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Asia in Review

(1/7/2019)

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the first July issue of 'Asia in Review' (AiR) providing you an update you on the latest developments constitutional politics, law reform and governance as well as in geopolitics and international relations in Asia.

I wish you an informative read.

With the best wishes,

Henning Glaser

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

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Law and Politics in East Asia

China/Hong Kong: Protesters and police clash during rally on day of anniversary of Hong Kong's return to China

(dql) In another huge rally within weeks against the controversial extradition law of the Hong Kong's government and against what is seen as Beijing's tightening grip on the city [AiR 4/6/2019], hundreds of thousands of protesters on Monday took to the streets in downtown Hong Kong as the city government was conducting a ceremony to mark the 22nd anniversary of Hong Kong's return to China. In the course of the large-scale march a group of hundreds of protesters clashed with police after storming the city's parliament at midnight. The police was able to clear the parliament using tear gas to disperse the protesters.

In the early hours of Tuesday, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam, who is under pressure over demands for a complete withdraw of the extradition bill and her own resignation, condemned the violence and announced to take legal actions against offenders. [CBS] [Hong Kong Free Press]

For footage of the storming of the parliament see [DW].

China: Xi grants prisoner amnesty ahead of anniversary of China's founding

(dql) The 70th anniversary of China's founding is casting its shadows before. In order signed by himself Chinese President Xi Jinping has granted amnesty to prisoners falling under nine categories of prisoners, including convicts who fought against the Japanese in World War Two, those aged over 75 and with serious physical disabilities, or convicts who had previously been named model workers.

Corresponding to upholding the anti-corruption campaign, convicts of embezzlement and taking bribes, are excluded from the amnesty. The same applies to prisoners sentenced for endangering national security. [South China Morning Post]

This year's amnesty is the second under Xi Jinping's rule after 2015 when prisoners were pardoned on the occasion of the end of the Chinese-Japanese war. Prior to Xi, only Mao Zedong granted amnesties.

China: Christian underground church raided

(dql) According to China Aid, non-governmental Christian nonprofit based in Midland, Texas, Chinese government authorities last week raided a Christian underground church in the southern province of Guanxi and arrested the church's leader and worshippers. [China Aid]

The move is the latest signal of a continued crackdown on underground churches which are not affiliated with state-run church organizations.

Meanwhile, the Holy See last Friday issued guidelines in response to requests from Chinese clergy to provide orientation with regards to the civil registration of clergy with the Chinese government. The guidelines reflect the Vatican's attempt to walk a fine line between its desire to lift Chinese priests from the status of underground priests on the one side and securing Catholic doctrine among clergy in the face of increasing state control over religions on the other. While the guidelines give advise under which circumstances clergy should register, they stress the "the Holy See does not intend to force anyone's conscience", normal feature". On the other hand, the Holy See understands "that the experience of clandestinity is

not a normal feature“ and views "registration [...] as having the sole aim of fostering the good of the diocesan community and its growth in the spirit of unity” while re-assuring that it “continues to ask that the civil registration of the clergy take place in a manner that guarantees respect for the conscience and the profound Catholic convictions of the persons involved”. [Asia News]

South Korea: Rival parties come to terms ending months-long Parliament stalemate

(jyk) The ruling Democratic Party (DP) and the main oppostion Liberty Korea Party (LKP) reached an agreement to extend the mandates of two special legislative committees on political and judicial reform to August 31 paving the way for the resumption of ordinary parliamentary work after the National Assembly had been paralyzed for almost free months in the wake the fast-tracking of controversial reform bills pushed for by the DP in April and rejected by the LKP as unilateral moves of the DP. Since then, the LKP has staged a boycott on all legislative activities and demanded a renegotiation of the fast-tracked bills, an apology from the DP, and a parliamentary hearing on the economy. [JoongAng Daily] [Yonhap]

South Korea: Prosecution apologizes for covering up high-profile criminal cases

(jyk) South Korea’s Prosecutor General acknowledged and apologized for the truth-finding commission’s finding that prosecutors were responsible for covering up or failing to maintain political neutrality while handling eight of the 17 controversial high-profile cases. The cases included a sex scandal and bribery of a former Vice Justice Minister [AiR 2/6/2019] , a violent police crackdown on a group of 40 tenants forcibly evicted from their homes in 2009, and the operation of a forced labor camp in Busan.

However, the Prosecutor General rejected the ruling Democratic Party’s move to pass the judicial reform bill that would transfer some of prosecution’s investigative authority to the police and create a new investigative unit specialized in high-profile crimes. He said his organization would instead conduct its own internal reforms to decentralize power within the agency. [JoongAng Daily]

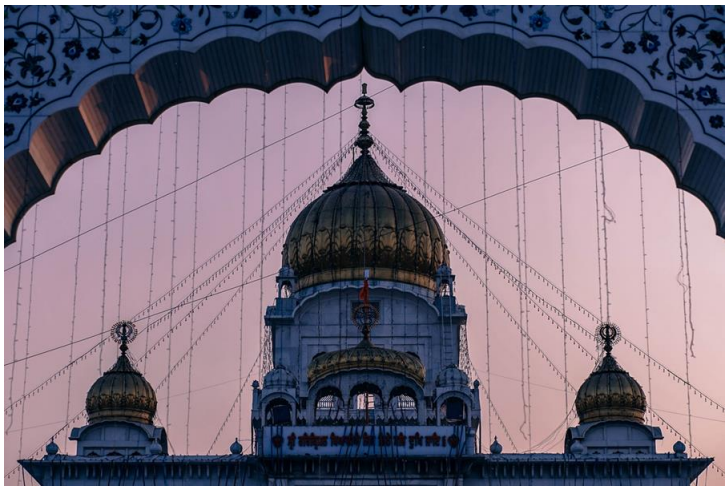
Japan’s upcoming Upper House election: Political parties clash over tax and constitutional revision

(jyk) Three weeks ahead of the election of one half of Japan’s Upper House members, leaders of political parties clashed over the controversial issues of increasing the consumption tax and revising Japan's constitution. Countering criticisms from rivaling parties on both issues during the first public debate after the government had announced 21st of July as election date, Prime Minister Abe upheld his pledges to raise the consumption tax from 8% to 10% in October to finance free education and child care programs, and to rewrite the country’s war renouncing Article 9 in current pacifist Constitution. [Nikkei] [Mainichi]

Taiwan: Amendment to Jugdes Act toughens punishments for corrupt judges

(dql) In a move aimed to toughen disciplinary action against judges committing wrongdoings, Taiwan's legislature last week passed an amendment to the Judges Act. Under the revised act judges or grand justices of the Judicial Yuan found guilty of corruption charges or dismissed from office in a disciplinary action, must now return to the state coffer the salary they have received during the period of time they are suspended from duties pending an investigation. In addition, the pension and retirement allowance of retired judges or grand justices convicted of corruption will be revoked. [Focus Taiwan]

Law and Politics in South Asia



Women's startling disadvantages in Pakistan/Government to create special courts to tackle violence against women

(jk) According to the 2018 World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report, Pakistan ranks 148 out of 149 countries in equality for women. [WEF] In addition to that report, the 2017-18 Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey [PDHS] analyses more key social indicators to explain why Pakistan's ranking is so low, and in particular with regards to gender equality, the results are startling: Pakistan's women are undereducated, often physically and mentally abused and many lack basic access to information or common services. PDHS states that "49.2 per cent of ever-married women aged 15-49 had no education whatsoever" (25.4pc for men), with nearly 61.6pc (33.3pc for men) in rural areas. Half of the women surveyed were illiterate. The data further shows that "only 12.6pc of women reported to have ever used the internet". [Dawn]

In addition, domestic and other violence against women is a major problem in Pakistan with thousands of cases such as rape, sexual assault, acid attacks, kidnappings or "honour killings" occurring every year. In one positive development, a Supreme Court Judge has said in a televised address that Pakistan will set up special courts to allow victims to speak out without fear of retaliation and in a supportive environment. The Chief Justice said "we are going to have 1,016 gender-based violence courts across Pakistan, at least one such court apiece in every district." [The Guardian]

Important semantics in Pakistan's parliament but word bans won't help

(jk) The deputy speaker of Pakistan's National Assembly last week banned lawmakers from using the word "selected" when referring to the Prime Minister. Using the terms "Selected Prime Minster" had become a way for government critics and opposition to suggest that Pakistan's PM was in fact chosen by the country's army generals rather than by the people in the elections last year. [Gulf News] Banning the word has of course drawn more attention to the matter internationally, and although opposition figures may now refrain from using the word, other suggestive phrases such as "hand-picked" are already filling the void. [NYT]

India's Congress party struggles to resolve its leadership crisis

(cl) India's Congress party is facing a leadership crisis as its president Rahul Gandhi refuses to reverse his decision to quit his post following a significant loss to Bharatiya Janata Party's Modi in last month's general election. [South China Morning Post] The party has refused to accept his resignation, with several protests breaking out including one by Youth Congress members on Wednesday. Several Congress office-bearers have also resigned in response, urging him to withdraw his resignation before they accepted any party position. However, Mr Gandhi has steered clear of making any decisions in the party and urged the Congress to choose another leader on Wednesday. [India Today] Analysts say that continued uncertainty would further harm a party which, until the rise of the BJP under PM Modi, was the dominant political force in Indian politics. The party had suffered back-to-back losses in general elections in 2014 and this year, and has seen its political influence wane as the BJP's political influence spread beyond its traditional support base in central and western India to other parts of the country. Mr Gandhi has also faced constant questions over his leadership abilities due to his long absences from public life, with the exception of election times. [Times of India]

Sri Lankan President signs death warrants for four drug convicts to end moratorium on death penalty

(jk) Sri Lanka, after just six months ago voting in favour of a global moratorium on the use of the death penalty at the UN General Assembly, still intends to abandon

long-standing moratorium on the death penalty. President Sirisena in February announced the country would carry out the executions, saying he had been inspired by President Rodrigo Duterte, but the country has not gone ahead yet, partly due to difficulties in filling the required job vacancy of a hangman, which has yet to be completed [SCMP]. The story has come to the fore again with international human rights organisations and foreign governments concerned that recent preparations indicate executions will be resumed soon. [Channel News Asia, UK Foreign Office, New Europe] In addition to external pressures, there are a number of administrative hurdles to pass internally, such as deliberating petitions that have been filed against the move to resume executions. [SCMP II]

Sri Lanka's special board of inquiry finds 'major lapses' led to a failure to stop Easter bombings

(jk) A special board of inquiry, set up by President Sirisena, has recommended to launch an investigation into the former Defence Secretary over "major lapses" in failing to prevent the Easter bombings that killed over 250 people. Sirisena himself was heavily criticised for failing to act on intelligence warning against the bombing prior to its occurrence, but he claims to have not been alerted to such warnings. He vowed to take action against officials who failed to share it and set up the special board of inquiry as a consequence. [Al Jazeera]

Law and Politics in Southeast Asia

Indonesia: Constitutional Court upholds President Widodo's victory over Prabowo in April election

(cl/ls) Prabowo Subianto lost his bid to overturn the result of the presidential election after the nation's Constitutional Court on Thursday unanimously rejected allegations of "systematic electoral fraud". [New York Times] In the nine-hour session, the nine-judge panel described many of the allegations – including vote buying and that biased civil servants favoured "Jokowi" – as baseless. The court further questioned the credibility of witnesses and quality of evidence, stating that Prabowo's legal team's submissions comprised mostly photographs and scans of vote tally forms from unclear sources. [Bloomberg]

In a speech following the ruling, the president called for all Indonesians to unite, regardless of their different political preferences, to advance the country. While Prabowo stated that he accepts the outcome, he has expressed his intention to search for more options by consulting his legal team on "whether there are still other legal and constitutional steps [he] might be able to take". [The Guardian]

With the court's final and binding decision, the president and his vice-president are set to take office in October. Prabowo has said that he is open to striking a deal with the president to ensure that his party becomes part of the government, and has also flagged that he might be running for presidency again in 2024. [South China Morning Post]

A day before the Constitutional Court's ruling, the Supreme Court had alreacy rejected a lawsuit by Prabowo's campaign team against the Elections Supervisory Agency's (Bawaslu) ruling on alleged election campaign violations. [Jakarta Post]

Malaysia: MACC clears Economic Affairs Minister as Umno's ex-deputy PM faces new graft charges

(cl/ls) The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) has cleared the Economic Affairs Minister Mohamed Azmin Ali of any wrongdoing following allegations that he was behind questionable money transfers. Investigations found that the alleged transfer from an engineering giant into a bank account bearing the same name as the minister did not exist, and this

was just one among the three cases of non-existent accounts and transactions implicating the minister. [Malay Mail]

The investigations also found that there was no so-called Deutsche Bank account in the minister's name that was allegedly opened in 2012. [Today] The allegations were part of the sex video implicating the minister earlier this month, with the former deputy minister's aide, who confessed to being in the video, accusing him of corruption. [The Star]

Meanwhile, Malaysia' former deputy prime minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi faces seven additional corruption charges involving USD3.12 million that he allegedly received in kickbacks from the operator of the foreign visa system while he was the home minister. [South China Morning Post] On Friday, he appeared in court in connection with another 33 charges related to the same case. [Channel News Asia]

In an apparently related development, Umno has been planning to amend its party rules in a bid to oust leaders who are facing court charges. The move to make the changes raised speculation that the party wanted to oust the president, Zahid, who was on leave from his position, and block tainted former president Najib from again taking up a top post. However, plans to change the rules have now been stopped in fear of a major split in the party. [Today] Only a few days later, Zahid announced his return from garden leave to resume the office of Umno president. [Malaysiakini]

Malaysia pledges to decriminalise drug addiction in landmark move

(cl) Malaysia's health minister has pledged to decriminalise drug addiction and drug possession for personal use, in a move it calls "a game-changer policy". According to the ministry, this move would be a critical next step towards "achieving a rational drug policy that puts science and public health before punishment and incarceration". [Aljazeera] The minister also cited evidence that showed decriminalisation of drug addiction had not led to an increase in drug use and drug-related offences, and had instead led to reduced costs in the criminal justice system. Currently, most of the 70,000 inmates held in Malaysian prisons are drug addicts. [The Star]

The measure is considered to be unprecedented, as punishment for non-drug trafficking offences in Malaysia can range from imprisonment, whipping and

fines, depending on the type and amount of drugs possessed and degree of offence. [Washington Post]

Malaysia to probe "sensitive" disappearances of pastor, Muslim activist

(cl) Malaysia's Home Minister has announced that a former High Court judge will lead a task force to probe the findings by Malaysia's Human Rights Commission (Suhakam), which concluded that the police's intelligence department was directly involved in the alleged enforced disappearances of a Christian pastor and a Muslim man suspected of spreading Shi'ite beliefs in the country. [The Star]

However, the appointment of certain members in the task force has been controversial given the inclusion of an official from the police's integrity department, which had failed to act on Suhakam's findings or the families' complaints over police conduct. [Malay Mail]

The issue involving their disappearances is sensitive in Malaysia amid claims that they were abducted by the authorities. The incident also raised concerns about rising religious intolerance in Malaysia as Islamic authorities in the country ban the conversion of Malaysian Muslims to Christians or Shi'ism. [Aljazeera]

The previous Barisan Nasional government had stonewalled queries by family members on their whereabouts, or whether the government had a hand in their disappearances. The Pakatan Harapan government's special task force was formed by the Cabinet last month following a verdict by Suhakam that the Special Branch police was likely behind the two men's disappearances, though the police had previously denied involvement in their abductions. [Straits Times]

Myanmar internet shutdown: Rising voices of criticism

(ls) As reported last week, Myanmar has shut down internet services in parts of Rakhine and Chin state. The US State Department has now joined the criticism, stating that a resumption of service would help facilitate transparency in and accountability for what the government claims are law enforcement actions. Myanmar has deployed thousands of troops to the western region. [Al Jazeera]

U.N. special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, said that Myanmar's army may be committing gross human rights violations under cover of the mobile phone blackout. She said that she had been informed that the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's army) was conducting a 'clearance operation'. [Reuters] According to a directive under article 77 of the 2013 Telecommunications Law, the suspension of a telecommunications service is permitted "when an emergency situation arises."

Human Rights Watch issued a statement according to which the disruption to internet services has exacerbated an information blackout and increased difficulties for humanitarian agencies and human rights groups to assist vulnerable populations in the face of increased fighting in the area. [Human Rights Watch]

Singapore: Gay pride rally and calls for abolition of criminalization

(ls) This weekend, Singapore joined dozens of other cities around the world in celebrating gay pride. But it is the only one where gay sex is criminalized, though the law is not enforced. Previous legal challenges to overturn the ban have failed. Shortly after last year's landmark Indian court ruling, a Singaporean DJ filed a new court challenge against the colonial-era law. [Reuters] Another parade took place in Manila. The Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte had recently said that in his younger days he "cured" himself of homosexuality with the help of "beautiful women". [The Nation]

Thailand: Attack on well-known democracy activist stirs up emotions

(ls) In Thailand, a pro-democracy activist has been admitted to intensive hospital care after having been attacked and beaten on a street in Bangkok. It was the second such violent assault Sirawith "Ja New" Seritiwat has suffered in less than a month. In both cases, police have so far not been able to find the attackers. [Khaosod English]

The attack has led to emotional responses on social media on the different ends of the political spectrum. Against this background, House speaker Chuan Leekpai reportedly contacted Deputy Prime Minister Wissanu Krea-ngam to express his concerns about

political violence in the wake the assault. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government and opposition camps entangled in legal battles

(ls) After Thailand's Constitutional Court accepted to rule about the qualification of dozens of government coalition members of the House of Representatives, Phalang Pracharat MPs have now sent a similar petition to the Court, asking it to rule whether opposition MPs held shares in companies registered for media business. The tit-for-tat had been kicked off by a petition against Future Forward leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, leading to Future Forward's petition against PPRP members and now Phalang Pracharat's retaliatory move. The development demonstrates how often broadly framed laws and regulations are increasingly weaponized in Thai politics. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Defense minister calls on military to fight "fake news"

(ls) Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Prawit Wongsuwon has called on the armed forces to take legal action to curb the spread of so-called "fake news" and disinformation online. He wanted that all units of the Defense Ministry as well as those of the armed forces concerned to take part in the monitoring of social and mainstream media for falsehoods that could impact national security or "damage a particular organization's reputation". The move illustrates the extent to which "fake news" are perceived as a threat by the government and shows how the military is engaging in what would otherwise be regular law enforcement. [Bangkok Post]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

China-USA relations: Xi and Trump agree to resume trade talks at G20 Summit

(dql) On the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Osaka last week, Chinese and U.S. presidents Xi Jinping and Donald Trump reached an agreement to resume trade talks between the world's two largest economies which broke down in May. Furthermore, Trump announced to refrain for the time being from adding tariffs on 300 billion USD worth of Chinese import – while not lifting current tariffs – as well as to allow US companies to continue to sell to Chinese tech giant Huawei, effectively reversing a ban the U.S. Commerce Department imposed in May. [CNBC] [AiR 3/5/2019]

In the aftermath of this agreement, China published shortened nationwide negative list for foreign investment on Sunday, reducing the items off limits to foreign investment from 48 down to 40, and removed and relaxed ownership restrictions in seven major sectors including shipping agencies, gas and heat pipelines in cities with more than 500,000 people, cinemas, value-added telecoms, and oil and gas exploration and development. The list will come into force on July 30. [Asia Times]

In a latest related development, Chinese Premier announced that China will bring forward plans to scrap foreign ownership limits on financial companies by 2020. [Bloomberg]

The moves signal China's efforts to open up its domestic market, a major issue in the trade negotiations between China and USA.

China: Missile test series in the South China Sea

(dql) Citing unnamed US officials, CNBC reports that China has been conducting a series of anti-ship ballistic missile tests the South China Sea since last Wednesday. [CNBC]

The tests follow last week's passage of China's aircraft Liaoning through the Taiwan Strait. [South China Morning Post]

Taiwan-USA relations: President Tsai transits on US soil and enhanced security cooperation

(dql) Taiwan's government has announced that President Tsai Ing-wen will stay for four nights in the USA during her visit to Caribbean allies. In response, China has lodged a protest against Tsai's transit plans as violation of the "One-China Principle" and urged the US government not to authorize these transits. [Nikkei Asian Review] [Taiwan News]

The US State Department defended Tsai's transits as in line with the "One-China Principle" arguing that "[s]uch transits are undertaken out of consideration for the safety, comfort, convenience and dignity of the passenger." [Focus Taiwan]

In an earlier move, the US Senate last week adopted provisions for enhancing defense and security cooperation between Washington and Taipei, particularly on arms sales. The provisions are part of the National Defense Authorization Act for next fiscal year, approved by the Senate last week and authorizing 750 billion USD in spending for defense programs at the Pentagon and other agencies. [The Hill]

North Korea-USA relations: Trump and Kim agree to resume denuclearization talk at meeting at the DMZ

(jyk) U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un agreed to resume the previously deadlocked denuclearization talks at a meeting at the inner-Korean Demilitarized Zone on Trump's return from the G20 Summit. "We've agreed that we're each going to designate a team. The teams will try to work out some details", said Trump — referring to the U.S. negotiators that will be led by Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun. He also said the U.S.

and North will start working on a comprehensive deal for the next two to three weeks, which won't be a rushed agreement as he was "not looking for speed" but "looking to get it right". [JoongAng Daily]

Japan slaps sanctions on its tech exports to South Korea

(jyk) Underscoring currently frosty relations between Japan and South Korea over the drawn-out issue of compensation of South Korean victims of forced labor during Japan's colonial rule of Korean peninsula [AiR 4/6/2019], the Japanese government announced its plan to restrict Japanese exports of semiconductor manufacturing materials used in smartphone displays and chips to South Korea.

The move includes tighter export controls as well as removing South Korea from a "white list" of countries that face minimum restrictions on transfers of technology with national security implications. Removal from the "white list" implies all South Korea-bound exports of advanced technologies and electronic parts that have the potential for military use will require Japanese government's pre-approval. This new screening process is likely to slow down exports and hurt the South Korean electronics makers that rely on the materials, most of which are only available from the Japanese suppliers. [Nikkei Asian Review]

In a stern response, the South Korean government announced to take necessary reactions, including filing a complaint with the World Trade Organization. [Korea Herald]

Japan-Russia relations: Abe and Putin look for momentum on peace treaty at G-20

(jyk) During a sideline talk in G20 Summit, Prime Minister Abe and Russian President Putin agreed to speed up the negotiations for a peace treaty based on the Soviet-Japanese declaration of 1956, in hope of resolving sovereignty issues of the Northern Territories — the four islands in the northern Hakkaido occupied by Russia during World War II. In a bid to drive up the momentum, the two agreed on a set of initiatives including expanding cooperation in the energy and medical sectors, and engaging in joint activities in the Northern Territories — such as tourism, waste disposal and vegetable farming.

However, the outlook for a peace treaty remain bleak as Russia shows no sign of making concession on any of the island and continues its military drills and opening-up of factories in the disputed islands. [Nikkei] [Japan Times]

Pompeo's India visit and US India relations

(jk) According US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the recent trade tensions between the US and India (e.g. India's imposition of retaliatory tariffs on some US items earlier this month, after the US ended trade concessions for India) won't impact ties and their partnership is already beginning to reach new heights. In the same vein, Assistant Secretary of Defense recently highlighted plenty of “convergence" on a lot of the strategic issues between the US and India. [Youtube: Asia Policy Assembly 2019, from 2:23:00] Conversely, some observers class the recent trade spat as a "low intensity trade war". [Newsweek]

Pompeo was on a three day visit to India last week, as part of a longer tour to the countries of the Indo-Pacific region. Obvious sticking points still evolve around the US$5-billion defence deal for S-400 air defence systems between India and Russia, but the Foreign Secretary and his counterpart have stated that these issues could be resolved among friends. India's Foreign Minister said during a press conference that India would be guided "by its own interests" when it comes to purchasing defence systems from Russia. [NDTV] Moreover, rumours are emerging that India considers making its payments for Russian arms in euros to a Russia-nominated bank, allegedly being able to bypass US sanctions. [Economic Times] At the same time, India is negotiating significant defence deals with the US - worth around US$10-billion- including the purchase of naval aircraft, air defence missiles and helicopters. [Times of India]

Overall, despite clear "strategic convergence" on a number of issue, the rhetoric of "new heights" or even more inflated terms are unlikely to hold up to reality. India will do exactly as it says and firstly look at its own national interest. It will continue to give a bit and take a bit, as it has done with reducing Iranian oil imports on the one hand, but most likely going ahead with its Russian arms purchases on the other. For a good, more detailed overview of the ups and downs of US-India relations of late, see [Brookings].

Indian naval ship in Egypt for Overseas Deployment Programme

(jk) An Indian Naval vessel arrived at Alexandria in Egypt late last week for a three-day visit as a part of the Western Fleet Overseas Deployment programme. According to the Indian Navy the visit "demonstrates India's commitment to its ties with Egypt and of Indian Navy's increasing footprint and operational reach." [NDTV]

EU and Maldives to enhance cooperation, Maldivian FM visiting Russia

(jk) The Maldives and the EU have agreed to hold annual meetings at senior officials' level to enhance cooperation. The EU recently lifted the framework for restrictive measures against Maldives which it had adopted for targeted sanctions against the Maldives in response to a deterioration of internal politics during the first half of 2018. The recent decision to enhance cooperation reflects both the growing importance of the Maldives in a greater geopolitical pictures, as well as recognising the incumbent administration's "commitment to consolidating democracy, ensuring good governance and strengthening the rule of law." [The Edition; Business Recorder]

In addition to the relations to the EU, the Maldivian Foreign Minister has also become the first Foreign Minister of the Republic of Maldives to visit Russia in his official capacity. [Modern Diplomacy]

Duterte backtracks on statement that China can fish in Philippines' exclusive waters

(cl) On Friday, Philippines' President Duterte walked back statements that China could fish in Philippine waters after he was accused of waiving his country's rights to its territories, which his critics say exposes him to impeachment. His remarks came as debates raged over the sinking early this month of a small Philippine fishing boat by a steel-hulled Chinese trawler. [Straits Times] The Philippines President has also threatened opponents with prison if they try to impeach him. [Reuters]

Previously on Wednesday, Duterte said that China could fish in parts of the South China Sea where the Philippines holds exclusive rights, claiming that he was giving China this "privilege" out of friendship, and for the funding and trade relations it extended to his government. [Bloomberg]

Despite Duterte's reassurance that he would not yield his country's sovereignty, government officials warned that allowing China to fish in Philippines' exclusive economic zone violates the Constitution. In particular, a top court judge said that Duterte does not have the authority to waive economic rights to areas that can be utilised only by Filipinos under the Constitution. [Inquirer.Net]

Previously, Senators had objected to Duterte's decision to agree to China's suggestion for a joint inquiry into the June 9 ramming incident. A presidential spokesperson said Duterte agreed to China's proposal for a joint inquiry only with the help of a "neutral country". [Straits Times]

Terrorism: Attack at Philippine military base; arrests in Indonesia

(cl/ls) According to the Philippines Army, the bomb that killed eight people at a military base in southern Philippines on Friday was likely a suicide bombing. [Arab News] The prime suspect is Abu Sayyaf, a militant group that President Duterte had vowed to crush after decades of banditry, kidnapping and countless attacks on civilian and military targets. Radical factions of Abu Sayyaf have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, who through its news agency, claimed responsibility for the attack, saying its fighters had infiltrated the base. [Rappler]

If these suspicions are confirmed, this would be the Philippines' third suicide bombing in a year, which all occurred in Abu Sayyaf's stronghold and includes a twin bombing of a church in January. In response, the director has stepped up security and policing efforts in Metro Manila, placing the entire region under a "full alert status" despite detecting no threats within the national capital. [Philippine Star]

In Indonesia, a man believed to be the top leader of the Southeast Asia terror group Jemaah Islamiah (JI) was arrested in a West Java province after a 16-year long hunt. [Straits Times] The JI network is affiliated with Al-Qaeda. The network was behind Indonesia's most deadly attack in Bali in 2002 and the 2009 attacks

on the JW Marriot and Ritz-Carlton hotels in Jakarta. [The Diplomat]

Although the group was initially believed to have been decimated in Indonesia following a series of operations by security agencies, counter-terrorism experts had warned that young militants were being recruited and hat the JI network in the country may have expanded to become a 200-strong force.

Moreover, Indonesian police have arrested a member of the Muslim Cyber Army, a self-proclaimed cyber-jihadist network, for spreading fake news and hate speech via social media. [South China Morning Post]

EU-Vietnam free trade agreement finally signed

(ls) Vietnam and the European Union have signed a free trade agreement on Sunday. It will eliminate almost all tariffs for goods traded between Vietnam and the EU's 28 member countries. The deal, which had been negotiated since 2012, is the EU's second free-trade agreement in the Southeast Asian region, after one with Singapore. [South China Morning Post]

Asian Development Bank to open office in Singapore

(cl) According to Singapore's Ministry of Finance, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) will open an office in Singapore in the second half of this year to support the expansion of its private sector operations. [Straits Times] On Friday, it announced that the office would be "lean and focused" outfit with 12 staff, including from ADB's Private Sector Operations Department and Office of Public-Private Partnership. This agreement to establish the new office was signed by Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat and ADB president Takehiko Nakao on the sidelines of the G20 Summit. [Channel News Asia]

Background Reading

China and Japan’s Pragmatic Peace

(dql) Despite the fact that Sino-Japanese relations remain problematic due to structural constraints including an ongoing standoff in territorial disputes in the East China Sea, mutual military distrust, and Japans critical stance toward China's Belt and Road initiative, both countries have been focusing on stability and a pragmatic peace in their relationship for the sake of economic output for the past years. The driving cause for this lies in the US-China rivalry which does not allow Beijing to have adversarial relationships with both Washington and Tokyo at the same time forcing Beijing to scrap its traditional policy of islolating Japan, J. Berkshire Miller argues in [Foreign Policy].

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