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*Grasp the pattern, read the trend*

# Asia in Review

**(2/6/2019)**

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Dear Reader,

AiR's team is presenting you the second June issue of 'Asia in Review' (AiR) updating you on the latest developments in geopolitics and international relations as well as constitutional politics, law reform and governance in Asia.

I wish you an informative read.

With the best wishes,

Henning Glaser

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# Law and Politics in East Asia

### China: Blocking of foreign online media outlets continued after Tiananmen Square anniversary

(dql) In a latest signal of the Chinese government's tightened grip on censorship and control over information on politically sensitive issues online editions of *The Washington Post and The Guardian* have been blocked in China in the aftermath of last week's 30th anniversary of the crackdown of the student-led protest at Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989.

In moves earlier last week, CNN's website, usually accessible in China, appeared to be inaccessible after the publication of a story on the protests on the day of the anniversary, while coverage on the Tiananmen square crackdown by Reuters were taken down. [The Guardian] [Quartz] [Tech Crunch]

Compared with past years, China's internet authorities this year have intensified censorship efforts ahead of June 4 using powerful software able to block over 10,000 web domains and artificial intelligence algorithms to track VPNs. Users of WeChat, China's most popular social media service with estimated 900 million daily active users, were prohibited from posting keywords or pictures related to the protests while

Wikipedia in all language versions has been blocked since April. So far, only the Chinese language Wikipedia edition had been banned. [South China Morning Post]

## China: Huge demonstration against Hong Kong's pending extradition law turns violent

(dql) Hundreds of thousands of people on Sunday staged a massive rally against Hong Kong's extradition bill scheduled to pass the legislature of China's semi-autonomous region this week. The protest turned violent at midnight when demonstrators attempted to storm Hong Kong's parliament and clashed with police trying to prevent them from doing so. [Hong Kong Free Press]

The highly contentious bill establishes a system for case-by-case fugitive transfers between Hong Kong and regions with which it does not already have extradition agreements, including mainland China. Critics fear that the proposed law would open the door for extradition requests of political nature from the Chinese government which the pro-Beijing Hong Kong government would not deny to meet. [The Guardian]

Defying these critics and the protest march, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam refused to withdraw the bill insisting that it was necessary "to uphold justice and also ensure that Hong Kong will fulfill her international obligations in terms of cross-boundary and transnational crimes". She further stressed that legally binding human rights safeguards were in place. [Aljazeera] [BBC]

For footage of the rally see [DW].

## Taiwan: Ruling DPP's primary kicked off, KMT contenders announced

(dql) On Monday, the ruling Democratic Progressive Party's nomination for the presidential election 2020 kicked off. Until Friday, public opinion polls will be conducted to select the party's candidate for the presidential election in January 2020.

On Saturday, Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen and her contender former Premier Lai Ching-te presented policies and visions for Taiwan under their respective potential presidency at the sole televised debate prior to the primary. Key issues debated included the

country's economy, social welfare, national sovereignty and cross-strait relations on which both contenders' proposals resembled each other. In particular, with regards to the issue of Taiwan's sovereignty both fiercely rejected the "one country, two systems" model, that Beijing is adhering to as unification formula, and stressed that Taiwan's future should be decided by its people. [Focus Taiwan 1] [South China Morning Post]

Meanwhile, the main opposition Kuomintang (KMT) last week announced five contenders for the party's presidential nominee, including former New Taipei Mayor Eric Chu, former Taipei County Magistrate Chou Hsi-wei, National Taiwan University political science professor Chang Ya-chung, billionaire Foxconn Chairman Terry Gou and Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu.

With the latter's campaign rally on Saturday attended by more than 150.000 supporters, observers believe the KMT's race for the presidential candidate to be a heated one, in particular between the outspoken Beijing-friendly Han and Gou, Taiwan's wealthiest man, who has pledged to balance Taiwan's relationship with both the United States and China.

The KMT's public opinion polls to select the presidential candidate will be conducted nationwide from July 5-15, with the results to be released July 16 and candidate announced on the following day. [Focus Taiwan 2][Taiwan News] [Straits Times]

## Taiwan: Freedom of press best in East Asia, Freedom House says

(dql) According to the Freedom House report "Freedom and the Media: A Downward Spiral" released last week, Taiwan has the highest level of press freedom in East Asia receiving the best score of four, along with only 35 other countries among 195 assessed in the report. [Taipei Times]

The report acknowledges in its key findings that "[f]reedom of the media has been deteriorating around the world over the past decade" and that "[i]n some of the most influential democracies in the world, populist leaders have overseen concerted attempts to throttle the independence of the media sector." [Freedom House]

### South Korea: Ex-Vice Minister of Justice indicted for receiving sexual favors and bribes

(jyk) South Korea's former vice minister of Justice, Kim Hak-eui, is set to stand trial for receiving sexual favors and bribes totaling 143,600 USD from a construction contractor. Kim served as the vice-minister of Justice Ministry for just six days until the Prosecutors investigated him for the above charges in March 2013. But the prosecutors and the police dropped all charges against Kim the immediate year, citing a lack of evidence [KyungHyang]. The case resurfaced in 2019 when Kim's sex video was disclosed by the media and prompted re-initiation of the investigation by the Prosecution Services. New evidences against Kim's misdeeds generated public speculations that the premature acquittal in 2013 was an attempt of cover-up led by the Prosecution Office and the authorities of the Presidential Office, which was then headed by the Park Administration. [JoongAng Daily]

### South Korea: Controversy as ruling party's election strategist plans to visit regional governments ahead of general election

(jyk) Yang Jeong-cheol, a key confidant of President Moon and the director of the ruling party's election campaign think tank - Institute for Democracy - sparked controversy as he planned his visit to Busan and South Gyeongsang Province to "establish a cooperation network with think tanks of all regional governments", according to an official of the institute [JoongAng Daily 1].

The announcement of the visit was controversial as it came shortly after Yang's recent private dinner with the director of the National Intelligence Service despite the NIS Act forbidding its involvement in political activities. [AiR 4/5/2019] The opposition Liberty Korea Party called the visit inappropriate as it could unjustly influence the election results by exerting influence on "the regional government heads who have influence over (their) residents and organizational power". [JoongAng Daily 2]

## Law and Politics in South Asia

## Bhutan decriminalizes gay sex

(ls) Bhutan's lower house overwhelmingly voted last Friday to repeal two sections of the 2004 criminal code which made "unnatural sex" illegal. The law had never been used, but Finance Minister Namgay Tshering, who submitted the recommendation to repeal sections 213 and 214, said they had become "a stain" on the country's reputation. Especially in Bhutan's rural areas, transgender people still face discrimination. [Channel News Asia]

## India: Court convicts six men for gang rape and murder of eight-year-old Muslim girl

(ls) An Indian court has convicted six men for the gang rape and murder of an eight-year-old nomadic Muslim girl in Jammu and Kashmir's Kathua region. The case sparked a massive country-wide outrage. According to the findings of the court, the girl was kidnapped on January 10, 2018 and raped in captivity in a small village temple in Kathua district after being kept sedated for four days. The case had also a political dimension as two ministers of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had participated in a rally organized in support of the accused. [India Today]

## Indian police deserters among four killed in Kashmir

(cl) On Friday, two low-ranking police deserters were among four rebels killed overnight in a firefight with

government forces in India-administered Kashmir. Soldiers laid siege to a residential area, triggering an exchange of fire with armed militants hiding in a house late on Thursday evening. [Aljazeera]

The former Himalayan kingdom is divided between Pakistan and India, and for decades, rebel groups have been fighting for independence from Indian rule or a merger of Kashmir with Pakistan. Many officers had deserted the police force in the past to join the rebels in the restive region to fight some 500,000 Indian soldiers who have been deployed in the disputed territory for decades. [The Guardian]

This year, more than 100 militants have been killed. Such gun battles between anti-India rebels and government forces are frequent in territory controlled by New Delhi and while India regularly accuses Pakistan of supporting the rebels, Pakistan has denied this allegation by stating that it only provides moral and diplomatic support to a Kashmiri struggle for right to self-determination. [BBC News]

## Four dead in shootout between rival Indian political parties

(cl) A gun battle between supporters of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and a regional rival has killed four people in West Bengal on Sunday, and at least 18 others were injured in the clashes that broke out on Saturday in the eastern state that has been on edge since Prime Minister Modi's BJP launched an aggressive campaign to win parliamentary seats last year. [Khaleej Times] [Arab News]

Violence peaked across the state during elections in April-May and has continued even after results, giving a massive nationwide victory to BJP. BJP and opposition parties have often accused each other of killings, intimidation and corruption. BJP, which has traditionally held sway in the Hindi-speaking belt in the north, has been trying hard to pick up support in West Bengal where the opposition party has dominated for a decade. In the past, the state has witnessed several violent feuds between rival parties – last month, a BJP supporter was shot dead in Kolkata and last year, a BJP worker was hanged from a tree. State elections in West Bengal are scheduled to be held in 2021. [New Straits Times]

## India is about to outlaw cryptocurrencies

(ls) The Indian government is taking steps to ban cryptocurrencies. The "Banning of Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill 2019" draft proposes a 10-year prison sentence for persons who "mine, generate, hold, sell, transfer, dispose, issue or deal in cryptocurrencies." Given the chances of cryptocurrencies being misused for money laundering, various government bodies such as the Income Tax Department and the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) had previously endorsed banning of cryptocurrencies. [Economic Times]

## Pakistan: Government targets the judiciary

(ls) Pakistan's government under Prime Minister Imran Khan has moved a reference against Justice Qazi Faez Isa of the Supreme Court and another Sindh High Court judge to the Supreme Judicial Council, claiming that they have not declared their overseas properties in their tax returns. Judge Isa originally comes from insurgency-ridden Balochistan province. He delivered several verdicts that openly criticized the army. [The Diplomat]

In response, all bar councils of Pakistan sought resignation of federal Law Minister Barrister Farogh Nasim and Attorney General Anwar Mansoor Khan and issued a call for a countrywide strike on June 14, the day when the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) will take up the references. The bar councils also demanded that President Arif Alvi and Prime Minister Khan resign, saying that the references were filed in such a dubious manner that one could doubt the move was a 'fixed match'. [Dawn]

The case is reminiscent of when Pakistani President General Pervez Musharaff sacked and then arrested the then-chief justice of Pakistan Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry in 2007, which galvanized into a lawyers' movement, one of the biggest civil protests in the history of Pakistan, and ultimately led to the downfall of Musharaff. [Wikipedia]

## Sri Lanka: Stand-off between parliament and president over bombing investigation

(ls) Sri Lanka's president Maithripala Sirisena said he would not cooperate with a parliamentary investigation into security lapses before the Easter

suicide bombings and would not allow defence or police officials to testify before a select committee. In response, the speaker of the parliament, Karu Jayasuriya, said that any public servant summoned by the committee was obliged to give evidence.  The committee began its publicly televised sittings since late last month. Evidence that has surfaced so far suggests that Sirisena failed to act on advance warning of the attacks. On Saturday, Sirisena's office fired his national intelligence chief who testified that the attacks against three churches and three luxury hotels could have been avoided. [Bangkok Post]

### Sri Lanka to introduce anti-fake news legislation

(ls) Following a rise in online disinformation after the Easter suicide attacks, Sri Lanka's government will introduce five-year jail terms for those caught spreading fake news and hate speech on social media. The cabinet of ministers approved a respective proposal. However, the text of the respective provision has not yet been released. following the attacks on three churches and three hotels on April 21, a nine-day ban on platforms including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and WhatsApp had been introduced. Sri Lanka also shut down Internet access in March last year to prevent further violence during anti-Muslim riots. [Straits Times]

## Law and Politics in Southeast Asia

## Malaysia: Speculations surrounding political interference in appointments of key posts

(cl/jk) According to critical observers, recent instances of political interference in key appointments of a state-led enterprise and an anti-corruption commission in Malaysia have raised suspicions that the Pakatan Harapan government is not standing by its election manifesto to do away with putting political appointees in key posts.

While the board of directors of one of Malaysia's biggest companies, Telekom Malaysia, said that its nominee for the permanent chief executive position, which has been vacant since last year's general election, was accepted by the Ministry of Finance, PM Mahathir revealed on Wednesday that the nominee would not be elevated. [Free Malaysia Today] This is despite the Finance Minister, who supposedly has the final say in such key decisions, revealing that he had not been informed of the rejection of said nominee. Stakeholders lament Malaysia's lack of policy clarity amid frequent interventions in government-linked companies (GLC) by the Pakatan Harapan administration since Mahathir returned to power last year. [The Malay Mail]

On another note, PM Mahathir's move to bypass the Cabinet and appoint an ex-member of a political party as the new Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) chief that we mentioned last week, has been questioned by said party's leader, Anwar Ibrahim, who is slated to succeed PM Mahathir as prime minister. Besides raising questions on whether the appointment contravenes the MACC Act, an MP from the Democratic Action Party stated that PM Mahathir's unilateral decision went against his election pledge to ensure a check-and-balance of such appointments by the setting up of a Parliamentary Select Committee on Public Appointments. [New Straits Times] Civil society group Bersih 2.0 added that her appointment made power of abuse inevitable, noting that former prime minister Najib Razak had used the same power to appoint his allies into key positions to escape the scrutiny of 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal. [Free Malaysia Today] In response, Mahathir said that he did not want to be bound by the Cabinet in making this decision, adding that he consulted "others", whom he did not identify, about her character before making the appointment. [South China Morning Post]

## Malaysia bans smart devices at Cabinet, Executive Committee meetings

(cl) Malaysia is banning all mobile phones and other digital devices from being taken into Cabinet, post-Cabinet and state executive council meetings where policy matters and official secrets are being discussed, as part of an effort to prevent leaks. National Security director-general added that this has become necessary as the uncontrolled use of such devices in ministries can compromise security and may violate the Official Secrets Act 1972. Previously in April, the parliament was told that restricted zones that prohibit mobile phones or other communication devices capable of recording information has been created in ministries to prevent the leak of confidential government information. [The Star]

## Vietnamese activist sentenced to six years in prison for online posts

(jk) An environmental activist has been sentenced to six years in prison for "anti-state" posts on Facebook. He was arrested in September last year and according to his indictment last week, he urged and incited protests on social media. [Reuters] The sentencing is yet another example of a trend in Vietnam towards harsher penalties and shrinking tolerance on behalf of the government towards citizens expressing critical thoughts online.

## Failed suicide attack in Indonesia

(cl) An Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) sympathiser carrying explosives around his waist was the only casualty of a failed suicide bombing outside a police post in the Indonesian province of Central Java. The attacker is thought to be a lone-wolf terrorist, and there were no indications yet that he was working with a terror cell or network. [The Jakarta Post]

However, the blast occurred on Monday, just two days ahead of Hari Raya, and bears striking similarities to a series of attacks that had occurred during public holidays. On the eve of Hari Raya in 2016, a suicide bomber attacked a police station in Central Java, killing himself and injuring an officer. On the first day of Hari Raya in 2017, a policeman on sentry duty was stabbed to death by two assailants. In 2018, four men

reportedly preparing for terror attacks during Ramadan and Hari Raya were shot dead in West Java by counter-terrorism troops. Since these attacks, National Police chief has called on officers on duty during the long holiday period to remain vigilant to prevent terrorist attacks. [Straits Times]

## Alleged hitman names former Indonesian army general as mastermind of assassination plot

(cl) A hitman allegedly hired to assassinate four high-profile state officials during riots in Jakarta last month has named former army general as the mastermind of the plot. One of the suspects apprehended said the murder plot was hatched during a casual discussion at a restaurant in North Jakarta. In response, the former army general has denied the accusation. He is, however, in custody for offences over illegal arms and treason in conjunction with rallies held last month to call for the Indonesian President Widodo to be disqualified from the presidential race. [Tempo]

The alleged plot, aimed at destabilising the country, was first exposed by the national police on May 27th after they arrested 6 suspects who they said were linked to the riots. The unrest followed the announcement on May 21st by the elections commission that Mr Widodo had won the April 17th election over his old rival. 8 people died and more than 700 injured. The national police said that the street violence was a deliberate and coordinated strike, planned through WhatsApp. [The Jakarta Post]

## Gay rights in focus in the Philippines

(cl) President Duterte has a wavering record when it comes to gay rights. While he voiced support for same sex marriage during his campaign for president in 2016, he is notorious for his foul-mouthed speeches that include insults, threats to perceived enemies and references to rape that he casts as jokes. In his subsequent three years as president, he has frequently invoked homosexuality as an insult, using it to describe Communist rebels, Catholic priests and the former United States ambassador to his country. [The Times] However, at the same time, Mr Duterte has expressed other views that have won him support from Filipino gay rights activists, and is also critical of the country's powerful Roman Catholic Church. The Philippines has a reputation for openness towards homosexuality, but

watchdogs warn legal protections are lacking. [New York Times]

In a recent appearance before the Filipino community in Tokyo last week, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte sparked outrage after claiming that he “cured” himself of being gay with the help of beautiful women. [The Sun] The World Health Organisation stopped classifying homosexuality as a mental disorder almost 30 years ago. [South China Morning Post]

## Philippines assails United Nations rights exports for “unpardonable intrusions”

(cl) On Sunday, the Philippine government assailed UN human rights experts for their "unpardonable intrusions" into the country's sovereignty after they called for an investigation into alleged unlawful killings brought about by President Duterte's drug war. UN human rights experts, in a statement released last Friday, said it was time for the UN Human Rights Council to take action against "sustained attacks on people and institutions defending human rights" in the Philippines because the government has failed to address the issue. [New York Times] Since 2016, more than 5,000 suspected drug pushers and addicts have been killed in police operations under the government's aggressive campaign against illegal drugs. The presidential spokesman stressed that Mr Duterte’s war on drugs was pursuant to the primary duty of the state to protect the people, rejecting the UN human rights experts’ allegations. Mr Duterte added that he never ordered police to kill suspects in his campaign against illegal drugs, but merely called for police to “destroy the apparatus of the drug organisation”. [Aljazeera]

## Thailand: PM Prayuth wins election in joint sitting of House and Senate; Government coalition forged

(jk) In a joint sitting of the House of Representatives and the Senate last week, PM Prayuth has been voted to remain PM by winning the vote with 500 votes to 244 ahead of his contender Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit from the Future Forward Party. The Senate (all 250 Senators were picked by the military government) expectedly and collectively voted in favour of PM Prayuth, ensuring a decisive victory in what would have otherwise been a much closer call,

adding 249 votes to the 251 votes Prayuth received from the lower house. [Bangkok Post]

Nevertheless, the clear win cannot do away with the fact that the newly found government coalition is in fact fragile, as is the support for PM Prayuth himself. The coalition became official only when the Democrat Party voted on Tuesday to join a PPRP-led coalition, over which party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva resigned. Going forward, things may become difficult in a ruling coalition of 19 parties that still only holds a narrow majority of five seats in the lower house. Current "horse-trading" over cabinet portfolios is an indicator of how difficult it may become. [Bangkok Post 2]

On the other hand, going against the predictions of some observers that this government will not last all too long, the post-coup leadership has thus far been successful in maintaining power and arguably executed its plan well, which now sees them at the helm of an *elected* government within a tailor-made constitutional framework. Furthermore, in particular the Future Forward Party, a significant block of the opposition, still faces significant legal battles which consequences are not yet predictable but may significantly weaken the anti-government forces.

## International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

### China and Russia agree to elevate relations

(dql) Close relations between China and Russia have reached a new height, after both countries to upgraded their relations to a “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era” during a meeting between visiting Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin. [Moscow Times]

The agreement is of high symbolic nature, reflecting intensified efforts of China and Russia to demonstrate unity and to close ranks against the USA. In his speech commemorating the 70th anniversary of Sino-Russian diplomatic ties Xi hailed the countries’ relationship and friendship which, after70 years during which the ties have been “all the more matured, stable, firm and tenacious”, are “standing at a new historic starting point and facing a new historic opportunity” “to join hands to safeguard global peace and tranquility”. [Xinhua, in Chinese] Putin echoed Xi’s remarks by confirming that “Russian-Chinese relations have certainly reached an unprecedentedly high level”, with both countries now seeking to “make an important contribution to solving the world’s most pressing problems and countering new challenges and threats, speak out jointly in favor of forming a new, fair world order, based on multipolarity, strict compliance with the international law, the UN Charter, equality and mutually beneficial cooperation.” [TASS]

Furthermore, Xi and Putin witnessed the signing of an agreement between Huawei and the Russian telecoms company MTS on the development of a 5G network in Russia over the next year. The agreement which counters Washington’s crackdown on Huawei was one among a number of other deals in areas of nuclear power, natural gas, automobiles, hi-tech development, and e-commerce totaling 20 billion USD and clearly. [South China Morning Post]

Noteworthy in this context are news on the trend towards the fragmentation of the internet and the related potential of creating domestic internet control of new dimension, with Russia and Iran reported spearheading efforts to “build isolated, domestic internets” which “represent a new form of internet fragmentation” where citizens will not be able use virtual private networks and other tools to circumvent filters as their domestic internets are disconnected from the global one. [Wired]

## China: Advancing space technology

(dql) Signaling the country’s advancement in space technology, China last week successfully launched its

first rocket from a sea launch platform. The Long March 11, a solid-propellant carrier rocket, lifted off from a mobile launch platform in the Yellow Sea carrying seven satellites into 600-kilometer altitude orbits. With this mission China becomes the third country to conduct an offshore rocket launch catching up to the USA and Russia, and the first to do so from an indigenously launched platform since the platform used by the U.S. and Russia was created as a collaboration between four nations. [Space News] [Futurism]

Meanwhile, a report of the Center for a New American Security, a Washington DC-based think tank specializing in the United States' national security issues, warns that given "what the Chinese military has accomplished technologically in little more than two decades and what they plan to do in the decades to come", China "appears increasingly close to achieving technological parity with U.S. operational systems and has a plan to achieve technological superiority." The USA must "at least consider the possibility that the U.S. Joint Force is close to becoming the victim of a deliberate, patient, and robustly resourced military-technical offset strategy" which includes industrial and technical espionage and civil-military fusion, systems destruction warfare, attacking effectively first, "Assassin's Mace" capabilities, and exploiting Artificial Intelligence for Military Superiority. [Center for a New American Security]

## China-USA relations: Trump threatens to slap new tariffs

(dql) In a latest escalating move in the ongoing trade war between the USA and China, President Trump has threatened to impose large tariffs on 300 billion USD in imports if Chinese President Xi Jinping did attend the G 20 summit in Japan at the end of this month. [Express]

Prior to this move the Trump administration raised tariffs on 200 billion USD worth of Chinese goods exported to the U.S. and issued an effective ban on American companies doing business with Chinese telecom giant Huawei in May. Beijing retaliated with new tariffs hitting 60 billion USD worth of US goods and the announcement of the release of list of "unreliable" firms "that run against market rules and violate the spirit of contracts, cut off supplies to Chinese firms for uncommercial reasons, damage the legitimate rights of Chinese companies, or threaten China's national security and public interests." [AiR 1/6/2019] [The Independent]

## Japan-Russia relations: Putin says US-Japanese military cooperation impeding peace talks over territorial dispute

(jyk) Ahead of his meeting of his planned meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on the sidelines of the G 20 summit in Japan at the end of the month, Russian President Vladimir Putin called at a press conference last week Japan's military cooperation with U.S an impediment to both sides' efforts to come to terms on peace treaty, which will also include the settlement of the territorial disputes over the four northern islands located near Hokkaido and the Russian border.

Putin's statement is the latest reflection of two countries' deadlock in a long-standing dispute over these islands, with Japan claiming that Russia seized them illegally in World War II, and Russia claiming the seizure was a legitimate consequence of the war. [Japan Times]

It echoes the failure of the last 'two plus two' meeting the between Japanese and Russian Foreign and Defense Ministers on this issue two week ago at which both sides accused each other of unacceptable military buildups in the region. [AiR 1/6/2019]

## Inter-Korean relations: President Moon leaves for Scandinavian countries after signing off food aid to North Korea

(jyk/dql) Soon after signing off 8 million USD worth of food and medical aid for North Korea [JoongAng Daily 1], President Moon went on a weeklong trip on Sunday to Finland, Norway and Sweden to seek economic cooperation in technological areas including 5G networks and artificial intelligence. [JoongAng Daily 2] Moon will also deliver a speech about his vision for denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula at the Oslo Forum, as a way of issuing a message to North Korea as he did in Berlin in 2017. President Trump is also known to have discussed and supported the food aid program to North Korea over the phone with Moon, according to the Presidential Office. [New York Times]

## “Neighborhood First”: Indian PM Modi visits Maldives and Sri Lanka

(ls) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made his first overseas trip since being elected to a second term by travelling to the Maldives and Sri Lanka, reflecting the importance India attaches to its 'Neighborhood First” policy.

In the Maldives, Modi and Maldives’ President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih signed six Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) in the fields of hydrography, health, passenger and cargo services by sea, customs capacity building, training of civil servants and the sharing of white shipping information between the Indian Navy and the Maldives National Defence Force. In March, the countries had signed a USD 800 million Line of Credit Agreement for assisting the Maldives to achieve sustainable social and economic development. [Business Today]

Modi also inaugurated a coastal radar system and military training center in the Maldives. The two leaders pledged to combat piracy, terrorism, organized crime and trafficking through “coordinated patrolling and aerial surveillance, exchange of information, and capacity building.” [Al Arabiya]

Solih reaffirmed his government’s “India first policy” and pledged full support toward deepening “the multifaceted, mutually beneficial partnership between India and the Maldives”. Solih’s stand was a marked shift from his predecessor Yameen Abdul Gayoom, who developed close ties with Beijing. [South China Morning Post]

In Sri Lanka, Modi started his short visit by paying respect at one of the sites of the Easter Sunday attack. He said that he was confident Sri Lanka will rise again and cowardly acts of terror cannot defeat their spirit. [India Today] During his Maldives visit, Modi had already called for a global conference to tackle the threat of terrorism in the region and around the world. “The international community has actively arranged for global convention and many conferences on the threat of climate change. Why not on the issue of terrorism?” he said. [Reuters]

## India and Japan agree to hold “2+2” talks

(ls) India and Japan have agreed to hold a “2+2” dialogue between the defense and foreign ministers of

the two countries. It is likely to take place ahead of the summit-level meeting between Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Shinzo Abe later in the year. So far, India had engaged in such a dialogue format at this level only with the United States since last year. One of the primary objectives for both New Delhi and Tokyo is to prevent the rise of a unipolar Asia dominated by one single hegemonic power. [The Diplomat]

## Singapore primary source of foreign direct investment in India

(ls) Singapore is the top source of foreign direct investment (FDI) in India. In the last Indian financial year, the country received FDI inflows from Singapore valued at US$16.23 billion. The city state was followed by Mauritius (US$8.08 billion), the Netherlands (US$3.87 billion), the United States (US$3.14 billion) and Japan (US$2.97 billion). The rise of Singapore as an FDI source can partly be attributed to tax treaty amendments that India signed in recent years with Singapore and others like Mauritius that have brought tax parity, providing a level playing field. [Straits Times]

## Singapore, Australia to explore new areas of collaboration

(cl/jk) Singapore and Australia are deepening bilateral ties and exploring new areas of collaboration, such as in the digital economy, Prime Minister Lee and his Australian counterpart said on Friday. Mr Lee said they exchanged views on regional and global issues, adding that Australian and Singapore see “eye-to-eye” on many issues. [Channel News Asia] Both leaders also shared their hopes for negotiations on potentially the world’s largest trade pact, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, to be completed by the end of the year. Negotiations for the RCEP, which involves 16 Asia-Pacific countries, have been ongoing since 2012 and Mr Lee said in November last year that there have been “significant breakthroughs”. The RCEP aims to lower trade barriers and secure improved market access for businesses in the region. [Straits Times]

PM Lee further stated that Singapore, which is currently evaluating its laws to strengthen responses against foreign interference in domestic politics, could learn from Australia. The latter had, in 2018, passed laws including a ban on foreigners making political donations after a New South Wales senator accepted money from foreign donors that had links with the

Chinese government, and contradicted his party's position by defending China's position on the South China Sea. [Today] Previously, during maritime and airspace disputes between Singapore and Malaysia, the government noticed a spike in online comments, which it noted sought to create "an artificial impression to netizens of the opposition to Singapore's position at a time of heightened bilateral difficulties". In response, Senior Minister of State for Law stated, in a parliamentary debate, that Singapore would look at laws to tackle hostile information campaigns by countering the spread of false information by foreign actors and expose clandestine foreign-interference campaigns before they happen. [Today 2]

Singapore and Australia have elevated their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016 and work closely on defence and security. They are expected to sign a defence treaty this year to finalise an arrangement to jointly develop more military training.

## Singapore Prime Minister's post on the 1978 Vietnam-Cambodia issue upsets both countries

(cl) On May 31st, Prime Minister Lee posted on Facebook that the then-five Association of Southeast Nation members previously came together to oppose "Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and the Cambodian government that replaced the Khmer Rouge". In a 2011 speech, former deputy prime minister said that Singapore had to respond to the "invasion of a smaller county by a larger neighbour" or it would have undermined the credibility of Singapore's foreign policy and had serious implications for its security, adding that this would create an undesirable precedent for small nations. [Straits Times]

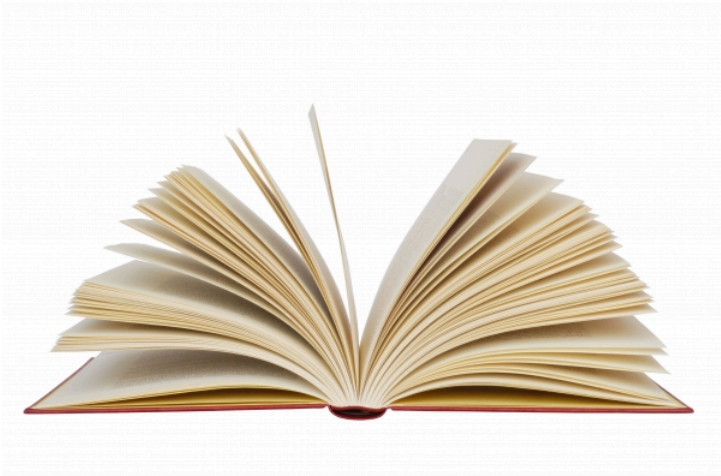
However, Cambodia and Vietnam have objected to PM Lee's remarks. Cambodia Defence Minister General told media that his comments were "unacceptable", and Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that Mr Lee's remarks did not "objectively reflect the historical truth". Cambodia's Prime Minister further accused PM Lee of supporting genocide. [Reuters] In response, Singapore's Foreign Ministry said in a statement last Friday that Singapore is committed to building on its good relations with Vietnam and Cambodia. It added that last Friday, Singapore's Foreign Minister spoke with Vietnamese and Cambodian Prime Ministers, who agreed that notwithstanding the serious differences,

they have taken a path of cooperation, dialogue and friendship. [Channel News Asia]

### Mahathir floats idea of a new currency based on gold, rather than on current "manipulative" currency system

(jk) Malaysian PM Mahathir has floated the idea of parts of Asia beginning to trade on the basis of a new currency based on a classical gold standard at an international conference on the future of Asia in Tokyo. He stated that the current tie to the US dollar is too open to manipulation and while the proposed currency would not be used domestically, it would reduce overall dependence on the US Dollar due to its use in regional trade. [Malay Mail] Whether or not such a proposal will gain any traction however, is primarily a political, rather than an economic question.

## Background Reading



### Hindus' attitudes towards secularism in India

(ls) The Washington Post has published the summary of a research conducted by Ajay Verghese, an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of California at Riverside, about Indians' attitudes toward secularism. He conducted a survey of 900 Hindus across the state of Bihar on religion and politics. His preliminary findings show that Hindus in Bihar overwhelmingly support many of the ideals of Indian secularism, including government support for mosques. However, the more religious voters are, the

more they subscribe to the tenets of Hindu nationalism, especially the idea that Hindus deserve preferential treatment over Muslims. [Washington Post]

## The Significance of Everyday Access to Justice in Myanmar's Transition to Democracy

(jk) In Myanmar, "ordinary people distrust and fear the official system and perceive courts as expensive, slow, distant, intrusive, and therefore the least preferred option in efforts to seek justice". Consequently, many "legal issues" are resolved by alternative providers of justice, such as elders, religious leaders or administrative officials. These pathways however, are informal and often not sufficiently recognized by outside observers. Their murkiness complicates any possible justice reform. This piece argues that alternative justice systems can contribute to stability when the official system has limited reach and is mistrusted. First though, the systems need to be properly understood. [ISEAS]

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