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Grasp the pattern, read the trend

Asia in Review

No. 46, November/2020, 3

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Dear Readers,

Please enjoy this week's brief on the latest events and developments in constitutional politics and governance, geopolitics and international relations in Asia.

Special greetings are extended to readers in Latvia, Lebanon, and Oman which celebrate Independence Day and National Day this week.

With best regards,

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 opposition lawmakers resign en mass

(dql) All 15 opposition lawmakers in Hong Kong's Legislative Council (LegCo) resigned last week in response to a decision of the city's government to disqualify four Hong Kong legislators from the opposition. The disqualification followed a resolution of China's National People's Congress Standing Committee, the country's to legislative body, which empowers the Hong Kong government to disqualify Hong Kong lawmakers for publicizing or supporting independence of the city, soliciting interference of foreign countries, and pursuing "other activities that endanger national security." The resignation leaves the parliament effectively without an opposition. [Reuters]

Chief Executive Carrie Lam defended the government's move with the need of a parliament "composed of patriots", adding that a legislature without opposition was "nothing to be ashamed of," allowing the government to pass bills "more efficiently." [The Guardian]

Critics see the lawmakers' disqualification as a further step towards Beijing's full control over Hong Kong since the imposition of the National Security Law for

Hong Kong in July, signaling the end of the 'one country, two systems' model, under which the city has been enjoying a certain degree of autonomy and spaces of debate and dissent. [BBC] [Hong Kong Free Press] [Human Rights Watch]

China: New anti-trust draft law targets Chinese tech giants

(dql) In a move to reign in monopolistic behavior of the country's top internet firms, China last week announced a set of draft rules to reform the country's existing anti-trust laws. The new regulations, proposed by the China's State Administration for Market Regulation (SAMR), tackle especially practices deemed as enabling monopolies of online giants.

One such practice is forcing merchants to "choose one of two" online marketplaces on which to sell their products. The "Choose one of two" practice is widely seen as source of the monopolistic position enjoyed by e-commerce giants such as Alibaba and Pinduoduo, the largest interactive e-commerce platform in China and in the world. The draft rules label such a practice as anti-competitive behavior.

Another practice targeted by the new regulations is pricing these companies' products or services differently according to customer purchasing power, consumption history, or user preference which is now labeled monopolistic behavior. [Tech Crunch] [Technode]

In an immediate effect, shares of China's biggest tech companies tumbled for two consecutive days, wiping out over 250 billion USD of their stock market value. [CNN]

For an assessment of the reform on China's antitrust law as the latest in a string of recent "crackdowns" under President Xi Jinping to stabilize the power of the Chinese Communist Party, see [Bloomberg].

China: Citizen journalist indicted over Wuhan Covid reporting

(dql) Detained since May for reporting on the coronavirus outbreak from Wuhan, Chinese citizen journalist Zhang Zhan has been now formally indicted on charges of spreading false information on various social media platforms. The prosecution has suggested

a sentence of four to five years. She was arrested for "picking quarrels and stirring up trouble", an umbrella term, frequently used against critics and activists inside China. [The Guardian]

Japan: Users of donated eggs, sperm to be recognized as parents

(dql) In an attempt to clarify decade-old legal uncertainties, ruling and opposition parties have submitted a bill which calls for the recognition of those as legal parents who give birth to a baby through in-vitro-fertilization. The draft stipulates that a woman who gives birth is the mother of the child when she used a donated egg, while a husband cannot deny he is the father if he had consented to his wife receiving sperm donated from a third person.

The bill, however, falls short of recognizing the rights of such children to seek disclosure of the identities of egg or sperm donors, sparking criticism from groups representing them and the Japan Federation of Bar Associations. [Japan Today]

Japan to review cyberbullying laws

(dql) Japan is set to revise its law pertaining to cyberbullying after a government panel proposed to make it easier for cyberbullying victims to obtain information about online harassers, including name and phone number, by establishing a one-court proceeding instead of going through multiple court proceedings as required under the current law.

The proposal comes after a TV star's suicide in May, widely believed to have been committed due to the pressure of a flood of hateful messages on social media. [Mainichi]

Taiwan: Main opposition accused of spreading fake news

(dql) Taiwan's government has accused the main opposition Kuomintang (KMT) of spreading fake news to denigrate its push to allow pork imports with specified levels of ractopamine, a the leanness-enhancing drug.

The accusation comes after the KMT posted a video, showing pigs at an American slaughterhouse convulsing after being given ractopamine, to reinforce its claim that the government disregards possible health risks and to mobilize the public for a rally scheduled for November 22.

President Tsai Ing-wen announced in August that Taiwan would lift its import ban on US pork containing acceptable levels of ractopamine. The policy is widely viewed as an effort to satisfy U.S. conditions for beginning negotiations on a bilateral trade agreement. The government has been insisting that no health risk is posed by those imports. [Focus Taiwan]

Law and Politics in South Asia

Bhutan: Lower house of Parliament to reconsider resolution that seeks to decriminalize homosexuality

(lm) The lower house of Parliament will reconsider its resolution from last year that sought to repeal two sections of the country's 2004 criminal code which deemed 'unnatural sex' between consenting adults illegal. While there have been no known prosecutions under the law, rights activists say provisions like the one in question dissuade many from disclosing their sexual identity out of fear of social hostilities. [Kuensel]

Last June, the motion to repeal the penal code provisions was passed almost unanimously in the National Assembly. However, the National Council, Parliament's upper house, didn't support the wholesale scrapping of the two sections, and, instead, sent the

amendment bill with certain changes for reconsideration to the lower house.

Bhutan: Rights body calls for stricter punishment for sexual crimes against women and children

(lm) The National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) in Bhutan has called for more effective strategies and interventions in minimizing and preventing rape cases in the country, including stricter punishment for offenders. [Kuensel 1]

Sex crimes have surged in Bhutan over the past decade, with attacks on children accounting for 70 percent of the 530 rape cases reported between 2008 and 2020, according to data compiled by the rights body. On average, four women or children have been raped every month between 2009-2013. But what is more, of the 45 cases of rape of minors the commission reviewed, almost two-third of perpetrators received minimum sentencing for no definite reason or for lack of past criminal record. [Kuensel 2]

India: BJP-led alliance retains power in Bihar state election

(lm) Defying exit poll predictions, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has retained power in India's first election held amid the coronavirus pandemic, winning 125 out of the 243 assembly constituencies in the state of Bihar, three above the halfway mark of 122. The opposition alliance Mahagathbandhan, led by Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), managed to secure 110 seats. The RJD emerged as the single-largest party in the House with 75 seats. [The Times of India]

Bihar remains the only big state in India's sprawling and politically febrile Hindi Belt that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has not won on its own. The party has been in power for more than a decade as a junior partner in alliance with the Janata Dal (United) party (JD-U), a party led by Bihar's hitherto Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. In this state election, the BJP won 74 seats, while the JD-U managed to get 43 seats. Having eclipsed its regional ally, the BJP is expected to replace the JD-U as the senior partner in the ruling coalition. [Zee News]

India's third-most populous state, Bihar accounts for 40 seats in the 545-member lower house of federal parliament, giving it outsize national influence and making it a key electoral battleground. Analysts say that the election results clearly show that Modi's popularity had not diminished during the pandemic and instead has given a boost to the BJP, which has been struggling to win state elections over the past four years [see AiR No. 44, November/2020, 1]. [The Straits Times]

Maldives: National debt predicted to reach 124 percent of GDP by the end of 2021

(lm) Finance Minister Ibrahim Ameer presented to parliament on November 9 the country's budget estimate for 2021, which predicts the national debt of the Maldives to reach $5.34 billion or 124 percent of the GDP by the end of 2021. [The Edition 1]

The economic outlook for the Maldives has deteriorated dramatically in recent months, as the country has been unable to offset the impact of the drastic reduction in tourism activity caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Statistics recently published by the Maldives Inland Revenue Authority (MIRA), a fully autonomous body responsible for tax administration, show a decline of 75 percent in dollar revenue in the third-quarter earnings compared to last year. As government revenue is largely dependent on tourism, the country is looking at a 50 percent deficit in its 2021 budget, notwithstanding new bilateral and multilateral financing. [SunOnline International]

Against this backdrop, Fitch Ratings has recently downgraded the country's credit rating to 'CCC' from 'B', ranking Male's vulnerability to default as 'a real possibility'. The downgrade reflects projections of a more severe and prolonged external liquidity pressures than initially forecasted, as well as a spike government debt due to the coronavirus pandemic and continued debt-funded infrastructure spending, according to the rating agency. [Fitch Ratings]

While Finance Ministry refused to accept the downgrading and criticized the rating agency for its projection, speaker of parliament and former president Mohamed Nasheed renewed his call for the government to seek loan restructuring [see AiR No. 44, November/2020, 1]. [The Edition 2]

Nepal: At Secretariat meeting, Dahal asks PM Oli to 'sacrifice' for saving party

(lm) During a meeting of the Secretariat of Nepal's ruling Communist Party (NCP), party co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal accused Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli of failing in his responsibilities and demanded his resignation for the sake of party unity. At the meeting held on November 13, Dahal presented a 19-page document listing the instances of Oli's backtracking on previous agreements and his failure to control the coronavirus pandemic. [The Kathmandu Post]

The situation in Nepal's ruling party had massively deteriorated after Oli last week warned Dahal not to officially call for a Secretariat meeting without his consent, and even threatened to split the party if pushed to the wall by his rivals [see AiR No. 44, November/2020, 1]. On November 9, Oli had then called for a meeting of the six-member task force whose suggestions had ended the stalemate between him and Dahal, albeit temporarily [see AiR No. 34, August/2020, 4]. The meeting, however, could not take place, because two members belonging to Dahal's faction refused to join [see AiR No. 45, November/2020, 2].

A letter written by Prime Minister Oli to Dahal was also presented during Friday's Secretariat meeting. In the letter, dated on November 10, the prime minister refers to the larger power-sharing deal according to which he would lead the government for the full five-year term while Dahal would be the executive chair of the party and important decisions would be made in consultation between the two [see AiR No. 37, September/2020, 3].

The next meeting of the Secretariat is scheduled for November 18, giving its nine members time to study three letters that had been exchanged in the past week between Secretariat members, laying bare the degree of ill-will among them.

Pakistan: PM Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf leads in Gilgit-Baltistan polls

(lm) The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party of Prime Minister Imran Khan is emerging as the single largest party in the provincial assembly elections in the Pakistan-administered region of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB). Despite failing to achieve a clear majority, the ruling PTI grabbed ten seats, followed by independent

candidates who secured seven seats in Sunday's polls, according to unofficial and unconfirmed results. [The Times of India]

Taking place against the backdrop of a larger political confrontation between the PTI newly-formed Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) [see AiR No. 38, September/2020, 4, AiR No. 40, October/2020, 1], the election saw unprecedented levels of campaigning as well as wide media coverage. In the run-up to the provincial assembly elections, Prime Minister Imran Khan announced on November 1 the granting of 'provisional-provincial status' to the region. To date, Islamabad has fallen short of declaring the strategic region as its fifth province, ostensibly to protect its claim on the entirety of Kashmir in the event of a resolution of the Kashmir dispute with India. As a consequence, the region has been caught in constitutional limbo and denied representation in Pakistan's national legislature [see AiR No. 44, November/2020, 1].

Usurpingly, leaders of the PDM rejected the results, alleging electoral rigging. Observers expect the PDM to use the alleged electoral malpractices to weaponize its rhetoric for the upcoming rallies. After a three-week break for the GB elections, the PDM will continue its campaign in Peshawar (November 22), followed by protests in Multan (November 30), and Lahore (December 13). The parties plan to end the campaign with a 'long march' march on Islamabad, the capital, in 2021. [The International News] [samaa] [Dawn]

Pakistan: Asian Development Bank to lend $300 million to Islamabad

(lm) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is expected to lend $300 million to support Pakistan's fragile foreign exchange reserves after Islamabad met all but one of the conditions to qualify for the loan. The board of directors of the regional lender is expected to approve the second tranche of a $800 million budgetary support program by the end of this month. The first tranche worth $500 million was disbursed in August last year. [The Express Tribune]

So far, the ADB has extended over $600 million in loans to Pakistan in the current fiscal year. After the upcoming approval, its lending will jump close to $1 billion. More recently, the ADB and Islamabad signed a $2 million grant agreement to strengthen Pakistan's response to the coronavirus pandemic. Moreover, the regional development bank had announced on

November 5 that it would provide $10 billion in financial assistance to Pakistan over the next five years to help tackle the economic and social challenges thrown up by the pandemic. [Pakistan Today]

Both the money and timing of approval are crucial for Pakistan, which to date has been unable to restore the $6 billion bailout program of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which was suspended in April after Islamabad failed to meet all requirements [see AiR No. 14, April/2020, 1]. The approval of the policy loan will be an indication to markets that global lenders are still engaged with Islamabad, although the government is currently sailing through choppy waters. That is, the loan will partially support the country's dwindling foreign currency reserves, which currently stand at $12.2 billion, ahead of some major unplanned repayments, including $2 billion to Saudi Arabia [see AiR No. 45, November/2020, 2]

Moreover, Islamabad reportedly decided on November 13 to seek an initial $2.7 billion loan from Beijing for the construction of package-I of the Mainline-1 (ML-1) project. The costliest project to date under the multibillion-dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) agreement, ML-1 involves upgrading and track-doubling railway lines in the Peshawar – Lahore – Karachi corridor. In August, the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC) had approved the strategically important $6.8 billion upgrade of railway infrastructure in the Pakistani-administered part of Kashmir [see AiR No. 32, August/2020, 2]. [The Express Tribune]

About 90 percent of the costs will be provided by Chinese banks in the form of long-term loans on conditions yet to be negotiated between Beijing and Islamabad. As per decision from the project's financing committee, Pakistan will initially request China to sanction only $2.73 billion in loan out of the total estimated Chinese financing of about $6.1 billion. [Global Construction Review]

Sri Lanka: Alternative proposals for new constitution handed over to PM Mahinda Rajapaksa

(lm) Representatives of the Buddhasasana Task Force and the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress have handed over alternative proposals for a new constitution to Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa. Titled 'A Proposal for an Alternative Constitutional Arrangement for Sri Lanka', the document was compiled by the National

Policy Council and the Subcommittee on Law, Public Administration, National Security and Foreign Policy of the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress. [ColomboPage]

Last month, Sri Lanka's parliament approved the 20th Constitutional Amendment Bill that concentrates powers under the president and allows duel citizens to hold political office. The amendment was passed with several changes because the country's Supreme Court had earlier ruled that certain clauses in the original proposal required approval in a public referendum. [AiR No. 43, October/2020, 4]

Law and Politics in Southeast Asia

Cambodia: Rong Chhun to appeal his detention

(nd) Labor leader and member of the Cambodia Watchdog Council (CWC) Rong Chhun, who was arrested in July, appealed his detention. He argued it was unlawful for there was no risk of flight and he promised full cooperation. Chhun was charged with incitement after publicly claiming that Cambodia's government had ceded land to neighboring Vietnam. Police arrested him at his house at night-time and charged him with causing social chaos under articles 494 and 495 of the Criminal Code. [Phnompenh Post] [See also AiR No. 39, September/2020, 5] [AiR No. 37 September/2020, 3]

Cambodia: Petition to King denied, ongoing crackdown

(nd) On Friday, a group of wives of jailed Cambodian activists were refused to hand over a petition to the kind by security guards. For several weeks every Friday, wives of jailed Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) members have protested publicly for their husbands' release. Some reported they were followed afterwards, at least one was told to defect to the ruling Cambodian's People Party (CCP) in exchange for her husband's freedom. Since early 2020, about 20 CNRP activists and officials have been the victim of targeted assaults, mainly carried out by motorbike-riders targeting their heads.

After the arrest of its leader Kem Sokha for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government of Hun Sen, Cambodia's Supreme Court dissolved the CNRP in November 2017. This was followed by a broad crackdown on NGOs and independent media, which helped Hun Sen's CPP to win the general election in 2018. [Radio Free Asia]

In a legal action last Friday, 50 opposition activists have been summoned by the court on charges of treason for protesting against the government nonviolently over the past three years. They are facing a possible jail time of 12 years. [Yahoo News] President Hun Sen's broad crackdown on the opposition started in 2017, targeting individuals and media outlets.

Cambodia: Per person debt highest globally

(nd) Due to a limited access to traditional banking, over 2.6 million Cambodians borrowed money from microfinance providers. With an average annual income of US$1,700, Cambodian borrowers owe an average of US$3,800 each – the highest per capita amount in the world –, mounting to a total debt of US$10 billion to microfinance lenders. The providers often target rural villages where residents have limited financial insight, with interest rates soaring up to 30 % in the light of a lack of enforcement against illegal lending. Lenders are holding land titles as collateral.

According to rights groups, up to 2 million working-age Cambodians migrated to Thailand to repay the debt. Many of them lost their jobs due to the pandemic, toughening the situation for the villagers. Many houses have been abandoned in flight of debt collectors. [South China Morning Post]

Indonesia: Hard-line cleric returns from self-exile

(nd) After three years of self-exile in Saudi Arabia and controversies over his visa [See also AiR No. 42, October/2020, 3] Indonesian cleric Habib Rizieq Shihab returned to Indonesia. Traffic to the airport was halted due to the high turnout of his supporters. Rizieq pursues an agenda for the Islamization of the Indonesian society, referring to a "moral revolution" that he deems necessary.

Rizieq founded the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI) in 1998, which places a rigid interpretation of Islam, excluding ethnic and religious minorities, at the center of the Indonesian identity. Initially backed by the Indonesian military, police generals and political elites, FPI started as a civil group acting as an Islamic moral police force. With their transformation to an Islamist pressure group, FPI organized high numbers of religious and political mass protests, which were deemed to incite violence in the name of Islam, for it strongly opposes the Pancasila doctrine, the foundational philosophy of Indonesia, including the idea of religious pluralism.

Before going into self-exile, Rizieq organized massive street protests against Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, the ethnic Chinese and Christian former governor of Jakarta, who was sentenced in 2017 on charges of blasphemy, after allegedly profaning the Quran. The big popular support suggests, that Rizieq's ideas have made their way into the political mainstream. His return comes in the midst of an economic downturn and political turmoil over the Omnibus Bill, which prompted a nationwide outburst and was opposed by labor and environmental activists, with Islamic organizations joining the protests. [The Diplomat]

Meanwhile, the cleric was fined Rp 50 million (US$3,536) by Jakarta Public Order Agency (Satpol PP) for a violation of health protocol regulations to curb Covid-19 during a public event he organized that attracted many people. [Jakarta Post]

Myanmar: NLD officially declared winner of election, reaches out to minority groups

(lf) The National League for Democracy's (NLD) win of the recent election was officially confirmed by the election authorities. Official records show that the NLD

won 396 seats, an absolute majority, nine more than 2015. [South China Morning Post], [Voice of America]

However, the opposition party Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and minority groups have criticised the fairness of the elections. The USDP has fallen under the 10% for elected seats, which it won in 2015. The USDP is widely seen as coinciding with the military. [Radio Free Asia], [Irrawaddy]

Despite internal criticism, the election observers (Carter Institute, PACE and the EU) have praised the high voter turnout and the conduct of the elections. The EU and the UK have congratulated Myanmar on the election and declared to continue working with the new government on the path to democratization. [Irrawaddy]

Shortly after the election, NLD reached out to the 48 ethnic parties to form a Democratic Federal Union, an unprecedented step. Many of Myanmar's violent conflicts are rooted in issues of self-determination for ethnic minorities, which have been pushed back by the military and the central government. Ethnic minorities have urged for greater equality for a long time. [Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Rebel group appeal for voting in Rakhine state

(lf) In Rakhine state, the Arakan Army (AA) has appealed to the government to hold "by-elections" for the constituencies, where voting had been prohibited by the Union Election Commission, due to the ongoing conflict. [AiR No. 42, October/ 2020, 3]. The Arakan National Party sees the execution of by-elections within the next month as unrealistic, as many townships in Rakhine state are still battling with Covid-19. [Radio Free Asia]

The AA is a rebel group, fighting for the self-determination for the Buddhist Rakhine population in Rakhine state. The group has been in conflict with the Tatmadaw for the last two years. [Unites States Institute for Peace]

Myanmar: Former Party Leader sentenced to two years

(lf) A Mandalay court found U Kyaw Myint, the chairman of the former United Democratic Party

(UDP), guilty of being a fugitive from justice and sentenced to two years in prison. He could face up to another ten years under Myanmar's money laundering law, due to allegedly accepting money illegally from a Chinese businessman.[Myanmar Times] [AiR No. 43, October/ 2020, 4], [A iR No. 42, October/2020, 3] [AiR No. 39, September/ 2020, 5]

Singapore: Arrest of Korean church members

(nd) 21 people were arrested for their alleged membership in a local chapter of the South Korea-based Shincheonji Church, which has been accused of being a cult in several countries. The church was founded in 1984 and received global attention after a surge in Covid-19 cases in South Korea was attributed to one of their meetings. The group's entities were dissolved earlier this year. For resuming activities despite of this, the suspects face jail-time of up to three years or a fine, or both. [South China Morning Post]

Thailand: Ongoing protests, parliament deliberating on charter amendment drafts

(nd) With the student-led protest continuing, the topics and support groups have widened, including the blocking of the PornHub web pages, rights of sex-workers and the LGBT community joining to call for equality. [Prachatai] Calling for the decriminalization of prostitution is another taboo broken by the student protesters. [South China Morning Post] Counter-cultural music icons Rap Against Dictatorship released a single in which they demand reform of the monarchy, with parts of the video being shot at a pro-democracy rally on the past Sunday, broadening the societal basis for the unprecedented criticism of the monarchy. [Coconuts Bangkok 1] In another move against the monarchy, protesters turned their backs and raised the iconic three-finger salute as the royal motorcade with the King and Queen passed by on their way to the opening ceremony of a railway line on Saturday, where yellow-shirt supporters welcomed the royal family. [Reuters]

Following the symbolic posting of letters to King Vajiralongkorn by pro-democracy protesters on Sunday, police announced investigation into law

violations, most likely the lese majeste law, which punishes royal insult and criticism. The letters were submitted anonymously. [Coconuts Bangkok 2]

Also on Sunday, during a counter-protest against the student-led protest, a royalist group called for a coup, saying they would petition the army chief to solve the crisis by "shutting down" the country. [Khaosod]

After several monks were seen at pro-democracy protests, the Sangha Supreme Council has issued letters to Thai temples clarifying that monks and novices are not allowed to participate in political protests, according to the National Office of Buddhism. As highly respected members of society, their participation gained attention. [Thaiger]

Meanwhile, more than 700 people have withdrawn support for a charter amendment proposal by the Internet Dialogue on Law Reform (iLaw). When initially handed to the president of parliament, the draft was signed by 100,732 people. This is unlikely to affect the draft's passage, which requires a minimum of 50,000 people to be deliberated by parliament. Together with the other three already handed in drafts for a charter amendment, the iLaw bill would then be put on the agenda for a vote. [Bangkok Post 1] A motion to review all four drafts by the Constitutional Court was signed by Palang Pracharath (PPRP) party members and put on the parliament's agenda, claiming the parliament was not authorized to draft a new charter. [Bangkok Post 2]

On Monday, co-founder of the now-dissolved Future Forward Party, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, canceled a meeting with student groups to avoid a confrontation with yellow-shirt royalists, who earlier protested in front of his hotel. [Bangkok Post 3]

Parliament reconvened on Tuesday for a two-day session to deliberate on the seven charter amendment drafts, six of them coming from the coalition government and opposition party MPs respectively, and the seventh from civil group Internet Law Reform Dialogue (iLaw), estimated to be least likely to be passed. In order to pass the first reading, a proposed bill needs the support of at least one-third of the 250 senators, a likely scenario for the government-sponsored draft, which has the support of the senators. Still, both this proposal and the opposition-proposed one are similar in principle and substance, agreeing on amending section 256 of the charter to set up of a charter drafting assembly. [See also AiR No. 40, October/2020, 1] [Bangkok Post 4] [Bangkok Post 5]

The parliamentary session was accompanied by student-led rallies to exert pressure on parliament. [Coconuts Bangkok] Since the absolute monarchy was abolished in 1932, Thailand has had 20 constitutions.

In a latest development, the police fired tear gas and water cannon at protesters on Tuesday in an attempt to push back a demonstration at parliament. At least 18 people were hurt, marking the most violent confrontation since a youth-led protest movement emerged in July. [Channel News Asia]

Thailand: Brighter economic outlook and further challenges

(nd) With announced progress in the search for a corona virus vaccination, oversea investors have started to reenter Thailand's financial markets. Hopes were fueled for a soon reopening for mass tourism. Overseas investors are already piling into the country's financial markets. Since the end of last month, the bath has strengthened almost 3%, ranking behind the Indonesian rupiah as the best-performing currency in Asia. [Bangkok Post]

Still, Thailand faces unemployment of around 1.9%, which traditionally was below 1%, inter alia due to a majority working in the informal sector and the lack of unemployment insurance, with a yet unpredictable trade agenda of the US. Additionally, household debts, credit card debts, personal loans and defaulted loans have risen to a record high, which is not reflected in the brightening GDP predictions. Due to banks' and lenders' fear of default on repayments, almost half of all mortgage applications were rejected, according to the central bank, leaving up to US$30 billion worth property unsold across Bangkok alone, according to Thailand's Real Estate Information Center. On top of this, the debt moratorium for "the stability of the financial institution system" was ended last month by the Bank of Thailand, which is likely to force many small business owners to close down for good, their assets being scooped up by bigger companies, likely to reinforce the already wide gap between rich and poor. [South China Morning Post]

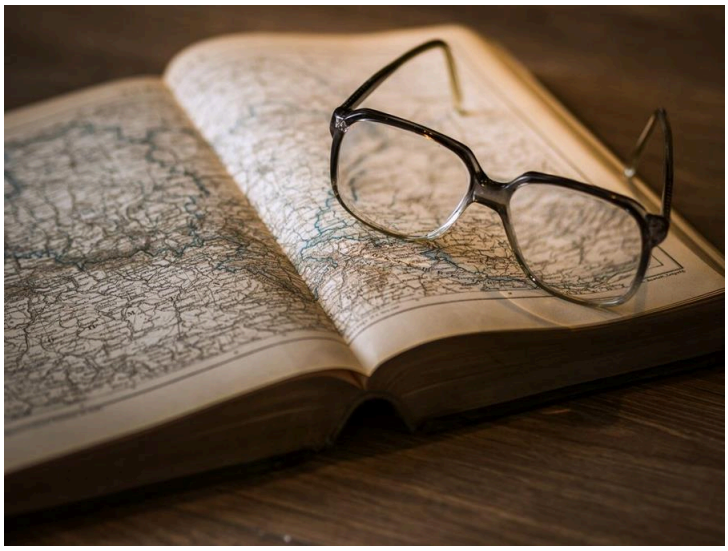
Thailand: Change in regulations on land use

(nd) Following an amendment of regulations by the Agricultural Land Reform Office (Alro), landowners are

now allowed to develop their plots into apartment buildings, gas stations and food-processing plants, among others.

With a program enacted in 1975, the initial aim of distributing degraded forest tracts to poor and landless farmers was to enable them to develop agriculture. Over the years, some owners made use of the broad legal definitions and used the land to house commercial buildings. The revised regulation states clearer what use is permitted, having the approval of Alpro and the benefit of the respective farmer as prerequisite to implement the planned use. [Bangkok Post]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia



China to proactively shape military events?

(dql) Signaling China's growing confidence in its military capacities, the vice-chairman of China's Central Military Commission, the country's supreme leading organ of the armed forces, called on China to "broaden its strategic approaches to catch up, surpass and accelerate the transition from passively adapting to war to actively designing how a war is fought."

The statement has been viewed by analysts as a major strategic shift for China's military, with Beijing stepping up efforts to seize the initiative and put itself in a position to proactively shape military events through

the introduction of new approaches and technologies, including AI, autonomous systems, hypersonics, and space warfare. [Yahoo News]

In a related assessment, Japan's National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), the country's Defense Ministry think tank, warned in its 2021 China Security Report that under President Xi Jinping China's military has put emphasis on the "growing importance of preemptive attacks" and shifted its aim towards "winning informatized warfare that makes effective use of new domains, including space, cyber, and electromagnetic." [NIDS]

China's latest jets are surpassing Russia's top fighters

(dql) According to findings of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), a UK-based think tank, China has surpassed Russia in various aspects of combat aircraft development, including sensors, datalinks, weapons, and low-observable technology, while Russia is ahead only in aircraft engines.

RUSI also states that, due to Beijing's structural industrial and budgetary advantages, Moscow is unlikely to regain areas of competitive advantage once lost. The think tank even forecasts that in the 2020s Russia might even purchase Chinese sensor and missile technology. [Flight Global] [Forbes]

China-US relations: Trump bans US investment in Chinese military-linked firms amid Beijing joining RCEP

(dql) In the latest of move against China's economy, US President Donald Trump last week signed an executive order banning American investments in Chinese firms the US government designates as being owned or controlled by the Chinese military. The order is targeting over 30 Chinese companies, including tech firms and large state-owned construction companies such as China Telecom, China Mobile and Hikvision, one of the world's largest manufacturers and suppliers of video surveillance equipment. The order will come into force in January. [VoA] [White House]

Meanwhile, US President-elect Joe Biden reaffirmed earlier statements, made during the election campaign, that US needed to negotiate with allies to establish global trading rules to counter China's

growing influence in the global economy “so that we can set the rules of the road instead of having China and others dictate outcomes because they are the only game in town.” [Aljazeera]

The statement comes a day after the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) was signed in Hanoi creating the world’s largest trade agreement, covering 30% of the global economy and a third of its population, and bringing together 15 Asia-Pacific countries, including the ten ASEAN member states as well as China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. The RCEP is widely seen as a major setback for the US influence in Asia and a boost for China's position in Asia. [CNN][Reuters] [Quartz]

China-Australia relations: Standoff over stranded ship carrying Australian coal

(dql) Australia has urged Beijing to resolve a standoff involving an Indian ship carrying a huge consignment of 160.000 tons of Australian coal that arrived at a Chinese port in mid-June but has been waiting since then for permission to berth. Canberra cited concerns about the Indian seafarers’ welfare on board, while appealing to Beijing to cease “what seems to be a recurring targeting of some Australian industries”. [The Guardian]

Chinese authorities have so far provided medical assistance for the seafarers, but cited Covid-19 restrictions for denying the ship’s berthing. [Financial Express]

The incident comes at a time when relations between China and Australia has been spiraling downwards since Australian Prime Minister Morrison demanded an international investigation into the outbreak of the coronavirus in China and after Huawei was excluded from Australia's national 5G network over national security concerns. In response Beijing imposed bans on imports of various Australian commodities. In a latest development, China has signaled that it will halt imports of Australian wine. [Asia Times] [ABC]

China-Africa relations: Beijing committed to strengthening ties with African nations

(dql) On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reassured his country’s

commitment to continuing to elevate the China-Africa comprehensive strategic and cooperative partnership, and to " achieve greater success in our journey of building a China-Africa community with a shared future." He also announced that China will provide financial aid for the creation of an Africa-wide free-trade area the would span 55 nations with a combined GDP of 3.4 trillion USD and around 1.3 billion consumers. [CGTN] [Korea Times]

The FOCAC is an official forum between China and all states in Africa, with the exception of Eswatini. At latest of hitherto three FOCAC summits in 2018, Beijing pledged a 60 billion USD package of aid, investment, and loans to Africa to Africa. [Brookings]

For current data demonstrating China's rapid expansion of its oil resources in Africa as part of its efforts to increase its global energy influence, see Haley Zaremba in [Oil Price].

Cross-strait relations: Beijing to compile a blacklist of "diehard Taiwan separatists"

(dql/ef) According to Chinese officials specialized in cross-strait affairs, China is preparing a blacklist of "diehard Taiwan separatists" targeting anybody who openly advocates Taiwan's independence, pushes aggressively for Taiwan independence or funds separatists generously. The list aims to send out a warning to Taiwan not to get too close to the US. The list is expected to be made public after the inauguration of the next US President. [South China Morning Post]

The revelation comes shortly after US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in a public interview said that "Taiwan has not been a part of China," adding that "that was recognized with the work that the Reagan administration did to lay out the policies that the United States has adhered to now for three-and-a-half decades." [Taipei Times]

Japan-Australia relations: Defense pact signed

(dql) As part of a defense agreement signed on Tuesday shortly before the Australian Prime Minister met his Japanese counterpart on Tuesday night, Australia and Japan will conduct more joint military exercises in key geo-strategic waterways, including in

the South and East China seas, where China's military assertiveness has been a growing concern for Canberra and Tokyo.

The pact also allows the stationing of troops in each other's countries, making it Japan's first agreement covering a foreign military presence on Japanese territory since the 1960 Status of Forces Agreement with the US. [Sydney Morning Herald]

It comes after Australia last month returned to the Malabar naval exercises involving Japan, India and the United States. [AiR No. 45, November/2020, 2]

Japan-South Korea relations: Agreement of compensating forced labor victims reached?

(dql) Japan and South Korea have reportedly reached an agreement on compensating South Korea victims of forced labor during Japan's rule on the Korean peninsula. South Korea's ruling Democrat Party, however, denied knowledge of the agreement, adding that such a deal would be difficult for both Korean and Japanese political leaders in light of strong anti-Korean and anti-Japanese sentiment in the respective countries. [Korea Herald]

Since the 2018, Japan and South Korea have been locked in a bitter dispute over the forced labor issue as Japan refuses to accept a ruling of the South Korean the Supreme Court in favor of forced labor victims and uncompromisingly maintains its position that the forced labor issue was already settled in the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations between both countries under which Japan provided financial aid to South Korea. Seoul, on the other side, upholds its position not to interfere in the country's judiciary.

North Korea believed to have up to 60 nuclear warheads

(dql) According to findings of the Institute for National Strategic Studies, a research institute affiliated with the US National Defense University, North Korea is in possession of 15 and 60 nuclear warheads and approximately 650 ballistic missiles capable of attacking cities in South Korea, as well as in Japan and eastern China.

The institute further says that Pyongyang has sold and transferred military technology to Iran, helping It advance its ballistic missile programs. [Korea Times]

WHO admits censoring the words “Taiwan” and “China” on social media

(ef) The World Health Organization (WHO) admitted to using content filters on its social media accounts that block comments mentioning “Taiwan” or “China”. Denying accusations of political motivations behind the move, the WHO argued that the filters were used to avoid “internet trolling, spamming and fake accounts producing malicious content”. [Focus Taiwan]

Expelled from WHO in 1972 and excluded from the body’s World Health Assembly meetings after the China gained UN recognition and took its seat, Taiwan was able to participate in those meeting as an observer from 2009-2016. However, since Tsai Ing-wen of the independence leaning ruling Democratic Progressive Party assumed presidency, China has been successful in obstructing Taiwan being invited to the WHA meetings.

Taiwanese to file case with ECtHR over being labelled “Chinese” by Norway

(ef) Taiwanese citizens living in Norway announced that they would file a case with the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) over Norway designate their nationality as Chinese on their residency permits.

Since 2010, Norwegian authorities have listed Taiwanese citizens as “Chinese”. In May, a district court ruled that the Norwegian government does not recognize Taiwan as it adheres to the “One-China”-policy, thus the residency permits have to label the Taiwanese citizens as “Chinese”. Last week, the Norwegian Supreme Court upheld that decision.

The Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) stated that Taiwan’s representative to Sweden has been instructed to file a complaint with the Norwegian government immediately. [Taiwan News] [Focus Taiwan]

East Asia Summit: Deepening cooperation in pandemic response

(dql) Leaders of participating countries at the East Asia Summit on past Saturday stressed the need for countries across the Asia-Pacific to cooperate in tackling the coronavirus pandemic and the current economic crisis.

The Summit brought together Asean's 10 members plus Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Russia and the United States. [Straits Times]

India, China are breaking the deadlock in the Himalayas, according to Indian media reports

(lm) After months of fitful progress to resolve their high-altitude border stand-off, a new disagreement has erupted between the neighboring nations, only this time it's over a purported resolution to the impasse. Quoting senior sources, the Indian media has been reporting since November 11 that the two countries are currently considering a reciprocal disengagement plan for the North Bank of Pangong Tso, a glacial lake at 4,242m. The plan, which is yet to be agreed upon by both sides involves creating no-patrol zones, pulling back tanks and artillery, and using drones to verify the withdrawal. [NDTV] [Financial Express]

The reports come just days after senior military commanders from both sides held the latest round of talks on November 6. According to an initial readout, a breakthrough had eluded the talks, as both sides had ruled out the possibility of drawing down troops near the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the de facto border between Indian and Chinese claims in the region [see AiR No. 45, November/2020, 2]. [Deutsche Welle]

According to Indian media reports, disengagement is envisioned as a time-bound, three-step process to dissolve tensions in the 'Fingers' region of the northern bank of Pangong Tso. The region has high, finger-like mountain spurs above the water, and control of these spur is disputed by both countries [see AiR No. 35, September/2020, 1.

During the first phase, China would dismantle its defense structures at the Pangong Tso where its troops are occupying an eight kilometer stretch of land once patrolled exclusively by Indian troops [see AiR No. 34, August/2020, 4]. Further, the Chinese People's

Liberation Army (PLA) would withdraw from Finger 8, while Indian troops would retread to a position between Fingers 2 and 3, effectively restoring the status quo ante. Thereafter, the zone would be declared a demilitarized 'no patrol' or 'buffer' zone. After the conclusion of phase two, during which tanks and heavy weaponry that had been brought into the area would be pulled back, both sides would withdrawal their troops from specific areas overlooking the south banks of the Pangong Tso and declare this area a 'no patrol' zone, too. The plan would conclude with the verification of the disengagement process by both the sides. [Al Jazeera] [South China Morning Post 1]

The Global Times, a state-backed Chinese tabloid, initially cited nearly identical sources, suggesting that both sides were close to an agreement for the Pangong Tso-Chushul area. On Thursday, however, the tabloid then rebutted the Indian media reports, calling them 'not accurate' and 'not helpful for the two sides to reach their established goals'. [Hindustan Times] [The Global Times]

Against the backdrop of the Global Times' change of heart, observers suggest that the Indian reports may have been premature, rather than inaccurate. Pointing out that the Depsang Plains is not part of the purported disengagement plan, they argue that Beijing may well string out the process in order to test the Indian response. [the quint]

Among possible reasons for a Chinese backtracking, the fact that New Delhi will be disproportionately affected by a premature withdrawal of troops seems the most consequential. With rivers freezing, by mid-November travel within the Indian territory of Ladakh will be easy but snow will block roads to the region, severely compromising the deployment, movement and response time of Indian forces. China, by contrast, has developed formidable infrastructure throughout the Tibet autonomous region. It includes a network of thousands of kilometers of fiber optics, small aperture terminal satellite stations and modern highways and high-speed railways that can rapidly deploy the PLA. [South China Morning Post 2]

Pakistan says it will provide 'irrefutable evidence' India sponsor 'terrorist' activities

(lm) Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi on November 14 accused India of sponsoring

'terrorist' activities from Afghan soil, aimed at destabilizing the country and undermining its economic partnership with China. Further elaborating on the issue, he added that Islamabad would present 'irrefutable evidence' of Indian involvement in 'terrorist' activities to the United Nations and other international bodies. This comes days ahead of Khan's visit to Afghanistan, his first since he assumed office in August 2018. [The Express Tribune] [Al Jazeera]

Pakistani officials have long claimed that India sponsors violent groups in Pakistan – claims that India has always denied – but Saturday's announcement provided a heightened level of detail and specific accusations. Pakistani officials said they had compiled a dossier that documented Indian financial and material sponsorship of the Pakistani Taliban and insurgents from the restive province of Baluchistan who have claimed responsibility for attacks on Chinese infrastructure projects as part of an effort to sabotage the China-Pakistan-Economic-Corridor (CPEC) [see also AiR No. 43, October/2020, 4]. [Deutsche Welle] [Dawn] [South China Morning Post]

New Delhi dismissed the allegations on Sunday, calling them 'fabricated' and 'figments of imagination.' [Hindustan Times 1]

The Afghan government also rejected the allegation that its territory was being used to train terrorists targeting Pakistan, adding that Islamabad should raise such issues through existing mechanisms such as the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS). In September, Pakistani diplomats met under the APAPPS with Afghan officials in Kabul to discuss bilateral ties and security issues [see AiR No. 35, September/2020, 1]. [Hindustan Times 2]

15 Asian leaders sign RCEP agreement, while India decides to stay out of the pact

(lm) After a meeting in September had yielded 'significant progress' towards the world's largest trade pact [see AiR No. 35, September/2020, 1], ministers from 15 Asia-Pacific countries inked on November 15 the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Building on existing free trade agreements, the 15 countries – 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plus the bloc`s five major trading partners Japan, China, Korea, Australia, and New Zealand – will establish common rules for e-commerce, trade and intellectual property. [The Straits Times 1] [South China Morning Post]

ASEAN leaders had originally proposed the idea of an RCEP in 2012. Talks had begun the following year, and India, an original negotiating participant of the RCEP, was expected to be a signatory nation. At the ASEAN Summit in Bangkok last November, however, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that New Delhi had decided to withdraw from the RCEP over fears the elimination of tariffs would make it difficult to protect domestic industries from China, whose low-priced exports are highly competitive in Indian markets [see AiR No. 45, November/2019, 1, AiR No. 46, November/2019, 2]. According to Indian officials, the thinking in New Delhi over the pact has not changed, as the current structure of the RCEP is considered to disadvantage the import-dependent nation. [The Indian Express] [The Straits Times 2]

Seeking an early conclusion of the RCEP negotiations, China had previously floated the idea of an RCEP without India, but other countries, notably Japan, have repeatedly called on India to return to the negotiations. In a ministerial declaration, the RCEP leaders last week reiterated that the door remains open for India to join and restart negotiations. While China's participation in the deal had already been proving difficult for India, the Galwan Valley clash in June [see AiR No. 24, June/2020, 3] has further soured relations between the two countries, leading to a backlash against Chinese products in India. [Asia Times]

India, France work towards stealth submarine deal

(lm) Coming on the heels of a series of missile tests and the commissioning of a stealth corvette [see AiR No. 43, October/2020, 4], the Indian Navy launched on November 12 its fifth Kalvari-class attack submarine. [The Times of India]

The submarine is part of New Delhi's Project 75, which entails the construction of a total of six attack submarines designed by French defense contractor Naval Group (formerly known as DCNS) and manufactured by India's by Mazagon Dock Limited (MDL) in Mumbai. Two of these submarines were commissioned in 2017 and 2019, respectively, two are currently undergoing sea trials, while the last one is still under construction. Signed in 2005, the contracts also include technology transfers from the French company to its Indian partners.

French arms producers are increasingly gaining ground as second deal for French submarines might not be far behind, Nikkei Asia Review reported. Accordingly, a meeting was held in September between the French Defense Minister Florence Parly and her Indian counterpart Rajnath Singh to discuss, inter alia, a tender by French shipbuilder Naval Group to deliver six stealth submarines under Project 75I, a follow-on of Project 75. The deal, expected to be finalized sometime next year, is valued at $5.6 billion. [The EurAsian Times 1] [Nikkei Asia Review]

The six diesel-electric submarines will feature advanced air-independent propulsion systems, which helps to make the diesel generator less dependent on surface air and enables the submarine to stay submerged for longer duration, thus substantially increase their operational range. Clearly reflecting the government`s vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat ('self-reliant India), New Delhi is expected to develop an indigenous submarine program (P-76) after the transfer of technology by the French manufacturer. [The EurAsian Times 2]

Moreover, three more Rafale fighter jets supplied by France landed at an Indian airbase on November 12. It is the second of two batches of aircraft sent to the region after the government's purchase four years ago of 36 total planes worth $9.2 billion from French defense manufacturer Dassault Aviation. With this, the Indian Airforce now has eight Rafale jets in service after the first five aircrafts landed on July 29 [see AiR No. 31, August/2020, 1]. The delivery of all 36 Rafale aircraft is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2021. [Anadolu Agency] [The Hindu]

Maldives: Authorities prevent terror attack

(lm) During a special operation, authorities have arrested six individuals who were allegedly plotting acts of terrorism in the country. Last month, authorities arrested a suspected terror fighter who had returned to the Maldives after fighting alongside jihadist outfits in Syria. The suspect is since being remanded in custody at the National Reintegration Centre, a special center designated to rehabilitate local terror fighters. [The Edition]

The country’s police commissioner revealed last December that almost 500 Maldivians had travelled, or attempted to travel, to Syria or Iraq, putting it among the world’s highest per capita sources of foreign

fighters to those countries. He also estimated that 1,400 residents were extremists who 'would not hesitate to take the life of the person next to them.' Latest findings of the police institute reveal that 173 Maldivians had travelled to join the Syrian conflict. [raajje.mv]

India, Pakistan report deadly violence along disputed Kashmir border

(lm) In one of this year's deadliest days along the heavily militarized Line of Control (LoC) separating India and Pakistan, at least 10 civilians and five security personnel were killed in cross-border shelling on November 13. Hundreds of villagers were moved away from the LoC in Indian-controlled territory, while Pakistani officials said dozens of homes were set ablaze by Indian shelling on their side. [Al Jazeera]

According to Indian officials, the barrage of mortars and other weapons along several parts of the de facto border began after troops from the Indian army foiled an infiltration attempt from Pakistan in northern Kashmir. Pakistan's military, in turn, said in a statement it had responded to unprovoked and indiscriminate firing by the Indian army. [Daily Sabah] [South China Morning Post]

The new peak in tensions came only weeks after Pakistan summoned a senior Indian diplomat to lodge a formal protest over recent ceasefire violations by Indian forces along LoC, resulting in serious injuries of two civilians. [AiR No. 44, November/2020, 1]

Pakistan: FIA's anti-terrorism wing lists 1,210 'most wanted' terrorists

(lm) The Counter Terrorism Wing (CTW) of Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has updated and released its list of 'most wanted and high-profile terrorists' in the country. Of the total 1,210 suspects listed in the document, a majority are wanted by law enforcement agencies in the northwestern province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. [The Express Tribune] [India Today]

Responding to the publication, India said the longlist would 'glaringly omit' the key conspirators and controllers of the 2008 Mumbai attacks that left at least 174 people dead and more than 300 wounded. In November 2008, 10 members of Lashkar-e-Taiba, a

UN-designated terror entity based in Pakistan, carried out 12 coordinated shooting and bombing attacks lasting four days across Mumbai. [zee news]

Bangladesh: Cabinet approves Chinese bid for waste-to-electricity plant in Dhaka

(lm) The Cabinet Committee on Public Purchase has approved eight procurement proposals, including a 25-year deal with a Chinese company to build the country's first large-scale waste-to-energy plant in Bangladesh's capital Dhaka. [energy bangla]

The power project will be implemented under a tripartite agreement between the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC), the state-owned Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB), and China Machinery Engineering Corporation (CMEC), which will set up an incineration-based plant at its own cost on build-own-operates basis. Accordingly, the DNCC will ensure adequate supply of garbage for generating electricity for the project, while the BPDB will purchase electricity for a 25-year period at a fixed tariff. [The Financial Express]

ASEAN signs RCEP, biggest trade agreement globally

(nd) The 37th ASEAN Summit concluded past Sunday with some 30 declarations, statements, plan-of-actions and summaries, covering a wide range of issues including stalled connectivity initiatives, environmental concerns, regional trade and integration, multilateral security frameworks, among others.

A dominant issue at the Summit was a joint response to the COVID-19 pandemic where cooperation initiatives were announced and put into operation, including the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund, the Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies, the ASEAN Standard Operating Procedures in response to Public Health Emergencies and the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases. [Vietnam Investment Review] [Malay Mail]

Opening the Summit, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc addressed the South China Sea issue, commenting ASEAN member states were not "drawn into the maelstroms" of the US-Chinese rivalry yet, but challenges to multilateral systems remain urgent.

At the sidelines of the Summit, the ASEAN member states along with China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), resulting in the world's biggest trade agreement [See also AiR No. 43, October/2020, 4], covering around 30% of the global GDP. India pulled out last year. The agreement will rather focus on trade and the practicalities of commerce, foreseeably to the detriment of labor and environmental issues.

Following a retreat from the region and uncertainties caused by an erratic foreign policy, the US engagement was put into question for a long time, enabling China to enhance its position. President-elect Joe Biden is expected to continue Barack Obama's stance on Asia and make it a pivotal region of the US foreign policy. [South China Morning Post 1] [Radio Free Asia]

The trade deal puts China in a comfortable position in the region, with the possibility to shape it according to its rules, solidifying China's geopolitical agenda together with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).The Trump administration was represented by National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien who stressed the importance ASEAN-US ties in times of the global pandemic. [South China Morning Post 2] [9News]

Malaysia's prime minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said he respects India's decision but noted India was a strategic partner for ASEAN, and their trade volume increased, with India being the sixth largest trading partner. In order to facilitate trade, the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) was proposed, which is being reviewed currently. [Bernama]

Cambodia: Ongoing debates on Ream Naval Base

(nd) At the ASEAN summit, Cambodia's Minister of Economy and Finance reinforced the country's stance on not allowing foreign military presence within its borders, referring to the nation's sovereignty and neutrality. For that reason, the Ream Naval Base Shall be relocated, with foreign parties invited to contribute to funding the center.

US National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien, meanwhile, said the US remains concerned about the issue, with a foreign naval base undermining maritime safety and security, and freedom of navigation. [Phnompenh Post]

Cambodian King to sign royal decree on legal assistance

(nd) Cambodian King Norodom Sihamoni signed a royal decree concerning mutual legal assistance between Cambodia, South Korea, Russia and France. According to a Ministry of Justice spokesman, the agreement is similar to those with other allied countries, and includes regulations on the transferring of prisoners, cooperation in criminal matters and extradition. [Phnompenh Post]

Indonesia, Australia to sign loan over pandemic relief

(nd) In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Australia and Indonesia have signed an AU$1.5 billion (US$1 billion) loan deal. After Indonesia entered recession in the third quarter, the administration of president Joko “Jokowi” Widodo allocated Rp 695.2 trillion ($47 billion) for a stimulus program to boost the economy. The funds will be used to curb economic repercussions and support micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Australian officials referred to the deal and Indonesia's recovery as “critical for not only Indonesia but for Australia and our region.” [Jakarta Post]

Malaysia not to extradite Uyghurs to China

(nd) In a parliamentary reply that was not publicly announced, Malaysia stated it would not extradite Uyghurs, even if there was a request directly from China, in contrast to neighboring Thailand and Indonesia, which deported three Uyghurs recently.

Despite a growing persecution of the Muslim minority group, even Muslim leaders in the region turned their heads, as China for most of them is the largest trading partner, and now a key partner in developing a Covid-19 vaccination. With Indonesia also struggling with separatist groups, it is reluctant to set a precedent of foreign interference in internal affairs, according to a source at the Australian Lowry institute. Given the necessary ties to China for Malaysia, this step, which possibly angers China, was labeled bold and a possible signal of Muslim-majority countries stepping up to protect Uyghurs.

Uyghurs fled China via Southeast Asia from 2010 to 2016. In Mahathir Mohamad's time as prime minister, 11 jailed Uyghurs were released, despite a request to deliver them by China. Before that, with Najib Razak as prime minister, at least 29 Uyghurs were deported to China, with six of them pending asylum status, which HRW referred to as a violation of international law. [South China Morning Post]

Myanmar, Japanese firm stops all dividend payment to firm connected to Myanmar's military

(lf) The Japanese beverages company Kirin has stopped all dividend payment to Myanmar Economic Holding Ltd (MEHL), a business conglomerate linked to the military. This follows an Amnesty International (AI) report, claiming MEHL directly funds parts of the military accused of genocidal actions. MEHL is one of Myanmar's most powerful businesses, involved in a large variety of ventures. According to the AI report, one-third of the shares belong to active combat groups, while the other two-thirds belong to retired and serving military personnel. [The Diplomat]

Philippines, US agreement on joint defense to remain for another six months

(nd) A decision to end the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the US was suspended a second time, referring to the US role in keeping peace and stability in the South China Sea amid growing tensions with an expansive-minded China. President Rodrigo Duterte threatened to pull out of the agreement of 1999 early this year but plans to terminate it were put on hold in June with a deadline until December 2020. The new extension of six months will end after the inauguration of newly elected US president Joe Biden. The Philippine foreign affairs secretary commented they needed more time to "enable us to find a more enhanced, mutually beneficial, mutually agreeable, and more effective and lasting arrangement on how to move forward in our mutual defense", praising the stability reached by the ongoing security alliance. The US welcomed the decision. [Manila Standard]

Several actions in the past months were seen as signs of a renewal of a close US-Filipino defense partnership, among which were Duterte's pardon for a former marine convicted of killing a transgender Filipina and

Duterte's prominent referral to a 2016 The Hague ruling, which rejected China's nine-dash line in the South China Sea [See also AiR No. 39, September/2020, 5]. He reemphasized the latter during the ASEAN summit. [Manila Standard] In an US administration led by Biden, security ties are expected to stabilize and deepen. [South China Morning Post] [Radio Free Asia]

Thailand, US ties amid a new presidency

(nd) The newly elected president Joe Biden sparks hope to revive trade ties in Thailand. The latest downturn in their bilateral relationship was caused by the US decision to suspend its tariff-free privileges for exports under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP), Thailand's blocking of US pork products and issues of labor conditions in the fisheries sector. [See also AiR No. 44, November/2020, 1] Still, ongoing student protests might influence trade ties, for the original dip in the relationship with the US happened with the coup of 2014, and student are calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha. It is likely that a Biden administration will put more emphasis on human rights. Similarly, there are no plans for a free trade agreement between Thailand and the EU yet.

Thailand and China, who is its largest trade partner, have been working together tightly on infrastructure projects within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While Thailand, which does not share US worries on Chinese engagement in the region, does not provide the US a similar military access as Singapore or the Philippines do, the US is Thailand's second-biggest trade partner with a trade value of US$37 billion last year. This makes it likely for the US-Thai relationships to be evolved around bilateral and multilateral trade options. [South China Morning Post]

South-East Asian leaders to discuss travel corridor

(nd) During the ASEAN summit, Southeast Asian leaders discussed a regional "travel corridor" in order to boost the region's Covid-sticken economies, with the first quarter of 2021 as possible start date. The Corridor would include generalized regional health protocols to facilitate the exchange of people between the countries.

This move follows several bilateral steps taken earlier to enable traveling, with Singapore establishing "green lane" arrangements, setting up a reciprocal green lane with Indonesia for essential business and official travel [see also AiR No. 41, October/2020, 2], also with Hong Kong, Brunei, Malaysia, China, and Japan. A corridor would help enhance the economic outlook for the Southeast Asian nations, which were hit heavily by the pandemic, with regional integration and mobility having been key to Southeast Asia's rapid growth over the past three decades, although analysts warned the timeline might be too optimistic. [The Diplomat]

Announcements

Upcoming Online Events

18 November 2020 @ 5:00 pm CEST, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, Spain

A European Green Deal for the Urban Age

This online debate will evaluate the possibility of a European Green Deal and its impacts on Europe's socioeconomic recovery and future.

If you are interested in joining the event, visit [CIDOB] further information.

18 November 2020 @ 10:00 am UTC+8 , Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs, Malaysia

Affirmative Action: Assistance or Discrimination?

This webinar hopes to shed light on the question of affirmative action from a constitutional and policy implementation perspective.

For more information and registration, kindly follow [IDEAS].

18 November 2020 @ 5:00 pm AEST, Lowy Institute, Australia

2020 Owen Harries Lecture: Dr Francis Fukuyama

This live-streamed lecture will be held by Dr Francis Fukuyama who is one of the most influential political scientists of his generation.

For registration details, please visit [Lowy Institute].

18 November 2020 @ 9:30 am EDT, Asia Society, USA

The Prospects of a U.S.-Taiwan Bilateral Trade Agreement

This webinar will assess the impacts of a possible U.S.-Taiwan bilateral trade agreement and the probability of such a deal under the Biden administration.

Please follow [Asia Society] for more details.

18 November 2020 @ 5:00 - 6:00 pm EDT, Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, USA

Israel and Palestine on Screen

This event will discuss the serial television as a medium for exploring cross-cultural narratives in Israel and Palestine and strategies for doing so with accuracy and sensitivity.

For registration details, please visit [Harvard]

18 November 2020 @ 2:00 - 4:30 pm JST, Asian Development Bank, Japan

Virtual Workshop on Reforming Asian Utilities: Institutional Reforms for Boosting Private Investments

This workshop will feature new research on the development of Asian utilities, reforms for promoting sector-specific objectives, and ways of attracting private investment.

For registration details, please visit [ADB].

19 November 2020 @ 3:00 pm CEST, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, Italy

Navigating Troubled Waters: Multilateralism as a Response to Crises in the Mediterranean

This virtual panel discussion will discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the MENA region and the ways the United Nations system could help. Furthermore, the participants will assess the difficulty of our multilateral institutions to react promptly and effectively to threats to international peace and security.

Please check [ISPI] for registration details.

19 November 2020 @ 4:00 pm CEST, European Council on Foreign Relations

Diplomacy can deliver: Europe in the fight against climate change

The European Council on Foreign Relations welcomes the U.N. Secretary-General António-Guterrees in his virtual address to Europe, speaking about the continent's role in the international fight against climate change. The address will be followed by an online panel discussion.

For more information and registration, please follow [ECFR].

19 November 2020 @ 3:00 - 4:30 pm GMT+ 2, Institute for Security Studies, South Africa

Migration vs free trade: Africa doesn't have to choose

This event will discuss the impact of heavy handed security responses on migration within the continent, the free movement of persons and the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

For registration details, please visit [ISS]

19 November 2020 @ 3:00 - 4:30 pm SGT, ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

Evaluating Intergenerational Mobilities and Migration Issues in an Era of Lockdowns

The policy challenges of negotiating and navigating the complexities in resuming travel between Singapore and Johor Bahru at the risk of new waves of infections will be discussed.

For registration details, please visit [ISEAS].

19 November 2020 @ 3:00 - 4:15 pm EDT, Center for Strategic & International Studies Washington DC, USA

China's Power: Up for debate 2020

The China Power Project will host its fifth annual conference as a series of five live online debates. The first debate will take place on November 19 and will feature two experts debating the following proposition: The U.S.-China relationship can best be described as a "New Cold War"

Please find detail here: [CSIS]

19 November 2020 @ 2:00 - 3:00 pm EDT, The Heritage Foundation, Washington DC, USA

The Mayflower Compact and the Foundations of the Rule of Law

This event will discuss the Mayflower Compact and its legacy of freedom.

More about the event at [Heritage].

19 November 2020 @ 11:00 am - 12:00 pm GMT + 9, Asian Development Bank, Japan

Book Launch: Macroeconomic Stabilization in the Digital Age

This event will discuss the key takeaways from the new book *Macroeconomic Stabilization in the Digital Age*, to be discussed by the co-editors and a panel of contributors to the book.

For registration details, please visit [ADB].

19 November 2020 @ 10:00 - 11:00 am EDT, Middle East Institute, Washington DC, USA

Elections in the Black Sea Region

Elections are taking place across the Black Sea, including in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. All three countries also share the problems of separatist and frozen conflicts on their territories that affect their security and stability.

For registration details, please visit [MEI].

19 November 2020 @ 10:00 - 16:30 pm EST, Cato Institute, Washington DC, US

Digital Currency: Risk or Promise?

Cato's 38th Annual Monetary Conference will bring together leading experts to examine the risks and promise of central bank vs. private (centralized and decentralized) digital currencies.

For registration details, please visit [CATO]

20 November 2020 @ 2:00 pm CEST, European Council on Foreign Relations

How to navigate Africa's institutional landscape

This virtual panel will discuss what the long-term costs of the proliferation of African regional arrangements in

West and Central Africa are and how ARO can improve their cooperation.

For further details, please see [ECFR].

20 November 2020 @ 5:00 pm JST, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Japan

Iran-GCC Relations: From the Perspective of the GCC Countries

This webinar will assess the Iran-GCC relations from the perspective of the GCC countries in light of the recent deaths of Omani Sultan Qaboos and Kuwaiti Emir Sabah.

For further details, please see [SPF].

20 November 2020 @ 3:00 - 4:30 pm GMT, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London , UK

US coercive cyber campaigns: methodology and assessment

This event will discuss a methodology for assessing the coercive potential of cyber campaigns.

For registration details, please visit [IISS]

23 November 2020 @ 4:00 - 5:00 pm GMT, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, UK

Achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development after COVID - 19: mission impossible?

This event will discuss the priorities and policy options for international organizations, donors, governments, the private sector and all relevant stakeholders to uphold democracy and create more inclusive and sustainable economies in order to ensure greater resilience against future shocks.

For more detail see: [IISS]

23 November, 2020 @ 2:00 - 3:00 pm EDT, The Heritage Foundation, Washington DC, USA

The May flower Compact and the Foundations of Property Rights, Liberty, and Prosperity

This online panel will discuss and trace the origins of free-market principles from Plymouth's economic structures to today's free-market economy and discover the influence on modern-day property rights and economic liberty.

For registration details, please visit [Heritage]

23 November 2020 @ 3:00 - 4:30 pm GMT+1, Danish Institute for International Studies, Denmark

Romanticizing the past, imagining the future

This event will discuss how some people are nostalgic even for a past that partly ruined their livelihoods and reflect on why nostalgia as a socio-cultural practice is pertinent when studying the afterlife of a crisis.

For registration details, please visit [DIIS]

23 November 2020 @ 9:00 - 10:30 am EDT, Center for Global Development, Washington DC, USA

COVID - 19 Vaccine Prediction Part 2: Estimating the Time Before We Approve Efficacious COVID- 19 Vaccines

This event will explore society’s ability to return to “normality” after the COVID-19 pandemic has centered on the development of a vaccine.

For more detail see [CGDEV]

24 November 2020 @ 8:00 - 9:00 am EST, Stimson, Washington DC, USA

What Awaits the U.S - Japan Alliance under

Japan will meet the next U.S. administration in January 2021, placing Japan's defense policy in the context of new alliance leadership and raising new possibilities for bilateral and regional cooperation. How will Japan meet its own security challenges with the potential changes in U.S.-China relations and the U.S.'s broader engagement in the Indo-Pacific?

For registration details, please visit [Stimson].

24 November 2020 @ 1:00 pm UTC, DiploFoundation, UK

Internet governance in November 2020

This webinar will be discuss what were the main Internet governance updates in November? How will recent updates influence the developments in upcoming months?

For more detail see [DIPLO]

24 November, 2020 @ 1:00 - 2:15 pm EST, Brookings, Washington DC, USA

The Biden presidency and the future of America's 'forever wars'

The arrival of a new administration in Washington has always raised questions about the future of American foreign policy. This online event will address these questions.

For registration details, please visit [Brookings].

Recent book releases

Pablo Kalmanovitz, *The Laws of War in International Thought*, Oxford University Press, November 12, 2020, 208 pages, reviewed in [SCJR].

Jill Norgren, *Stories from Trailblazing Women Lawyers: Lives in the Law*, NYU Press, November 3, 2020, 304 pages. More information at [NYU].

Calls

IESALC invites to submit papers for the special issue on "**New Geopolitics of International Higher Education"**. Closing date for submissions is January 15, 2021. For more information, please visit [IESALC].

The **12th Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities** invites to submit papers on the topic **"Embracing Difference"**. Closing date for submissions is January 6, 2020. Detail available at [ACAH]

Jobs & positions

The **University of Leeds** offers a fixed term contract for the position of Research Fellow. Closing date for application is December 4, 2020. More information at [Leeds]

The **Aston University** offers a fixed term contract for the position of Research Associate. Closing date for application is December 12, 2020. More information at [Aston]

The **Swansea University** invites to submit applications for a fixed term contract for the position of Research Assistant. Closing date for application is December 3, 2020. More information at [Swansea]

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