strengthen our cooperation in the security sector, particularly in cyber security." [Times of India]

In The Diplomat, Harsh V. Pant argues that the changing global context, in which states like China and Russia are remolding the rules of global governance to their advantage and with India standing out as an economic powerhouse with strong democratic credentials, has changed the discourse in the Nordic states too. A strong partnership with India is now seen as not only desirable, but an imperative of changing global realities. [The Diplomat]

China proposes India-Nepal-China economic corridor as South Asia remains strategic hotspot

(Is) China on Wednesday proposed an India-Nepal-China economic corridor with multi-dimensional connectivity through the Himalayas as it seeks to expand its influence over the new Nepalese government headed by Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli, widely regarded as pro-Beijing. China's proposal came after visiting Nepalese foreign minister Pradeep Kumar Gyawali held talks with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi. During his last tenure as Prime Minister, Oli signed a transit treaty with Beijing in 2016 ending the decades-long dependence on India for commodity and energy supplies for his land locked country. He also sought railway connectivity between the two countries through Tibet which China is currently building. [Livemint]

S.D. Muni analyzes India-Nepal relations in the light of Oli's recent visit to New Delhi. He describes how Oli discarded the widespread notion of Nepal's dependence on India and repeatedly underlined the importance of sovereignty, equality, non-interference and interdependence in Nepal's dealings with India. Muni argues that India eighbor that there is a limit to its muscular and aggressive diplomacy, which has alienated one after another eighbor and been exploited by China to its advantage in South Asia. He holds that India's attempts to reach out to Oli have, therefore, been a serious exercise towards course correction in its neighbourhood approach. [The Wire]

An assessment by Stratfor sums up current India-Nepal-China relations, holding that Nepal has little choice but to maintain cordial relations with India given the deep economic and cultural links across their open border. India's diminishing ability to influence Nepalese politics, however, points to its declining power in South Asia as China's presence in the region expands through the Belt and Road Initiative. [Stratfor]

Pakistan: Pakistan cuts dependence on US weapons, turns to China

(ot) Pakistan has shifted its reliance from the United States to China for high-tech weapons, according to a report by the Financial Times. The move reflects a change in policy which will have repercussions on the geo-political situation in the region. The shift started as the US Congress blocked the sale of eight F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan during the last few months of the Obama administration. The country turned to China to co-develop and jointly manufacture the JF-17 fighter jet, compatible with the US-made F-16, with complete transfer of technology. Since 2010, US weapons exports to Pakistan have plummeted from 1 billion USD to 21 million USD last year. During the same period, exports from China have also fallen, but more slowly, from 233 million USD – 747 million USD to 514 million USD, making it the biggest weapons exporter to Pakistan. The Trump administration also suspended 2 billion USD in military aid. [The Express Tribune]

Pakistan has been procuring weapons from China since the US placed an arm embargo on the country during the 1965 war with India. In 1990s, China also helped Pakistan in developing nuclear weapons and provided missiles, capable of carrying nuclear warheads. China-Pakistan relations have also strengthened following the launch of multi-billion USD project China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). [Daily Pakistan]

Sri Lanka: China's geo-strategic investment into the empty port of Hambantota

(ls) The Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, built with Chinese money and an example of President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road trade and infrastructure initiative, sees almost no container traffic. Sri Lanka borrowed from China to build the port, could not repay the loans, and then gave China a 99-year lease for debt relief. The port's weak performance has fuelled impressions that it simply serves China's broader strategic interests to secure crucial trade routes and international supply chains. [Straits Times]

China this week dismissed speculation that the Belt and Road Initiative had a military dimension, with a

foreign ministry spokeswoman saying it was “open and transparent.” Hambantota was mutually beneficial and would aid Sri Lanka’s economy, she said. [The Print 1]

However, new research by Washington-based nonprofit research group C4ADS suggests a clear political agenda behind the initiative, aided by the exercise of ‘corporate obfuscation’ by the Chinese companies involved. Quoting unofficial Chinese reports, the authors said the ports were chosen to build political influence and create “strategic support states”. [The Print 2] While there is no official policy document linking Belt and Road to China's national security interests, Chinese analysts have written that developing the program and pursuing Chinese security are "intimately linked," the report said. [Economic Times]

South China Sea

(jk) With increased Cross-Strait tensions and Taiwan climbing up the list again of most-concerning flashpoints in East Asia, the attention of international news reporting has slightly shifted away from South China Sea issues. Notwithstanding, there are plenty of stories that are worth keeping an eye out for.

Last month, state-owned enterprise PetroVietnam withdrew its consent for Spanish energy firm Repsol to move ahead with a drilling project in Vietnman’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of the South China Sea. This is the second time that Repsol could not move on with an already well prepared and heavily invested in drilling project after a similar incident in July last year.

It is reported that coercion by the PRC, such as the threatening of military clashes should the drilling go ahead were to blame for the sudden pull of the plug of the project by Vietnam. Observers are concerned that for a second time, the PRC has coerced a littoral SCS state into not exploring resources within their EEZ. Apparently, recently improving ties between Vietnam and the US did not instill enough confidence in Vietnam’s leadership for them to go ahead with the project [BBC; SCMP]. It is worth remembering that as we have noted in AiR before, Vietnam has become the most forward leaning of the claimant states in the SCS vis-à-vis China. Now, after the Repsol episode, Vietnam is negotiating with China on joint exploration and production efforts.

In the meantime, Vietnam and Indonesia are working towards a mechanism to deal with fishing violation in their respective territorial waters which could turn into

a positive example of cooperation amongst claimant states and so-called "interested parties" such as Indonesia. Over the past few years, Indonesia has destroyed hundreds of fishing vessels from Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand, for violating its waters. Last week, the two nations sat down as part of their third installment of a bilateral cooperation committee meeting which focused on maritime security in particular [SCMP I].

In the Philippines, photographs of Chinese military aircraft on one of the artificially developed islands within the Philippines' EEZ have raised doubts about China's official line not to further militarise any of the South China Sea features it has built. The pictures were allegedly taken in January this year and have now been verified by the government in the Philippines which is now considering filing an official complaint. China's seems to keep to its successful strategy of creating facts on the ground [Strait Times]. Despite its competing claims in the Spratly chain, the Philippines is increasing its economic ties with China. This includes plans for joint developments of gas and oil. President Duterte and President Xi agreed on this last week in a meeting in Hainan.

US Arms sales to Indonesia

(jk) After the US Secretary of Defense visited Indonesia in January this year and a major arms deal involving two dozen used US-built F-16 fighter jets went ahead in February, some observers expected an ever-intensifying US-Indonesia defense relationship, not least to balance against increasing Chinese influence. In reality however, as is argued in this piece, US military assistance will always be subject to ups and downs, as exemplified by the US military embargo in the 1990s and early 2000s. Whilst the deal is significant, the US has never been Indonesia's top arms supplier and the defense relationship has yet to grow to a level where it could truly influence Indonesia's foreign policy trajectory [East Asia Forum]. On a related note, Indonesia has ordered three submarines from South Korea [Antara News].

Thailand: Defense Minister Prawit to visit Washington

(jk) Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Prawit Wongsuwan, who remains under investigation by the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) over

failing to declare assets, is set to meet US Secretary of Defense Mattis in Washington this week. [Washington Times]. Secretary Mattis led a US delegation to Bangkok in October last year, attending the royal cremation of Thailand's late King.

Under the Obama administration and particularly since the coup in 2014, US – Thai relations had somewhat soured despite the US "pivot" to Asia and Thailand's historically deep ties to the US. But Thailand also has a history of skillfully hedging between the great powers and has recently been working closer with Beijing which raised some alarm bells in Washington. Notwithstanding Obama meeting the Thai PM and the continuation of Cobra Gold exercises, if downscaled, it is fair to say that with human rights concerns taking more of a backseat under US President Trump, US-Thai relations are intensifying again. The upcoming visit where defense and security matters will be discussed is another sign of that development.

For a detailed analysis of US-Thai relations as well as Thailand's relations to Beijing, Benjamin Zawacki has recently published a highly recommendable book titled "Thailand: Shifting Ground Between the US and a Rising China" [Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia].

Myanmar: Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in crisis

(jk) In Myanmar, where recent focus has been mostly on the Rohingya refugee crisis, conflict and ethnic tensions are ubiquitous. The central government and many armed ethnic opposition groups are once again getting ever-closer to an eruption of violence. In a precarious situation, with many groups fighting for federal autonomy, a major achievement has been the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) of 2015. The NCA, however rests on very shaky grounds, writes Anthony Davis [linkedIn].

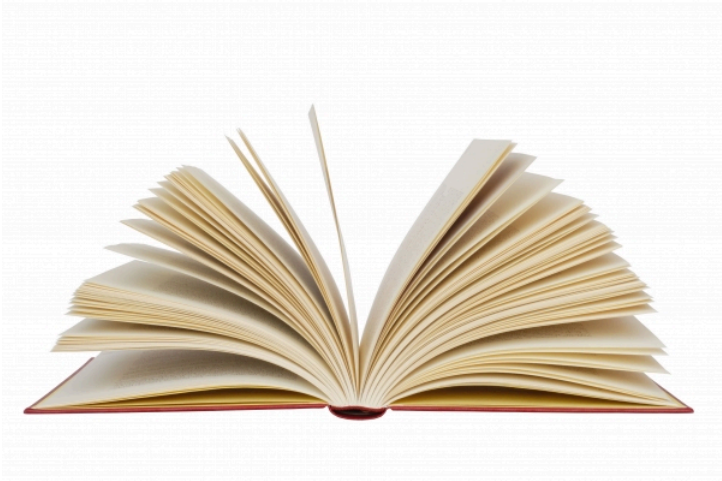
Annual Philippine-US military drills to include Japan and Australia

(jk) This year's US-Philippine "Balikatan" (shoulder-to-shoulder) military exercises will include Japanese and Australian forces for the first time. Last year, the US – Philippines exercises were scaled down amid some strategic re-alignment under President Duterte who has also invited Chinese and Russian forces for exercises [Strait Times].

Royal Australian Navy warships visiting Vietnam

(hg) Three Royal Australian Navy (RAN) warships, including the helicopter frigates HMAS ANZAC and HMAS TOOWOOMBA and support ship HMAS SUCCESS, docked at Ho Chi Minh City's Sài Gòn Port on April 19 as a part of a goodwill visit 17 years after the visit of three Australian Navy ships in Vietnam at the same time. Recently bilateral relationships have been elevated to a strategic partnership. [Vietnam News]

Background Reading



Book review of Robert Bickers' "Out of China"

(ls) Jeremiah Jenne reviews Robert Bickers' 2017 book "Out of China. How the Chinese Ended the Era of Western Domination". The focus of the book is on the foreign presence in China, but it is also about China's search for national and individual dignity and the quest for a new national identity, one which is both fully modern and fully Chinese. In the book, Bickers picks up the story of foreigners and foreign influence in China from the end of the first World War through the wars and upheavals of the mid-20th century to the rise of a resurgent China – and a resurgent Chinese nationalism – in the post-reform era. [Los Angeles Review of Books]

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