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

Get the pattern, read the trend

Asia in Review

(5/4/2019)

Brought to you by CPG

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the fifth issue of CPG's *Asia in Review* in April 2019, updating you on the latest developments in law, politics and international relations in Asia.

I hope you enjoy reading!

Best regards

Henning Glaser

Director, German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance (CPG)

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

Main Sections

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

- International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia
- Background Reading

Law and Politics in East Asia

China: Large protest demonstration against reform of Hong Kong's extradition law

(dql) On Sunday, thousands of protesters marched through downtown Hong Kong to protest against the planned changes to an extradition law [AiR 2/4/2019] that would allow individuals to be sent to a number of countries, including China, for trial. While according to protest organizers 130,000 marched to the city's Legislative Council building, the police estimated the crowd at less than 23,000.

While Opponents to the extradition bill, expected to pass Hong Kong's legislature in a few months, fear that it would undermine city's core rights and freedoms which were guaranteed under the city's handover from Britain in 1997 for 50 years, the government re-affirmed its commitment to the law revision and defended it as a necessary move to plug long-standing legal loopholes. [The Diplomat] [Macau Daily Times]

In an earlier development fueling concerns over the decline of freedoms in Hong Kong, leaders of the 2014 pro-democracy Umbrella Movement, which demanded more open elections in Hong Kong and led to a months-long occupation of major roads of the city, were sentenced by a Hong Kong court to prison terms

of up to 16 months for their roles in the demonstrations. [Reuters]

China: Detention of government-critical Mongolians

(dql) Radio Free Asia, citing an unnamed New York-based rights-group, reports on two ethnic Mongolian group chat moderators on the social media platform WeChat who have been detained and sentenced without a trial by Chinese authorities for protesting against Chinese development policies in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.

Their detentions follows the detention earlier this month of three other ethnic Mongolian writers for speaking out for their ethnic group in the face of actions by Chinese government officials and companies as well as a trial against ethnic Mongolian author Lhamjab A. Borjigin on charges of "separatism" and "sabotaging national unity". In his 2006 book “China's Cultural Revolution” he accuses the Chinese Communist Party of a state-sponsored genocide in the region during the Cultural Revolution. [Radio Free Asia]

China accused of “systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom”

(dql) In its 2019 annual report, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) accuses the Chinese government of “systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom” and designates China – along with 15 other countries including Burma, Central African Republic (CAR), Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam – as a tier 1-“country of particular concern”. [United States Commission on International Religious Freedom]

South Korea: Ruling party fast-track reform bills amid fierce resistance of main opposition party

(dql) Defying fierce objections by the main opposition Liberty Korea Party (LKP), parliamentary committee members of the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DP)

and three other minor parties approved key reform bills as fast-track measures.

Aimed to preventing legislative proposal from overlong pending, South-Korea's National Assembly can designate a bill which fails to obtain bipartisan support over a long period as a fast-track proposal if the move receives approval by three-fifths of lawmakers in a parliamentary committee. [Korea Herald]

The measures agreed on include a bill on the adoption of a new electoral proportional representation system, against whose fast-tracking LKP last week staged sit-ins in the parliament to block rooms, where the special committee on political reform was supposed to vote on fast-tracking the electoral reform bill, and also staged a rally at the weekend in central Seoul on Saturday attended by some 50,000 people joined the rally.

According to results of a mock election conducted by local pollsters, the LKD is likely to lose as many as 20 parliamentary seats under the new electoral system. [Korea Times]

Taiwan: Pro-independence activists to form new political party amid internal tensions within DDP over presidential candidate

(dql) Adding pressure on the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DDP) in the presidential and legislative elections in January 2020, a group of advocates of Taiwan's independence announced that they will establish a new political party that will focus on Taiwan's sovereignty as its main agenda and field candidates in the 2020 legislative elections. [Focus Taiwan 1]

Meanwhile, internal tensions within the DDP over the question who to nominate as presidential candidate intensifies and threatens the unity of the party which is facing the unprecedented case of an incumbent president challenged as presidential candidate after former Premier Lai Ching-te registered for DDP's primary to run against President Tsai. In move to buy time to mediate between Tsai and Lai, the party last week postponed the primary, originally scheduled for April 24, to end of May, while a petition of a group of academics and civic groups urged "President Tsai and former Premier Lai to work together" and to run on a joint ticket to counter an expected strong challenge from the opposition Kuomintang (KMT). Lai, however,

appears unwilling to bow to pressure to withdraw his bid for presidential nomination, insisting that "anyone who thinks holding a primary will cause division in the party is wrong, and that the purpose of the primary is so the DPP can field the strongest candidate in 2020." [Focus Taiwan 2] [The News Lens]

Law and Politics in South Asia

Sri Lanka bombings updates

(jk) While Sri Lanka is trying to get to terms with consequences of the serious attacks last week, the number of victims has been revised down due to some double counting and ensuing chaos after the bomb attacks to 253. [Al Jazeera] Yet, it remains the deadliest attack on Sri Lankan soil since the end of the civil war which is approaching its 10th anniversary in May. The attack was carried out by nine suicide bombers, two of which were children of a millionaire merchant. In fact, several of the bombers had studied abroad and were at least reasonably well off, which challenges a common narrative that terrorism is more often than not a response to poverty, economic hardship and a response to a lack of alternatives.

ISIS has claimed responsibility for the attacks but there are also clear signs of an intelligence failure enabling the attacks, which led to the resignation of a top Ministry of Defence official [SCMP 1], but also initiated a wider discussion on whether the failure was related to the recent constitutional crisis and if there are lingering difficulties between the country's President and Prime Minister affecting national security. [SCMP 2] Another top official, the police chief of Sri Lanka, has

refused to step down despite President Sirisena already naming his successor. [Straits Times]

With elections coming up at the end of the year, the domestic political situation plays an important role in the bombing's aftermath. Rajapaksa (and some family members) in particular have a reputation as strong leaders who helped bring about a bloody end of the civil war and he may try run on a platform of a need for a strong hand to ensure security for the country.

Investigations into the bombings are continuing and further arrests are being made. Since the bombing, other explosive devices have been found and at least 15 people have died during one explosion in an alleged ISIS safe-house in one of a number of raids by security forces. [SCMP 3] The Catholic church has announced it will not hold Sunday masses until further notice and the President has banned covering one's face, including wearing burkas, which may conceal people's identities. [The Quint] The controversial social media ban that had been issued immediately after the bombings took place seems not yet to have been lifted entirely, although some people have been able to access social media via VPNs [Netblocks].

India: With polls at halfway point, efforts to fight fake news in full swing

(zf) With three phases down and four to go in India's month-long election, efforts to fight the onslaught of fake news in the country are in full swing. Anoop Mishra, one of India's leading social media experts, said that doctored content and the forwarding of fake or misleading stories in bulk via WhatsApp and Facebook messenger are still a huge concern despite the significant amount of attention and resources given to the issue. According to Mishra, over 90,000 WhatsApp groups and 200 Facebook pages are currently influencing the electorate with false or biased content. Specifically, the forwarding of fake statistics, manipulated political news, and the propagation of myths or false statements were the main methods utilized by these pages and groups. Sometimes the content devolves into explicit calls for violence. For their part, social media companies have made concerted efforts to combat the scourge of fake news on its platforms. Facebook says it is removing or blocking hundreds of thousands of pages per day via its artificial intelligence and machine learning systems. It has also systematically removed approximately 700 political pages and groups from operation in India for 'coordinated inauthentic behavior.' WhatsApp recently

launched a tip-line for fake content and put limits on who can add users to group chats. Despite the efforts, it's unclear how successful these policies will be overall. [Gulf News]

India: Air pollution emerges as election issue

(zf) India has some of the most polluted air in the world, and now the major parties are making it an election priority. BJP, Indian National Congress, and the Aam Aadmi Party have all pledged to combat the scourge of toxic air. In party manifestos, several measures have been proposed, including the implementation of emissions standards and the promotion of electric vehicles. The emphasis on the issue is worth noting as it is the first time it has been explicitly mentioned in party platforms. During the last election cycle there was no mention of pollution or toxic air. To illustrate the sheer scale of the problem, it is estimated that 1.24 million Indian deaths could be attributed to air pollution in 2017, directly or indirectly. [Science Direct] In BJP's manifesto, they promise to reduce toxic air emissions by 35% in 102 of the country's most polluted cities. INC calls the situation a "public health emergency" and promises to strengthen the National Clean Air Program to mitigate its worst effects. [Bloomberg]

Pakistan: Musharraf unlikely to appear in court

(jk) The special court in Pakistan which is hearing a treason case against former army chief and President Musharraf had ordered him to appear before court on May 2. After it was assumed that Musharraf will appear (at least his lawyer said he was "eager to do so"), it is now said that he will not make it. Musharraf left for Dubai in 2016 to seek medical treatment and has not returned since. Last week, he was admitted to hospital in Dubai and will most likely again not return to Pakistan on medical grounds. A conviction for high treason in Pakistan could result in life imprisonment or death penalty. [NDTV]

Bangladesh: Bashar Chan Island now ready to welcome refugees; no repatriation in sight

(jk/cc) With rainy season approaching, Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are at increased risks from landslides. Around 730,000 Rohingyas that fled to neighbouring Bangladesh live in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. The government of Bangladesh formulated at several reprisals over the past two years the wish to relocate the refugees to the uninhabited island of Bhashan Char. Despite NGOs and refugees expressing concerns over the risks of cyclones, Bangladesh's State Minister for Foreign Affairs said the island is now ready to welcome refugees. According to the State Minister, the relocation could start before the upcoming monsoon. [Reuters] He added that "UN is not against Bhashan Char...we do not think anyone from the UN is against Bhashan Char," and warned that "If people die due to landslides following heavy rainfall, we will not take responsibility". [Dhaka Tribune 1] [Dhaka Tribune 2]

The International Crisis Group (ICG), focusing on the present refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, has published a report on the situation, calling on the government to initiate a few concrete steps to improve the situation for the refugees. These steps are suggested in realisation that while repatriation to Myanmar should remain the long-term goal - as is strong preference of both the Bangladesh government and the refugees themselves, it is not likely to be achievable anytime soon. The most pertinent issues according to the ICG report are therefore for the Bangladesh government to lift its ban on the provision of formal education in the camps as well as to improve law and order "in the camps, where militants and gangs increasingly operate with impunity and are consolidating control to the detriment of non-violent political voices and leaders." [ICG]

Law and Politics in Southeast Asia

Indonesia: Anxiety grows over uncertain election results

(ls) Following Indonesia's presidential elections on 17 April, strong exchanges between the two rival camps over the veracity of the electoral process continue. Presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto is disputing unofficial exit polls, which have had a reliable track record in the past three elections, and which show the incumbent Joko Widodo with 54 to 55 per cent of the votes. He made allegations of electoral fraud and urged the General Elections Commission (KPU) and Bawaslu election supervisory body to investigate and ensure the polls were conducted fairly. The government has dismissed accusations. [Straits Times]

Since the election, supporters in both camps have been celebrating victory. In particular, the groundswell of support for Prabowo has fueled concern over how the millions of people who voted for him might react when the KPU officially announces the results on May 22. Some observers fear mass riots like in 1998 when people waged large-scale demonstrations that descended into violence and chaos. An estimated 1,200 people died during those days in May, now called "Peristiwa Mei 1998", which eventually led to the resignation of authoritarian leader Suharto after 32 years in power. [South China Morning Post]

Meanwhile, thousands of polling stations across Indonesia are expected to hold revotes to make up for technical errors that reportedly caused problems in dozens of provinces nationwide. The KPU received revote or voting extension requests from 2,700 polling stations in 31 provinces. However, he polling stations that filed reports comprise only 0.3 percent of the total 813,350 polling stations that operated on the day of the election. [Jakarta Post]

Malaysia: The continuing struggle over the role of the monarchy in state affairs

(ls) In another round of disagreements between Malaysian Prime Minister and the Johor royal family, Mahathir Mohamad reiterated that the ruling party of a state can reject a chief minister candidate chosen by the sultan through a vote of no confidence in the assembly. His comment came after Sahruddin Jamal, who was appointed as Johor chief minister, reshuffled of the Johor Executive Council in a move that apparently defied the Cabinet. [CAN]

The previous chief minister Osman Sapian had stepped down. Johor crown prince Tunku Ismail Ibrahim said it was his father Sultan Ibrahim who ordered the chief minister to be replaced. However, Pakatan Harapan leaders insisted they were unsatisfied with his performance.

Mahathir listed events that led to the adoption of the country's Federal Constitution, where it was agreed that Malaya (and later Malaysia) would be a democracy where the people would choose its government. "The rulers would be constitutional heads without executive power. Their position would be guaranteed by the Constitution, which would be the supreme law of the country," he said. In response Tunku Ismail cited Article 71(1) which states that the "Federation shall guarantee the right of a Ruler of a State to succeed and to hold, enjoy and exercise the constitutional rights and privileges of Ruler of that State". [Straits Times]

The most dramatic showdown between the two sides emerged in early April, after the royal households appeared to successfully pressure the government into rescinding its decision to accede to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Sultan Ibrahim Ismail claimed the treaty was unconstitutional and that the statute would disturb the "powers of the monarch, Malay special privileges, and the sanctity of Islam in this country". Last year, the government also backtracked on the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Back then, Tunku Ismail also questioned accession to the treaty. [South China Morning Post]

Myanmar: Human Rights Watch calls on parliament to amend repressive laws used against journalists

(cc) As the Parliament will begin a new session on Monday, April 29, the international NGO Human Rights Watch calls on the representatives to “repeal or amend repressive laws used to silence critics and suppress freedom of expression.” Recently, the two imprisoned Reuters’ journalists were awarded a Pulitzer Prize for their investigation on the killing of 10 Rohingyas in Rakhine State. However, their appeal was rejected the same week by the Supreme Court. This is far from being the only case of jailed journalists, and investigations against editors and news companies are not uncommon in the golden country. Earlier this month, the Tatmadaw filed a complaint against the newspaper Irrawaddy for defamation under the Telecommunication Act. [The Irrawaddy] [HRW] [Reuters]

Philippines: Communist rebels kill six soldiers in Samar

(ls) Six soldiers were killed on Tuesday in the central island province of Samar in the first major attack by Communist rebels in the Philippines since the 50th anniversary of their guerrilla movement last month. The New People’s Army, the armed wing of the underground Communist Party of the Philippines which has been waging guerrilla warfare in the Philippines since 1969, claimed responsibility for the attack, saying it was carried out because the military “has a long and bloody trail of human rights violations” on Samar, a stronghold of the Communist movement. [New York Times]

Philippines: Duterte administration threatens journalists after alleged ouster plans became apparent

(ls) The Philippine government warned the press against plotting to “destroy” President Rodrigo Duterte’s administration, following recent local news reports alleging the Duterte family’s involvement in illegal drugs and raising questions about a large increase in his wealth. A presidential spokesperson said the ouster allegations were based on information shared by an unnamed foreign intelligence agency. He added that the Duterte government was putting implicated journalists and news outfits on notice but would not pursue legal action against them “for now”. Since Duterte became president, several journalists have been targeted with legal action, in particular

Rappler's chief editor Maria Ressa. Journalists' killings have been rising as well. [Straits Times]

Thailand: Royal astrologer casts King's horoscope ahead of coronation

(ls) In an important ritual to prepare for King Maha Vajiralongkorn's elaborate coronation ceremonies this week, Thailand's royal astrologer cast the King's horoscope last Tuesday. The three-hour ceremony included the inscription of the king's name and new royal title on another golden plaque, and the carving of the king's official seal. The coronation ceremonies from May 4 to 6 will be the first the country has seen since Vajiralongkorn's father, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, was crowned on May 5, 1950. [Reuters]

Thailand: Constitutional Court asked again to rule on election calculation formula; FFP leader to face additional charges

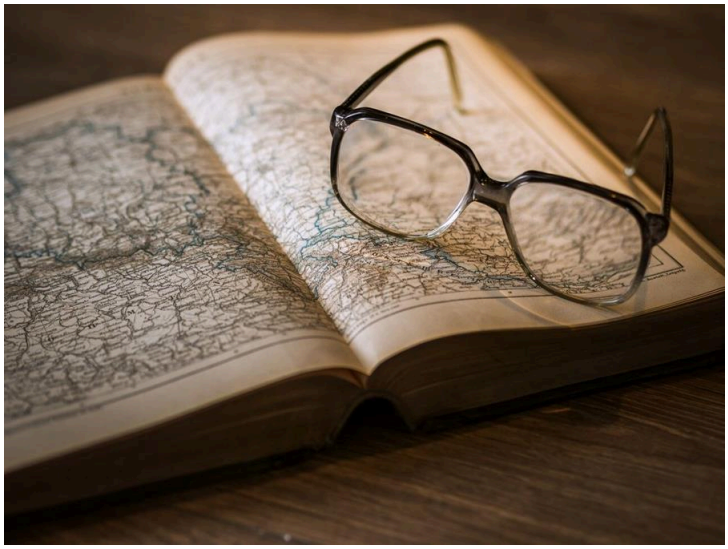
(ls) The Thai Ombudsmen have voted to ask the Constitutional Court to rule whether some provisions of the Organic Act on the Election of Members of the House Representatives involving the allocation of party-list MPs are constitutional. At the same time, they dismissed calls to nullify the March 24 election. The ombudsmen were of the opinion the formula outlined in the Act added criteria and was different from what is stipulated in the constitution. Earlier this month, also the Election Commission (EC) had asked the court to make such ruling, but the court dismissed the petition, saying it is the EC's duty to decide on the formula to be used and that the court can only rule after it makes that decision. [Bangkok Post]

Nonetheless, the Election Commission said that the results of both party-list and constituency MPs will be unveiled by May 9 as mandated by the constitution. A month has passed since Thailand voted on March 24, yet the full results have yet to be released. A lack of clarity means it is even unclear which party will emerge as the majority in the lower house. [Khaosod English 1]

In a separate development, the EC resolved to accuse Future Forward Party leader Thanathorn Juangroongruamgkit of breaching the election law by holding media company shares while competing in the general elections. Article 98 of the afore-mentioned

Organic Act bans MP candidates from holding shares in a media company after registering in the election. Thanathorn claims he had already sold his shares in a media company called V-Luck Media as required by the law. Besides, Thanathorn is also facing a sedition charge. [Khaosod English 2]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia



Belt and Road Forum I: China's century project beneficial to all partaking, Xi Jinping says

(dql) At last week's 2nd Belt and Road Forum, Chinese President Xi Jinping took pains to refute international criticism of the Belt and Road Initiative, in the frame of which China has signed cooperation documents with 126 countries and 29 international organizations, and present China's multi-trillion USD flagship project as open, inclusive and beneficial to all participants.

In his opening speech he highlighted the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a "joint project whose aim is to focus on inter-connectivity and inter-communication, to deepen pragmatic cooperation, to join hands in addressing the risks and challenges mankind is facing, and to realize mutual interests, common benefits and development". He re-assured that China would introduce well-recognized rules and standards in Belt and Road projects "mak[ing] make sure that corporates follow international rules and standards during construction, operation, merchandise and

tender and respect laws and regulations in different countries." He also announced that China would clean up state subsidies, reduce non-tariff barriers, boost imports and protect intellectual property as well as not engage in the de-evaluation of its currency. [Xinhua, in Chinese]

The forum was a demonstration of China's aspiration for global leadership. At the closing of the forum Xi announced deals worth 64 billion USD signed during the forum, while the Chinese Foreign Ministry made available a list of 283 "concrete results", including initiatives proposed or launched by the Chinese side, bilateral and multilateral documents signed during or immediately before the second BRF, multilateral cooperation mechanisms under the BRF framework, investment projects and project lists, financing projects, and projects by local authorities and enterprises. [Global Times]

The forum was attended by nearly 40 political leaders and 5000 representatives from more than 150 countries. Among the Asian countries represented by their head of state or government were Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, Nepal, and Pakistan as well as nine Southeast Asian countries with Indonesia represented by Vice-President Jusuf Kalla. [The Diplomat]

Among the leaders at the forum were also Russian and Turkish Presidents Putin and Erdogan whose countries are jointly working on creating aircraft and helicopters, as well as components for the armor, according to TASS citing the press office of Rosoboronexport, Russia's state arms seller. The news come after Erdogan discussed with US President Trump in a phone call Ankara's intention to buy the Russian S-400 air-defense system, which has put the historic alliance between the United States and Turkey under a test, as Erdogan has repeatedly stated that Turkey will maintain the planned deal with Russia defying US warning of penalties in case of such a purchase. [TASS] [Aljazeera]

Belt and Road Forum II: Continued Chinese investments in Laos' and Thailand's railway sector and Myanmar's dams

(ls/zf) A memorandum of cooperation between China, Laos and Thailand was signed during the Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing last week, cementing a partnership in the Belt and Road Initiative's pan-Asia

rail project that looks to reach the Southeast Asian market via Kunming. Concerns are mounting over how the two Southeast Asian countries can navigate the alleged debt-laden diplomacy in Beijing's vision to revive the historical Silk Road. Thailand is currently building the 607km (377 mile) route between Bangkok and Nong Khai province, partly financed with Chinese and other international loans. [South China Morning Post]

Over 250 miles of railway connecting Laos' capital Vientiane and the southern Chinese province of Yunnan are currently under construction. The Laotian government is hailing the project as an important catalyst for the county's development prospects. During the groundbreaking ceremony in 2016, the Lao Minister of Public Works and Transport, Bouchanh Sinthavong, depicted the railway as a boon for the country: "Once completed, the railway will benefit Lao people of all ethnic groups, facilitate and reduce costs of transportation, stimulate the development of agricultural and industrial sectors, tourism, investment and trade, as well as generate income for Lao people and the country." [MPR News]

With that said, concerns over debt associated with the project are mounting. The project costs $6 billion overall, but China has agreed to pay 70% of the total cost. The remaining 30% will be paid by Laos, but financed via loans from Chinese financial institutions. As such, while increased economic growth might well be a clear legacy of this project, the specter of over-leveraged debt is a real concern. So too is the issue of displacement. It has already been reported that that thousands of Laotians are being ordered off their land near construction sites. [Radio Free Asia]

But in this one-party communist state, any public pushback against government efforts are largely frowned upon. When asked about their opinion of the project, one Vientiane resident said, "Zero of my friend[s] agree with it. However, we cannot go against [it] because it's already been decided by the top people and we just have to accept [it]." [NPR]

In a separate development, more than 8,000 residents of a township in Myanmar's Kachin state protested to call for a complete halt to the controversial Myitsone dam project, urging government action. Construction of the Chinese-backed U.S. $3.6 billion hydropower project on the Irrawaddy River in Kachin state, begun in 2009, has stalled since 2011 because of concerns over potential flooding and other environmental impacts and anger that 90 percent of its electricity would be exported to China. [Radio Free Asia]

Belt and Road Forum III: Pakistan and China sign MoUs and FTA II

(jk) Pakistan and China signed the second phase of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and other memoranda of understanding (MoUs) and agreements during the Belt and Road Forum last week. The FTA means duty-free access to Chinese markets for Pakistan, the MoUs refer for instance to the ML-1 project, a railways project connecting Peshawar and coastal Karachi, as well as the establishment of Havelian dry port under the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). [The News]

Japan: Trade issues dominate Abe's six-country tour to Europe and Northern America

(dql) Prime Minister Shinzo Abe returned to Japan on Monday from a six-country European and North American tour which took him to France, Italy, Belgium, Slovakia, the United States and Canada.

With France to host the next G7 summit and Japan the G20 summit in this year, Abe and French President Macron pledged to work together in forming a united front on global policies. In a potential check against US President Trump both leaders agreed to coordinate topics to be discussed at the respective summits including free trade, multilateralism and climate change. [Nikkei Asian Review]

Against the background of Italy's recent signing up to the Belt and Road initiative, Abe and Italian Prime Minister Conte reached an agreement on the need for high quality infrastructure. Both leaders also agreed to strengthen defense cooperation in area defense equipment and technology sharing. [Mainichi]

Meeting with EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and EU Council President Donald Tusk, Abe re-affirmed the growing relationship between the EU and Japan as well as Tokyo's support for Brussels against economic protectionism and possible further unilateral tariffs levied by Washington against the EU. [Politico]

During his first visit to Slovakia, Abe and his counterpart Pellegrini discussed possibilities of intensifying Japanese companies' investments in Slovakia as well as agreements to remove the trade barriers between the countries. [Spectator]

Trade was also the main issue at the meeting between Abe and US President Trump. Following recent announcements of Japanese carmakers' decision to increase investments in car manufacturing plants in the USA, Trump pressed Abe to have Japanese automakers build more vehicles in the United States. The USA is facing a trade deficit of 67.6 billion USD with Japan in 2018 against which Trump imposed tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from Japan and has threatened to slap auto tariffs. [Channel News Asia] [Japan Times]

Meanwhile, Abe and Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau praised the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) which came into effect at the start of the year and removed trade barriers among 11 countries covering a market of nearly 500 million consumers in the Asia-Pacific region. Abe's visit to Canada was an opportunity for Trudeau to re-assure the two countries' strong relationship at a time when Canada is facing strained ties with both the USA and China over US tariffs on Canadian metal and imprisonment of Canadian nationals in China following the arrest of Huawei's chief financial officer in Vancouver. [Edmonton Journal]

North Korea: Russia positions itself as essential factor in Pyongyang's denuclearization

(dql) At their summit in Vladivostok last week, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and Russian President Vladimir Putin pledged to strengthen relations between their countries, with the latter offering support to normalize North Korea's relations with the US and asserting Moscow's potential of being a factor in reviving US-North Korean talks which have stalled since the failure of the summit between Trump and Kim in Hanoi.

In a press conference following the summit Putin expressed his believe that Pyongyang could forgo its nuclear weapons if security guarantees were given first as wells as his advocacy for a phased approach to denuclearization, in which the United States and North Korea slowly take trust-building steps. [The Guardian]

In a latest move reflecting the negotiation deadlock between Washington and Pyongyang, North Korea's First Vice Foreign Minister on Tuesday warned of "unwanted consequences" in case Washington does not change its policy on the North's denuclearization within this year. North's state-run Korean Central News

Agency quoted her saying “Our resolution on denuclearization remains unchanged and we will put it into practice when the time comes. But, it will only be possible when the U.S. changes their current way of calculation and reestablishes its stance." [Yonhap]

India’s Iran conundrum – no new US sanction waivers

(jk) The Trump administration said last week that the United States would not renew waivers to third party countries for their purchase of Iranian oil after May 2. This has put India put in a very tough position as Iran is its number three crude oil supplier and India is heavily dependent on imported oil. After China, India is also the second-biggest purchaser of Iranian oil. Rather than using US Dollars, it is buying Iranian oil in Rupees. A pertinent question this week will therefore be how India will react to the U.S. sanctions and whether they will continue to import Iranian oil, or how they can otherwise manage to maintain a good relationship with the United States, maybe without entirely severing ties with Iran. [ORF]

According to a US State Department official, the Chabahar port project, which is developed by India in Iran, will not be impacted by this decision as it is under a separate exception. [Business Today]

India and France to hold 'Varuna' naval exercise off Goa coast

(jk) Expanding on their strategic partnership in the Indian Ocean region, India and France will conduct their largest naval exercise to date 'Varuna' later this week. While the French navy is sending its nuclear-powered aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle with Rafale-M naval jets as well as a number of other naval vessels, the participation of the host country’s only aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya is in doubt after a fire accident in the aircraft carrier last week which cost the life of one naval officer and injured nine others. [New Indian Express, IB Times]

After 5 years of Modi, India keeps struggling to keep pace with China

(zf) A Bloomberg report lays out the ways in which India is failing to keep pace with China. For example, despite Prime Minister Modi's attempts to run a campaign on his party's foreign policy chops, China has decidedly taken a clear geopolitical lead in the region over the course of his first term. Specifically, Beijing continues to outspend Delhi on defense, has implemented sweeping reforms in its military, and continues to provide archrival Pakistan with defense capabilities. India's next government, meanwhile, will inherit an aging defense infrastructure and a bloated military bureaucracy. Interestingly, according to the [Lowly Institute's Asia Power Index], India lags behind China on a whole host of domains, not just those concerned with defense. Economic resources, diplomatic influence, and cultural influence are all areas where China far outstrips India. In response to the report, BJP spokesman said that China "Admittedly has a much larger economy and defense budget in line with its own needs and plans," but emphasized that "India is not in any arms race with any country and has a defense budget that is adequate as per its needs. Streamlining the armed forces and reforms has been an ongoing process." [Bloomberg]

Xi and Duterte meet in Beijing as South China Sea tensions keep simmering

(ls) Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and Chinese President Xi Jinping held a meeting in Beijing ahead of the Belt and Road Forum in China. Duterte encouraged their two countries to continue to "explore new areas of cooperation and artnership" and to fast-track the implementation of agreements signed during Xi's visit in November 2018. The Philippines reportedly secured up to US$12 billion of investment deals. [Rappler]

Duterte's visit took place against the backdrop of rising tensions in the South China Sea, where Chinese vessels have surrounded the Philippine-occupied Thitu island in a move aimed at preventing Manila from upgrading facilities including a strategically significant air strip. In the run-up to his visit, Duterte threatened "suicide missions" against the Chinese vessels. Though the issue was reportedly also discussed at the meeting, none of the bellicose rhetoric was on display during Duterte's visit. [Asia Times]

Duterte also brought up the issue of the 2016 arbitration award favoring his country in the territorial dispute. But Xi reiterated Beijing's position of not recognizing the ruling by the U.N.-backed court in The Hague. Both countries agree to fast-track negotiations

over the South China Sea Code of Conduct to be able to meet the three-year deadline, or until the end of the Philippines' coordinatorship between China and ASEAN ends in 2021. [Japan Times]

Philippines: Duterte threatens 'war' with Canada over trash shipments

(zf) Several years ago a Canadian company shipped several thousand tons of garbage to Manila for disposal. Now, it is creating a diplomatic spat between the Philippines and Canada. The shipments took place in 2013 and 2014 but were deemed illegal because the private Canadian cargo ship did not have the correct import clearances. Furthermore, the trash was labeled as recyclable, but inspectors found that the shipments were unable to be recycled. As such, the shipments have been sitting in Manila ports for years waiting to be processed or removed.

This week, President Duterte lashed out at Canada over the situation. He criticized the country over its willingness to use the Philippines as a 'dump site,' and threatened to 'declare war against them' if they don't remove the garbage. Duterte has never been one to shy away from bombastic rhetoric. In response to the statements, the Canadian government promised to work with Manila to solve the issue. [CNN] [City News]

Two ASEAN agreements to remove trade and investment barriers signed

(ls) ASEAN countries' economic ministers last week signed to agreements aimed at reducing trade barriers for service suppliers and promote investment to the region. The pacts were concluded under Singapore's chairmanship last year and inked on the sidelines of an Economic Ministers' Retreat in Thailand. The ASEAN Trade in Services Agreement builds upon an earlier deal and aims to further reduce trade barriers for service suppliers. The other agreement is the Fourth Protocol to Amend the ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement, which aims to remove barriers to investment by clearer and added commitments that prevent governments from imposing performance requirements on investors. [Straits Times]

UN report sees extreme droughts as potential security threat in Southeast Asian countries

(ls) A new study conducted by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) and ASEAN revealed that drought will become intensified and even more extreme in Southeast Asia if countries do not take steps to reduce its impact. As revealed in the report, drought is often overlooked and receive less attention from policymakers compared to other natural disasters. They are often seen as a local problem and occur over a long time period. The report also points out that droughts will create "fertile ground for conflict." [UNESCAP]

U.S. Justice staff seek Goldman guilty plea in 1MDB settlement

(ls) U.S. Department of Justice staff have recommended that a U.S. government settlement with Goldman Sachs Group Inc over its role in the 1MDB corruption scandal should include a guilty plea at the parent company level. According to prosecutors, the investment bank generated about $600 million in fees for its work with 1MDB. Goldman is being investigated by Malaysian authorities and the U.S. Department of Justice for its role. The bank has consistently tried to distance itself from the scandal, saying the criminal activities of Leissner and Ng were hidden from the bank's management. [Reuters]

Continued Chinese investments in Laos' and Thailand's railway sector and Myanmar's dams

(ls/zf) A memorandum of cooperation between China, Laos and Thailand was signed during the Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing last week, cementing a partnership in the Belt and Road Initiative's pan-Asia rail project that looks to reach the Southeast Asian market via Kunming. Concerns are mounting over how the two Southeast Asian countries can navigate the alleged debt-laden diplomacy in Beijing's vision to revive the historical Silk Road. Thailand is currently building the 607km (377 mile) route between Bangkok and Nong Khai province, partly financed with Chinese and other international loans. [South China Morning Post]

Over 250 miles of railway connecting Laos' capital Vientiane and the southern Chinese province of Yunnan are currently under construction. The Laotian government is hailing the project as an important catalyst for the county's development prospects. During the groundbreaking ceremony in 2016, the Lao Minister of Public Works and Transport, Bouchanh Sinthavong, depicted the railway as a boon for the country: "Once completed, the railway will benefit Lao people of all ethnic groups, facilitate and reduce costs of transportation, stimulate the development of agricultural and industrial sectors, tourism, investment and trade, as well as generate income for Lao people and the country." [MPR News]

With that said, concerns over debt associated with the project are mounting. The project costs $6 billion overall, but China has agreed to pay 70% of the total cost. The remaining 30% will be paid by Laos, but financed via loans from Chinese financial institutions. As such, while increased economic growth might well be a clear legacy of this project, the specter of overleveraged debt is a real concern. So too is the issue of displacement. It has already been reported that that thousands of Laotians are being ordered off their land near construction sites. [Radio Free Asia]

But in this one-party communist state, any public pushback against government efforts are largely frowned upon. When asked about their opinion of the project, one Vientiane resident said, "Zero of my friend[s] agree with it. However, we cannot go against [it] because it's already been decided by the top people and we just have to accept [it]." [NPR]

In a separate development, more than 8,000 residents of a township in Myanmar's Kachin state protested to call for a complete halt to the controversial Myitsone dam project, urging government action. Construction of the Chinese-backed U.S. $3.6 billion hydropower project on the Irrawaddy River in Kachin state, begun in 2009, has stalled since 2011 because of concerns over potential flooding and other environmental impacts and anger that 90 percent of its electricity would be exported to China. [Radio Free Asia]

Background Reading

India’s Supreme Court on the edge

(jk) Is India’s Supreme Court going through its darkest hour since India’s independence? According to this observer, Indian PM Modi has “spent his first term centralizing power while debasing the institutions that were supposed to curb such impulses. The autonomy of educational, legislative, economic, and investigative bodies—not very lofty to begin with—has gone into a downward spiral.” [The Atlantic]

We would greatly appreciate your feedback! Please send any feedback you have regarding this newsletter to: info@cpg-online.de

Also, don't forget to Like CPG on Facebook, and browse our *website* for other updates and news!

German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance - CPG
Room 204, Faculty of Law, Thammasat University, 2 Prachan Road, Bangkok 10200, Thailand

Preferences | Unsubscribe