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CPG

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

Asia in Review

(1/11/2018)

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Dear Reader,

CPG is presenting you the first issue of CPG's Asia in Review (AiR) in November 2018 with an update on the latest developments in law, politics and international relations in Asia.

I hope you enjoy an informative reading.

Best regards,

Henning Glaser

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Webpage: www.cpg-online.de, Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/CPGTU/

Main Sections

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Law and Politics in East Asia

China: World's worst abuser of internet freedom, report says

(dql) Freedom House has released its annual 'Freedom on the Net' report on 65 countries according to which overall internet freedoms deteriorated for the eighth consecutive year with China being the "worst abuser of internet freedom in 2018". The reports highlights that China has not only reached new extremes of domestic internet control in 2018 due to new security law and technology but that it has sold technological infrastructure to a number of countries and hosted seminars on the use of its censorship and surveillance systems for foreign government officials from 36 countries. [Freedom House, with access to the full report]

China silencing political dissent: Scholar barred from leaving country

(dql) In a move reflecting the Chinese government's continued efforts to silence domestic dissent two scholars from Unirule Institute of Economics, a Beijing-

based Chinese liberal social sciences think tank, were prohibited from leaving the country to take part in a seminar hosted on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of China's opening up at Harvard University, on grounds of national security.

The think tank is known for its liberal-leaning research and has repeatedly been pressured by government authorities in the recent past. Websites and social media accounts of members have been shut down and deleted while landlords under government pressure twice obstructed the exit of the office and kept workers locked. [South China Morning Post]

China's anti-corruption crackdown: Installation of surveillance teams in state banks and insurance companies

(dql) In an attempt to gear up the government's fight against rampant graft in the financial sector, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, the CCP's anti-corruption agency, announced that anti-corruption units will be stationed in the country's state-owned banks and insurers to constantly keep their management under surveillance. The move comes after a number of high profile corruption cases in the financial sector in the past years, including the former chairman of the China Insurance Regulatory Commission, the former head of the supervisory board of China Development Bank and the president of the People's Insurance Co (Group) of China. [South China Morning Post]

Japan: New immigration law to ease labor shortage on the way

(dql) Prime Minister Abe's cabinet last week approved a bill for the revision of the country's immigration law which, if approved by the parliament, would admit more foreign workers to Japan. In a move to cope with a serious labor shortage, with around half a million people annually exiting the working-age category of 15-64, the new law would introduce to two visa categories with one for unskilled workers who would be allowed to stay alone for five years without possibility of extension, and the other for skilled workers which would permit family reunion and visa extension.

Parliamentary passage of the bill is expected for December, implementation for April 2019. [Nikkei

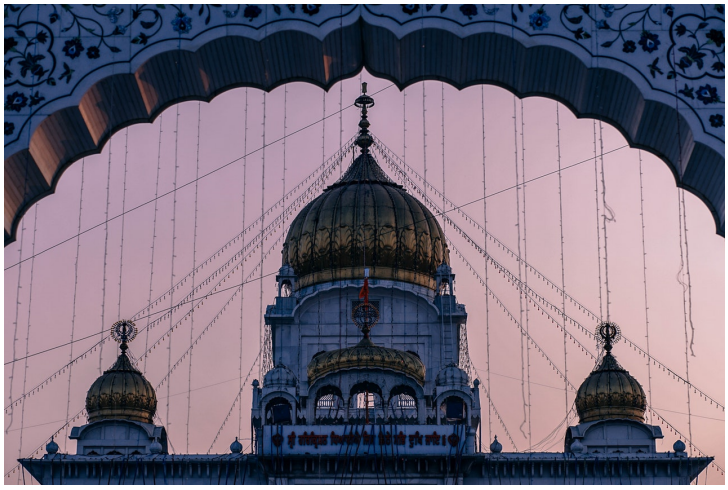
Asian Review] [GCR]

South Korea: Government and opposition clash over record budget plan

(dql) South Korea's main opposition Liberty Korea Party announced its objection against spending plans for short-term jobs and inter-Korean projects within the government's record budget plan 2019 of more than 410 billion USD, making the road to parliamentary passage of the budget bill a bumpy one. The opposition specified that it will seek to cut at least some 8 trillion won from the 23.5 trillion won budget used for the creation of short-term jobs and 640 billion won from the 1.1 trillion won allocated for inter-Korean projects.

The Moon administration justified the high budget allocated to boost job creation citing the currently poor economic situation of the country with the number of long-term unemployed at 150,000 between January and September, the highest in 18 years. [Yonhap] [Korea Times]

Law and Politics in South Asia



India: Kashmir leader of ruling party killed

(cc) On Thursday, unidentified gunmen shot dead Anil Parihar, state secretary of the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and his brother in the town of Kishtwar in Kashmir. Kashmir, the only Indian State with a Muslim majority, at the center of a

territorial dispute between India and Pakistan since the partition in 1947, is highly divided and has been the theatre of violent confrontations for several decades. The police is still investing to determine if the shooting is a militant attacks or a criminal act. The authorities have imposed a curfew in the area. [Reuters]

Nepal's Human Rights Mechanism

(hg) The Asia Foundation has published an interesting article on the multiple, specialized national human rights institutions (NHRIs) under Nepal's 2015 Constitution. Mandate of the eight (!) NHRIs is to monitor human rights violations, assess compliance with international treaty obligations, and recommend improvements. However, the constitutional commitment has hardly been followed by much activity yet.

One problem is, that the NHRIs have partly overlapping mandates, lack coordination and are thus prone to engage in interagency conflict or to avoid to engage themselves. Whether this system of specialized NHRIs is designed, as some critics claim, as a divide-and-conquer strategy or not, improvements are warranted. Recommended in the article is to establish a collaborative framework that would have to be oriented at the Paris Principles which are establishing the internationally recognized benchmarks for the structure, legitimacy, and autonomy of NHRIs.

Suggested is the implementation of a representative inter-commission coordinating committee, that could introduce some mechanisms such as an initial screening of complaints and their subsequent referral to the appropriate agency; the transfer of cases between agencies; an interagency dispute resolution system; a joint monitoring and investigation mechanism and a system for developing joint recommendations on cross-jurisdictional issues.

In any case, in any country, even a well working NHRI mechanism will never replace the necessity that a conventional criminal justice system brings penalized human rights violations to justice. [The Asian Foundation]

Pakistan's blasphemy trap and a family's suffering

(hg) Pakistan, one of the biggest Muslim majority countries in the world with an Islamic Constitution, punishes blasphemy with a draconian law. Last week, the release from prison of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman who was eventually acquitted by the Supreme Court eight years after having being sentenced to death for blasphemy, was prevented by public unrest organized by radical Islamists who want the mother publicly hanged.

While the cleric who had raised the initial blasphemy charges petitioned the Supreme Court to reverse its acquittal, Islamists have blocked highways and damaged or set-fire to vehicles. Last month, two inmates were arrested for planning to kill Bibi by strangling her in prison.

The case poses a challenge to the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan, who came to power partly by pursuing a Islamist agenda, albeit a more moderate one, and has to deal with the fact that any crackdown on Islamists in Pakistan risks triggering large-scale unrest. The radical cleric behind the mob has already urged supporters to kill the three judges who acquitted Bibi, revolt against the army chief and overthrow Khan's government.

Meanwhile Bibi's family awaited her release in vain. Her husband had only returned from Britain with their children to take her out of the country. She was arrested in 2009 for blasphemy after a quarrel with two fellow female farm workers who refused to drink from a water container used by a Christian and later accused her to have insulted the Prophet while she maintained her innocence.

The charge of blasphemy is often used to settle feuds and arguments and is hard to handle by authorities as its inherent religious claim implies submission to a divine law that many Islamists see out of reach of a government of men. Even most unsubstantiated allegations can easily spark death at the hands of merciless mobs. [Channel News Asia] [The Washington Post] [CNN]

Maldives' Consolidating power shift after the elections

(hg) The Maldives' Supreme Court enabled the return of exiled opposition figures including former President Nasheed. The Court, which had been confronted with allegations to conspire against Nasheed's adversary Abdulla Yameen who lost the recent elections, suspended Nasheed's prison sentence until it reviews

his conviction, a move that was supposed to prevent Nasheed's arrest on arrival.

The Supreme Court also reinstated 12 opposition lawmakers who were stripped of their seats when they defected to the opposition in 2017.

Newly elected President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih is a close ally of Nasheed, who won the 23 September poll by a 16.8 percent margin against former pro-China President Abdulla Yameen.

Under Yameen, Nasheed was sentenced to jail on terrorism charges for allegedly ordering the abduction of a judge in 2012 after a rushed trial in 2015. [First Post]

Now, the pro-Indian and pro-Western Nasheed has returned to the Maldives such as two other opposition leaders, an opposition party leader who has returned from exile in Germany and a former vice president who was Yameen's running mate in the 2013 presidential election. [Time]

In a parallel development, the parliament speaker who belongs to the Nasheed camp and had survived a number of attempts to impeach him before, resigned hours before a no-confidence vote could held against him. [Xinhuanet]

Sri Lanka: Deep constitutional crisis and a looming power shift

(hg) After President Sirisena has just claimed to have uncovered a plot to assassinate him and former defence minister Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, he relieved Prime Minister Wickremesinghe from office and appointed, in a stunning move, former strongman and President Mahinda Rajapaksa as new Prime Minister. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, a former army lieutenant-colonel, is the new PM's brother and currently member of parliament. The President accused Wickremesinghe to not seriously investigate the alleged assassination plot. There are also rumors that a member of Wickremesinghe's cabinet, who is a former army general, is implied. [ColomboPage]

Wickremesinghe claims to still command the majority in the House, denies the president the power to sack him and refuses to vacate his office. Those seconding him call the President's move a coup and the first illegal transfer of power since the establishment of democratic governance in the country in 1931. The president, who maintains to have the right to fire a

Prime Minister, has meanwhile suspended Parliamentary session until 14 November to let the new Prime Minister prepare his budget. The Wickremesinghe camp, however, claims that parliament was suspended to give Rajapaksa time to gather enough support to survive a no-confidence vote when the House reconvenes. Meanwhile, both sides engaged heavily in behind the scenes maneuvering to secure their numbers in parliament, with loyalties shifting back and forth unpredictably. One MP who shifted to the Rajapaksa camp switched to Wickremesinghe one day later to be then included in Rajapaksa's cabinet. [Al Jazeera]

The atmosphere is heated also on the streets where tens of thousands marched Monday in support of the new government - police estimates around 120,000 people, state television at least 200,000.

Priory, the petroleum minister, was detained by police after one of his guards fired into another mob allied to Sirisena, killing one man and injuring three. [ABC]

While 'preparing to present his budget to the soon to reconvened parliament' PM Rajapaksa has called for snap parliamentary elections which he has good chances to win after his party surprised in the last local elections with a formidable outcome. His voter base is the rural Sinhalese Buddhist majority who regard Rajapaksa as a hero for winning the civil war against the Tamil Tigers.

Wickremesinghe on the other hand has caused public anger over high inflation and the failure to deliver on promises of cracking down on corruption and accountability for war atrocities not to speak of high-level corruption scandals involving his political camp directly. [India Today]

Unlike Wickremesinghe, who wears western suits, Rajapaksa is from the country's rural, southern Hambantota district, dresses traditionally, talks and acts down to earth and displays the superstitious attitudes of his followers by wearing rings and bracelets believed to ward off misfortune. His administration faced condemnation for extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, torture and practices of detaining journalists and activists. For those fearing his return a billboard in the outskirts of Colombo of the many politically involved Rajapaksa family members does not only greet the new prime minister but also has a ominous message for Wickremesinghe "Keep your self respect and leave. Otherwise we know how to get rid of you. This battle is not over. We are alert!" [Bloomberg]

The crisis has strong geopolitical implications with the pro-Indian Wickremesinghe eventually most probably being replaced by Rajapaksa who gets better along with China. As the geopolitical scales in the Indo-Pacific have just tipped in favor of India in the Maldives, developments in Sri Lanka will thus probably favor China. The Chinese ambassador has just met both competing Prime Ministers for talks. At the same time four other ambassadors were newly appointed to Sri Lanka including those of major countries such the US, Japan and France. [First News]

Law and Politics in Southeast Asia

Thailand: Political restrictions on campaigning to be lifted next month

(jk) According to Deputy PM General Prawit Wongsuwan, the current political restrictions would be completely relaxed by early December. This would pave the way for campaigning in the run-up to the general election, which has been tentatively scheduled for February next year. The Election Commission (EC) is preparing a meeting with political parties in November to discuss primary voting to select election candidates, campaigning through electronic media and debates on public television stations. [The Nation]

Other sources suggest that political parties can fully engage in political activities from November 26. November 26 is 90 days away from the previously suggested election date of February 24 and would therefore constitute the deadline before which election candidates have to register with a political party in accordance with new laws. [Thai PBS]

At an expert panel discussion at Thammasat University on Sunday, academics, politicians, activists and former and current EC officials discussed whether a free and fair election can be expected – and largely argued against is. [The Nation II]

Political succession in Singapore

(jk) Next week, the People's Action Party (PAP) will meet for its conference and the party's Central Executive Committee (CEC) election. The election of new leaders from the PAP's fourth-generation (4G) to its CEC will be closely watched for clearer signs of who will become Singapore's next Prime Minister. [SCMP]

In both previous leadership transitions — to Goh Chok Tong after Lee Kuan Yew, and then to Lee Hsien Loong after that — both men had already been identified as the next Prime Minister before they assumed higher positions in the PAP CEC during the party conference. This time, the party's internal elections are seen by many as much more than a formality since leadership succession details area far from clear at this stage. PM Lee has previously stated that he will step down when he turns 70 in 2022.

Vietnam: Cybersecurity law and web monitors

(jk) Vietnam's government has put in place measures to control online communication, which according to critics is aimed at activists who use social media platforms as their main way of sharing their reporting. Vietnamese legislators have approved a cybersecurity law back in June that tightens control of the internet and global tech companies operating in the country, raising fears of economic harm and a further crackdown on dissent. The law will take effect on Jan. 1, 2019 and will require, for example, Facebook, Google and other global technology firms to store locally "important" personal data on users in Vietnam and open offices there. The Ministry of Public Security posted a draft decree on its website last week on how the law would be implemented. It suggested the global tech firms would have up to a year to comply with the new regulations. [Bloomberg]

More recently, the government announced a 10,000-strong internet task force had been set up to monitor online posts and that the "National Centre on Supervising Information" has software that can

allegedly read 100 million items online daily. [Channel News Asia]

Southeast Asian cyberspace in general is becoming more expansive, yet more restricted. The Philippines is the only country in the region that receives a score of "free" according to Freedom House Net Freedom Index. The rest of Southeast Asia enjoys partial to little freedom surfing the net. [New Mandala]

Indonesia: Second House speaker suspected in corruption case in 12 months

(cc) The House of Representatives deputy speaker is suspected by the antigraft agency KPK to be implicated in a bribery case involving a scheme to secure the transfer of funds from the state budget to a district government in Central Java. He is suspected of having accepted bribes of at least Rp 3.65 billion (around 250.000 USD) in 2016 from Muhamad Yahya Fuad, then regent of Kebumen in Central Java. While failing to show up on initially, he eventually arrived at the KPK for questioning, and was detained after nine-hours of interrogation.

He is the second House speaker implicated in a corruption case in less than 12 months and Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometers Survey depicts the House as the country's most corrupt institution. [Jakarta Globe] [Jakarta Post]

West Java: HRW warns against fresh Wave of Anti-LGBT Rhetoric

(cc) The international NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) sent a letter to Governor Ridwan Kamil of West Java province expressing "grave concerns regarding the recent spate of discriminatory policy proposals and actions by local government officials in West Java province against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people."

In the letter, the NGO cited a number of events that took place in October such as the arrest by Bandung police on October 18 of two men who allegedly run a Facebook page for same-sex couples. During the raid of their private home, the police confiscated 25 condoms, often used as evidence of homosexuality by authorities. HRW cites several local decrees and other official documents that aim to combat the "LGBT threat".

As an example, on October 15, the Cianjur regency government issued a decree to encourage Imams to talk about "The Danger of LGBT, Sodomy and Abuse in the Life of Religion, Nation and State in the perspective of Islamic Law" in their Friday sermons.

According to the NGO, "Indonesia has been engulfed by a government-driven moral panic about gender and sexuality". [HRW]

Myanmar by-elections: small victory for the NLD shows decline in support in Ethnic areas

(cc) On November 3, voters were called to cast their ballot in 13 constituencies. While the ruling Party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), was expecting a large victory it only won 7 of the contested seats. While this election in itself does not have important consequences regarding the balance of power, it represents a "test" for the 2020 general elections and the currently ruling NLD led by Aung San Suu Kyi.

The results show the decline in the support for the NLD, who hold eleven of the 13 seats prior to the elections, especially in ethnic areas, as the NLD spokesman Myo Nyunt stated "We lost five out of six seats in ethnic areas. Ethnic people are not satisfied with our performance on the peace process". The Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDP), main opposition party created in 2010 with the support of the Military Junta, won three seats previously held by the NLD, the Sagaing's Tamu and Yangon's Seikkan regional parliament seats as well as the Upper House seat in Myitkyina in Kachin State. The official figures regarding voters' turnout have yet to be released by the Union Election Commission, but provisional figures estimate around 30-40% turnout in eight constituencies and over 50% in the only five remaining constituencies. [Reuters] [The Myanmar Times] [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar Peace process

(cc) During the second Secretariat meeting of all levels of the Joint Monitoring Committee in Yangon, the signatory groups of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) sought the participation of non-signatory ethnic armed groups to the peace process. [The Myanmar Times 1]

This followed the meeting in Kunming, China, on October 31st, between the government's peace commission and the Northern Alliance regrouping three Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAO's), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Arakan Army. Here, an agreement was reached to reduce clashes, and according to the TNLA "Agreements were reached on participation in the peace process, and the details will be released this week. The main thing is for non-NCA signatories to join the peace process and to find a practical solution to the fighting. Another meeting will be held in early December,". [The Myanmar Times 2]

While peace talks outside the formal Union Peace conferences seem to be held more and more regularly, the different parties keep standing their ground, resulting in a stalemate in the negotiations. The ruling NLD plans to conclude the peace process by 2020, date of the next general election, but the slow progression in the talks and the resurgence of conflicts in several ethnic areas render that deadline difficult to meet. The last Union Peace Conference (UPC), also known as 21st Century Panglong Conference, was held in July this year had ambivalent results. The next one is expected to take place in December.

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

China-US trade dispute: Conciliatory signals from Beijing

(dql) Ahead of the meeting between Presidents Xi Jinping and Donald Trump later this month, Vice President Wang Qishan confirmed Beijing's readiness to resume talks with the Washington and work to resolve trade issues, signaling a possible de-escalation of the ongoing Sino-US trade dispute. [Reuters]

In a related move, President Xi in his opening speech of the China International Import Expo in Shanghai on Monday vowed to increase business with the rest of the world and announced that China's imported goods and services are expected to exceed 30 trillion U.S. dollars and 10 trillion USD respectively in the next 15 years. He also promised to lower tariffs and broaden market access. [Xinhuanet].

Meanwhile, the US State Department confirmed that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary James Mattis will meet Chinese politburo member Yang Jiechi and Defence Minister Wei Fenghe this week for diplomatic and security talks which were originally scheduled for last month but scrapped amid tensions over trade, Taiwan and the South China Sea. [Aljazeera]

Japan: Ratification of huge FTA with EU on the way

(dql) The Abe administration has submitted to the parliament a bill for ratification of a Japan-EU free trade agreement which would be one of the world's largest FTA covering 30% of global gross domestic product and roughly 40% of world trade.

With the FTA, the Japanese government eyes an increase of its real GDP by more than 44 billion USD and the creation of 290,000 jobs. [Nikkei Asian Review]

South Korea and USA resume military drills

(dql) Ahead of the meeting between US Secretary of State and his counterpart Kim Yong Chol this week, South Korea and the United States resumed their combined joint military exercises with a small scale two-weeks maritime drill participated by some 500 troops and involving military equipment such as assault amphibious vehicles. The joint exercises had been halted in June to back denuclearization talks with North Korea. [Yonhap]

In a related development, the larger Vigilant Ace exercise which involved 230 aircraft and tens of thousands of troops in 2017, was cancelled for this year during a meeting between Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis and his counterpart Jeong Kyeong-doo in Singapore last week. It was scheduled for December. [CNN]

US grants India waiver from Iran oil imports, but with a warning

(am) The US administration announced to permit eight importers to keep purchasing Iranian oil until it re-imposes sanctions in order to force Iran to curtail its nuclear, missile and regional actions. While not having named any country which would be getting the benefit, the Indian petroleum minister said that India secured the waiver. [Reuters]

However, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in an interview to Fox News said that US Government is determined to shrink Iranian oil imports from its key consumers India and China to zero within six months and warned gloomily, otherwise “watch what we do” dismissing suggestions that India and China will never discontinue purchasing oil from Iran. [HT]

India lodges protest with Pakistan and China on bus service via disputed territory

(am) India’s Ministry of External Affairs has lodged a formal protest with Pakistan and China over a bus service set to run between Pakistan’s Lahore and the Chinese Kashghar in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The route runs through the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. India raised concerns that any such bus facility will be a violation of India's sovereignty and territorial integrity. [India Today]

India now nuclear proficient at sea, land, air

(am) The INS Arihant, one of India's nuclear submarines, has positively accomplished its first deterrence patrol, allowing India to complete the nuclear triad, meaning that it has reached the capacity

of firing nuclear weapons from land, air and sea. The submarine's capability to launch nuclear missiles from below the sea is strategically particular significant as submarines, contrasting fighter aircraft and land-based missile systems, are harder to track and destroy. [India Today]

Prime Minister Modi announced in a nationwide televised speech that the INS Arihant was a "fitting response to those who indulge in nuclear blackmail" as "an open warning for the country's enemies, for the foes of peace: don't try any misadventure against India." [Channel News Asia]

Pakistan-Iran Competition in Balochistan

(hg) The Diplomat publishes a very readable background report on the 'Balochistan factor' in bilateral relations between Iran and Pakistan. The Baloch are an Iranian people living in the region of Balochistan which covers the border region between Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The mountainous, culturally rich region is strategically highly important due its twin ports in the Baloch territories on the Iranian and the Pakistan side of the border: Gwadar in Pakistan and Chabahar in Iran which are developed in the framework of the Iranian and the Chinese regional strategy respectively. As Iran also accuses Pakistan to give refuge to jihadi Baloch militants sponsored by its arch enemy Saudi Arabia, the situation is further complicated.

The article gives a historically differentiated account on the political structure and historical development of the 'Balochistan factor' which is worth to study. This counts even more as the region belongs to one of the potential global hot spots to be closely observed. [The Diplomat]

How much can the Maldives recalibrate their foreign policy?

(hg) Since the transition to a new, more Indian friendly government in the Maldives after the recent elections, India gains some much needed strategic space to reestablish a greater degree of influence in the Maldives which are a highly important area of Delhi's maritime backyard.

With an increasingly likely visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Malé to meet newly elected President Ibrahim Solih an advance team from the Indian government has just reached the Maldives to lay the groundwork after a visit by Modi in 2015 was cancelled due to the growing tensions with the China friendly Abdulla Yameen administration.

While Indian diplomacy might gain an upper hand in dealing with the Maldives, Chinese influence remains as Beijing still holds considerable leverage due that fact the Maldives have borrowed heavily from China to finance its infrastructure with China holding more than 80% of the Maldives' sovereign debt accounting for nearly a quarter of its GDP. Moreover, India will probably not be able to compete with Beijing's ability to meet the Maldives' infrastructure demands. [The Wire]

Sri Lanka might serve as an instructive example so far. After the now returning Rajapaksa had also heavily borrowed from China the government of President Sirisena proved unable to drive back the influence despite trying it. Ultimately the Sirisena government was even forced to transfer control of its strategically situated Hambantota port to a Chinese state-owned company under a 99-year lease deal. It remains to be seen if India and its Western partners will find ways to use the strategic space they have gained to contain the influence China has successfully build up in the Maldives. [Forbes]

Nepal reaching out to Qatar and Malaysia

(hg) A recent visit of Nepalese President Bidhya Devi Bhandari in Qatar and the conclusion of a Memorandum of Understanding between Nepal and Malaysia on the supply of labor highlight the Nepalese government's efforts to step up its diplomatic engagements beyond its relations with India and China. [Gulf Times] [The Himalayan Times]

China's support of Nepalese Army

(hg) China promised to give RMB 150 million to the Nepalese Army over a period of five years for humanitarian and disaster relief equipment increasing its support by 50 per cent. [The Economic Times]

Pakistan and Russia to enhance strategic relations

(hg) Prime Minister Imran Khan and Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev agreed on strengthening bilateral relations and strategic cooperation between Russia and Pakistan when they met on the sidelines of International Import Expo in Shanghai. [The News]

Pakistan and China to trade in Yuan instead of Dollar

(hg) In an ongoing search to secure financial support Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan recently traveled to China after he just received a $6 billion aid package from Saudi Arabia. While Beijing signaled its commitment to help Islamabad it made also clear that more talks would be needed, making thus clear that assistance will flow only if Beijing is convinced to find a strong ally in Khan's administration. [CNBC]

Less than a success for Khan, both sides agreed, however, to carry out bilateral trade in Chinese yuan instead of U.S. dollar. While this addresses Islamabad's massive 87-percent trade deficit with Beijing it reduces pressure on its depleting foreign currency reserves. [VOA]

Thailand's ASEAN Chairmanship 2019

CPG is organising an international conference on the topic of the upcoming Thai chairmanship from 3-4 December in Bangkok. Please consult our website for further information.

(jk) On November 15, when leaders gather in Singapore for the 33rd Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit, Singapore will hand over the ASEAN chairmanship it currently holds to Thailand. The chair is the *primus inter pares* among the ten leaders, it rotates annually and officially organises, hosts and leads all ASEAN institutions and meetings. The chair is also setting the agenda, acts as ASEAN's spokesperson and crucially, is in the position and responsibility to informally forge consensus among the members.

At the same time, Thailand is in the interesting position of also aiming to hold elections in 2019. This would be the first time that an incumbent chair would hold

general elections in ASEAN's 50+ years of existence. Close observers suggest that a national election, particularly the one potentially coming up in Thailand, could become a challenge to domestic political stability, and that the domestic instability could negatively impact the regional association. A first direct impact could be the date of the first of the two ASEAN summits (the 34th ASEAN Summit), which is usually held in April or early May. If elections in Thailand were to take place in May, and not in February as it has been suggested, the date of the summit will likely be pushed back as it last happened in 2016 when Laos was chair. A graver fear for instability is however based on Thai history. In 1991, army chief General Suchinda Kraprayoon seized power from an elected government. Following a new constitution and elections in 1992, he became prime minister without being elected to parliament. His premiership ended with serious violence on the streets in May 1992. [Nikkei]

Execution of Indonesian migrant worker in Saudi Arabia

(cc) Saudi Arabia carried out the execution of an Indonesian migrant worker, seven years after she was sentenced to death and without warning Indonesian representatives or her family. She was charged in 2011 with the premeditated murder of her employer's father who sexually abused her. On Wednesday, President Joko Widodo stated that the government has filed an official protest against Riyadh.

In 2015, Indonesia introduced a moratorium banning new domestic workers from entering 21 Middle Eastern countries after the execution of two other Indonesian maids by Riyadh, but a deal in mid-October, the One Channel System, allows for the placement of a limited number of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia. Following the execution, the Manpower Minister has said he will review the scheme.

Saudi Arabia's visa sponsorship system has been widely criticized as it prohibits workers to change job or to leave the country without the employer's permission, putting migrant workers at high risks of exploitation. [Al Jazeera] [The Jakarta Post] [The Washington Post]

Repatriation of Rohingya to begin in November

(cc) After a two days meeting between Bangladesh and Myanmar officials in Dhaka that started on Monday October 29, Myanmar's deputy permanent secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that the repatriation of Rohingya will start on November 15. The first batch will include 2260 of the 4000 refugees verified as Myanmar citizens. The refugees will be first received at Nga Khu Ya reception center before being transferred to Hla Phoe Khaung transit camp for temporary resettlement. [Myanmar Times]

In August last year, over 700,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh after a brutal crackdown by the Tatmadaw against the Muslim minority ethnic group in Northern Rakhine State. In late August this year, a report of the UN independent Fact-Finding mission qualified the attacks against the minority as being committed with "genocidal intent".

In November 2017, Bangladesh and Myanmar signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the safe, voluntary and dignified repatriation refugees from Northern Rakhine. While Myanmar officials maintain that they were ready since January, the UNHCR warned that the conditions in Rakhine State are "not yet conducive for returns". [Reuters]

The international NGO Human Rights Watch has called for the immediate suspension of the proposed repatriation noting that "The repatriation plan was developed without consultation and consent from Rohingya refugees, in contravention of international standards". [HRW] A week earlier, during his briefing to the Security Council, the chairperson of the UN fact-finding mission stated that "remaining Rohingya in Rakhine State are at grave risk and conditions are not in place for a safe, dignified and sustainable return of the Rohingya in Bangladesh. Returning them in this context is tantamount to condemning them to life as sub-humans and further mass killing." [OHCHR]

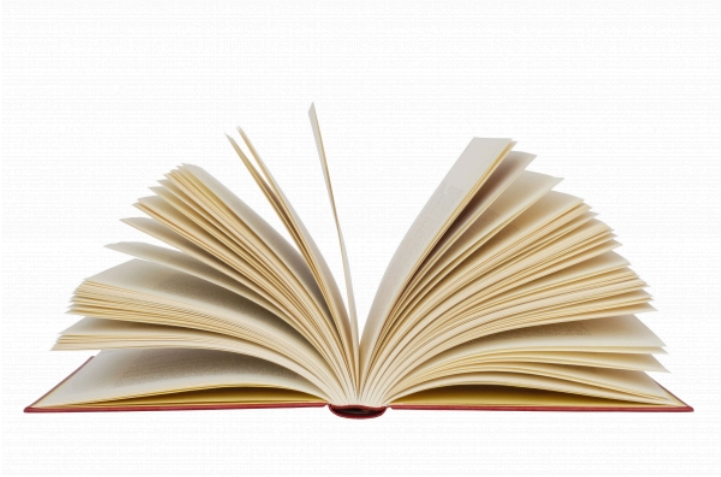
Bangladesh's Foreign Minister, Md Shahidul Haque, in response to these concerns stated that "it's not Bangladesh's decision. It's not Myanmar's decision and it's not UNHCR's decision. The return is a decision that must be taken by Rohingyas". [Bdnews24]

China and Japan competing over infrastructure investments in the Philippines

(jk) President Duterte, who wants to significantly increase infrastructure spending, is looking to both

Japan and China for investment. Both have pledged to help the Philippines build new railways. While China has expressed willingness to bankroll long haul railway projects, the Philippines and Japan early this year signed a loan agreement for the construction of the Philippines' first subway in Manila. [PhilStar]

Background Reading



The Growing Role of the Military in Counter-Terrorism in Southeast Asia

(jk) In many Southeast Asian countries, but in particular Indonesia and the Philippines, the military has been heavily involved and supported law-enforcement agencies in combating terrorism. This happens due to lack of capacity and an increasing urgency to combat terrorism with IS attacks in Indonesia and the Marwai siege in the Philippines. While the Indonesian military (TNI) had lost much of its role in fighting internal security threats following the end of the Suharto administration, new pressures are bringing the TNI back to the fore. Whilst their capacity is welcomed in a government sanctioned fight against terrorism, concerns about past abuses of human rights by the military are valid and relevant. [ISEAS]

New Mandala Podcast Series

(jk) New Mandala has this year begun recording regular podcasts with experts on many issues relating to Southeast Asia. There is for example a very interesting "Philippines beyond the Clichés" series,

discussing issues such as Catholicism, crime, dynasties and beauty in the Philippines. [New Mandala]

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