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

Asia in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to this week's brief on the latest events and developments in domestic politics, constitutional law, human rights, international relations and geopolitics in Asia.

Wishing you an informative read, I extend special greetings to readers in the European Union, Latvia, the Netherlands, and Poland which celebrate Europe Day, the Restoration of Independence, Liberation Day, and Constitutional Day respectively in this week.

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

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Law and Politics in East Asia

China: Another major internet company probed

(dql) China's anti-trust authorities announced that they are investigating Meituan, the country's leading online food-delivery services provider, for alleged anti-competitive practices. The accusations revolve around so-called exclusivity requirements which e-commerce leaders have imposed on their merchants to prevent them from offering and selling their products or services on other platforms.

The probe comes amid increased state scrutiny of internet companies suspected of anti-competitive practices. It follows the 2.8 billion USD fine against Alibaba Group Holding for similar violations of anti-trust rules, and the summoning of more than 30 leading online platforms to regulators' offices, where the firms were warned not to abuse their market position. [New York Times][AiR No. 15, April/2021, 2]

In November last year, China's State Administration for Market Regulation (SAMR) released new anti-monopoly guidelines targeting internet platforms and tightening existing restrictions faced by the country's tech giants. Shortly after the release of the guidelines the investigation of Alibaba begun. [AiR No. 52, December/2020, 5]

China: Joshua Wong pleads guilty over June 4 assembly

(dql) Leading Hong Kong pro-democracy activist Joshua Wong has pleaded guilty of taking part in an un-authorized vigil on June 4 last year to commemorate the crackdown on the1989 Tiananmen Square protests.

Last year's vigil struck an especially sensitive nerve as it came amid Beijing's preparation to introduce the new national security law for the former British colony. Police banned the event, citing concerns over public health risks due to the pandemic. [Channel News Asia]

China: Life-time ban for Hong Kong teachers over teaching material and involvement in 2019 protests

(dql) Two Hong Kong teachers have been punished with a life-time ban, one for being involved in the 2019 anti-government protests and one for "using a large amount of one-sided and biased teaching materials," deemed by the city's Education Bureau as amounting to "defaming the nation and undermining students' sense of national identity." [South China Morning Post]

The teachers' de-registration is to be seen against the broader backdrop of increased efforts of the Hong Kong government to reform education in the former British colony in line with the national security law for Hong Kong. In February, the Education Bureau issued new guidelines for curriculum arrangements, requiring, among others, primary school pupils to be taught the basic concepts of national security, including subversion, secession, terrorism and collusion with foreign forces, key offenses stipulated in the national security law. Higher classes in secondary schools would receive more in-depth teaching on national security-related offenses. [AiR No. 6, February/2021, 2]

In April, Hong Kong held its first “National Security Education Day” to promote the national security law among the city’s youth. [Aljazeera]

China: Shrinking press freedom in Hong Kong

(dql) In this year’s survey of the Hong Kong Journalist Association (HKJA), participated by almost all representatives of Hong Kong’s press, press freedom in 2020 in the former British colony was rated at 32.1 out of 100 points, marking a decrease of 4.1 points compared to 2019 and the lowest rating since the survey was first introduced eight years ago. 99% of respondents attributed the decline to the national security law imposed by Beijing in summer last year. [The Standard]

This survey result echoes the 2021 world press freedom index of Reporters without Borders (RSF) which concludes for Hong Kong that the “national security law that the Chinese government adopted in June 2020, [...] is especially dangerous for journalists.” [AiR No. 17, April/2021, 4]

Interestingly, Hong Kong’s public saw a slight increase of 0.7 points to 42.6 in press freedom. More than 1000 Hong Kong residents were surveyed, with only 69% of them believing that the national security law was harming the work of the press and media in their city. [South China Morning Post]

Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), the city’s public broadcaster, meanwhile, announced that it will begin to remove shows older than one year from its YouTube channel and Facebook page. [Kong Hong Free Press]

While RTHK assured that the measure is taken in order to align its social media platforms with its website, where only programs not older than one year are viewable, critics view it as a latest sign of the erosion of media independence in Hong Kong, as material reporting on Hong Kong’s protests in 2019 will no longer be viewable. Thus far, the broadcaster’s archival content has been freely accessible on the two platforms. [Radio Free Asia] [China Digital Times]

In a separate move, RTHK has fired outspoken journalist Nabela Qoser who has become known for her sharp questioning of the city’s officials, including Chief Executive Carrie Lam, during the anti-government protests in 2019. [Apple Daily]

South Korea: Parliament passes legislation addressing conflicts of interest

(nm) South Korea's National Assembly last week approved an anti-conflict-of-interest bill which prohibits public officials, including lawmakers, from using information related to their professional responsibilities to conduct transactions for personal gains.

Under the new law, any of the approximately 1.9 million officials subject to the law who wishes to conduct personal transactions within the domain of their public duties needs to declare the transactions in advance. Violations may be sanctioned criminally with a sentence of up to seven years or a maximum fine of about 63.000 USD, in addition to other disciplinary measures.

Additionally, the law imposes new regulations concerning family connections at public agencies, companies and subsidiaries, disclosure obligations related to personal and family-related wealth and previous private sector activity for lawmakers and related to personal property transactions for public sector employees involved in real estate or land purchase operations.

The passage of the bill comes against the backdrop of a massive land speculation scandal involving employees at the state-run housing developer Korea Land and Housing Corp. (LH) as well as public officials accused of and now under investigation over charges of insider trading. [AiR No. 11, March/2021, 3]

South Korea: Ruling Democratic Party seeks reform amid dire poll results

(nm) The ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) last week elected Rep. Song Young-gil, a five-term lawmaker and head of the National Assembly Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee, as its new chairman. Song is seen as being tasked with launching reform efforts within the party, ten months ahead of the 2022 presidential election and weeks after the party's crushing defeats in the April mayoral by-elections in Seoul and Busan, the country's two largest cities.

Speaking at a press conference at the National Assembly, he particularly stressed the need to

"strengthen democratic communication" within the party as well as to give more attention to young voters. Policy-wise, he vowed to focus on stabilizing the real estate market in addition to increasing the supply of Covid-19 vaccines.

The DPK's current political crisis is particularly attributed to failed attempts to stabilize the housing market, adding to a major real estate scandal involving public officials, as well as the delays in Covid-19 vaccine supplies. Both the DPK and President Moon Jae-in's public approval ratings are currently at their lowest ever since Moon's inauguration back in 2017, at roughly 30%. Especially young voters seem to have turned against the ruling party, as suggested by the by-elections exit polls. [Korea Times 1] [Korea Times 2] [SCMP]

South Korea: Supreme Court upholds revocation of parliamentary mandate

(nm) South Korea's Supreme Court last week rejected the request of five former National Assembly lawmakers the now-disbanded leftist Unified Progressive Party (UPP) to restore their status as lawmakers. According to the court, the decision was a "logical consequence" considering that it was required to exclude members of the party from the national parliament after the Constitutional Court had decided on the disbandment of the party.

In an unprecedented decision in 2014, the Constitutional Court had ruled to disband the left-wing UPP, stating the party was organizing activities with the hidden goal of establishing a North Korea-like communist state. According to the court, the party's lawmakers had to lose their seats in order to "secure the effectiveness of the disbanding of the party," a consequence not expressively stipulated in relevant laws.

The Supreme Court now confirmed the decision but equally asserted it would be more appropriate to stipulate such consequences in laws. [Korea Times]

South Korea: Defector group launches anti-North Korea leaflets action

(dql) An activist group in South Korea headed by a defector from North Korea confirmed that it had in defiance of a recent legal ban released balloons into

North Korea which carried half a million leaflets decrying the government in Pyongyang as “hereditary dictatorship”, along with 500 booklets, and 5,000 one-dollar bills.

The action marks the first ‘leaflet’ protest against Kim Jong-un’s regime since a ban came into force in March, amid fears that such protest actions could provoke North Korea and endanger people living near the border. The law which provides a maximum prison term of three years or a fine of 30 million won (27,400 USD), was enacted in December after North Korea blew up an inter-Korean liaison office in the border town of Kaesong last June in response to Seoul’s failure to prevent an anti-Pyongyang leaflet action.

The law has been criticized by human rights activists accusing the South Korean government of curtailing free speech at the behest of Pyongyang. [Korea Herald] [Reuters] [AiR No. 49, December/2020, 2]

Japan: Four years in prison sought for ex-justice minister in vote buying case

(dql) Japanese prosecutors have demanded a four-year prison term for former Justice Minister Kawai Katsuyuki accused of bribing some 100 local politicians in Hiroshima Prefecture to help his wife, Kawai Anri, winning a seat in the 2019 Upper House election.

Reversing earlier pleadings of innocence, Kawai conceded the vote buying in March. [Mainichi]

Japan set to tighten rules on digital advertisements

(dql) Japan’s government has announced plans to develop ordinances to require technology giants which provide digital advertisement distribution systems to implement measures for preventing ad fraud. This includes, among others, requiring major IT companies to accept third-party assessment of online advertising performance and effectiveness as well as the disclosure of information on wrongdoings such levying illegal charges on advertisers. Furthermore, tech giants providing targeted advertising are urged to provide transparency in collecting data from consumers by disclosing what kind of personal information are obtained as well as the conditions under which the data are used when such targeted ads are displayed.

The announcement comes after the Act on Improvement of Transparency and Fairness in Trading on Specified Digital Platforms came into effect in February. Under the law, digital platform operators must disclose terms and conditions for the use of their platforms while taking certain measures to enhance mutual understanding of digital transactions. [Japan Times] [Japan Times 2]

Taiwan: Cabinet proposes relocating planned LNG terminal

(dql) Taiwan's Cabinet proposed to relocate a contentious liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal from its planned site further away from the coast in northern Taiwan. The proposal comes in response to strong opposition of environmental groups to the original location of the terminal and will delay completion of the project by two and a half years to 2025 while increasing the costs by NT$15 billion to NT$75 billion.

To observers, the government's move aims to satisfy critics of the project and prevent a defeat in the upcoming related national referendum in August. [Focus Taiwan]

Law and Politics in South Asia

Bangladesh: Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist group behind anti-Modi protests, say officials

(lm) According to Bangladeshi officials, investigations into the violent protests against last month's visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi have revealed the resurgence of an al-Qaeda-linked terrorist group, which was believed to have been lying dormant for over a decade. [The Daily Star]

Reports indicate that members of the radical Islamist outfit Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami-Bangladesh (Movement of Islamic Holy War-Bangladesh, HUJI-B) have secured themselves significant influence within Hefazat-e-Islam, a tightly-knit coalition of a dozen or so Islamist organizations that had led the violent protests.

The main aim of HUJI-B is the creation of an Islamic regime in Bangladesh modelled on the former Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In fact, Bangladesh's history is replete with HUJI-B's violent campaigns against the ruling Bangladesh Awami League (AL) – a traditionally secular, center-left party – and other civil society members. The group was banned in October 2005 but remains one of the most violent jihadist groups in Bangladesh's history.

In February, a High Court upheld the death sentence of 10 members of HUJI-B and acquitted one, in a two-decade-old case related to an attempted assassination of Prime Minister Hasina. [AiR No. 8, February/2021, 4]

India: High Court, Supreme Court rebuke government over oxygen crisis

(lm) With the government unable to maintain a steady supply of oxygen, the New Delhi High Court on May 2 said that it would start punishing government officials for failing to deliver the life-saving items after several hospital authorities in the capital successfully sought an injunction. [The New York Times]

On the day of the verdict, India recorded a slight drop in new infections with 392,488 from a high of 401,993 in the previous 24 hours. It also reported 3,689 additional deaths, bringing the total to more than 215,000. Experts believe both figures are an undercount. [Associated Press]

Just days before, the Supreme Court (SC) had also weighed in, urging the central and state governments to consider another lockdown to gain control of the virus and to create and emergency stockpile of oxygen. [India Today]

Importantly, the SC also warned that attempts to clamp down on any information by the state or police

authorities will be treated as contempt of court, after the federal government last week forced social networking service Twitter to remove more than 50 tweets that had been critical of Prime Minister Modi and his government's handling of the pandemic. [Bar and Bench] [Forbes]

Critics have blasted Prime Minister Modi's handling of the crisis. A sudden, harsh lockdown imposed early in the pandemic sent millions of laborers scrambling back to their home villages and disrupted the economy. When cases dropped, the government failed to heed warnings of a potential resurgence from scientists, and its COVID-19 task force did not meet for months. Modi declared a premature victory over the pandemic in late January, during what proved to be a mere lull in infections.

India: Party of Prime Minister Modi looses West Bengal state election

(lm) Voters in West Bengal dealt Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) a blow in a state election held as India's coronavirus pandemic surged to crisis levels. The All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC) led by its founder and incumbent Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee won a two-third majority, taking more than 200 seats in the 294-seat state assembly. [CNN] [The New York Times] [The Straits Times 1]

One of India's most populous states, West Bengal was viewed as a key battleground, for it has never been ruled by the BJP. The AITC has been in power since 2011 when it dislodged a government led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) that had governed the state for 34 years.

Hoping to widen the appeal of his BJP beyond the Party's heartland – India's sprawling and politically febrile Hindi Belt – Modi had addressed dozens of rallies, prompting criticism the Prime Minister was focusing on elections instead of making the pandemic his top priority [see AiR No. 13, March/2021, 5]. Despite the defeat, the Hindu-nationalist BJP made substantial gains and became the main opposition party. Its tally in the state legislature went to nearly 80 seats, compared to just three seats won in the last state election in 2016.

Results were also announced for elections held in the neighboring state of Assam, alongside the results from Legislative Assembly elections in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry. [AiR No. 5, February/2021, 1]

In northeastern Assam state, the BJP managed to retain power. In Tamil Nadu, victory went to the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the main regional opposition party. In Kerala state, the ruling leftist political party was set to form government while the BJP led-alliance won no seats. In the Tamil-speaking union territory of Puducherry, the All India NR Congress-led alliance was leading in 14 of the 30 seats assembly. [The Straits Times 2]

Nepal: Prime Minister Oli seeks vote of confidence in parliament's lower house

(lm) Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli is set to face a vote of confidence during a special session of the House of Representatives, which has been summoned for May 10 by President Bidhya Devi Bhandari. Oli announced his decision during a meeting of the Council of Ministers on May 2. Importantly, if a no-confidence motion fails, a new one may only be registered a year later, as per the constitution. [The Himalayan Times]

To get through the floor test successfully, the prime minister must garner the support of a minimum of 138 members of the 275-member lower house of parliament. As the chairman of the ruling Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) (CPN-UML), Oli currently controls 121 lawmakers. To preempt supporters of his intraparty rival Madhav Kumar Nepal from changing fronts, Prime Minister Oli earlier this month entrusted the CPN-UML's newly constituted Standing Committee to initiate disciplinary action against as many as 27 lawmakers from the Nepal-led faction [see AiR No. 17, April/2021, 4].

As of now, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) (CPN(M) of Oli's archrival Pushpa Kamal Dahal is yet to officially withdraw its support from the government following the verdict of the Supreme Court in February, which had scrapped the then ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) and revived the two predecessor parties that had joined hands in 2018 to form the NCP. The CPN(M) controls 53 seats in the House, four of which have recently been suspended.

With 63 lawmakers, the opposition Nepali Congress (NC) – the second-largest party in the House – had emerged as a virtual kingmaker: Both CPN-UML and CPN(M) could form the government on the majoritarian principle with the support of the NC [see AiR No. 11, March/2021, 3]. But while both the CPN(M) and the NC have signaled their intention to move a no-trust motion against the prime minister

[see AiR No. 14, April/2021, 1], opposition parties have failed to reach a consensus to form the next government.

The opposition People's Socialist Party, Nepal, (PSP-N), whose 32 lawmakers hold the key for any future government, is yet to align itself with either the prime minister or the opposition. Against this backdrop, two days prior to Oli's announcement, NC President Sher Bahadur Deuba said his party would not register a no-confidence motion against the prime minister, citing a lack of support. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: United Nations rapporteurs urge government to reverse appointments to human rights body

(lm) United Nations (UN) independent human rights experts have voiced serious concerns over recent appointments of new members to Nepal's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), which they said "undermined its independence, integrity and legitimacy". The UN's statement comes just a month after the NHRC had lashed out at three international rights organizations, which had voiced similar concerns [see AiR No. 11, March/2021, 3]. [The Himalayan Times] [UN News]

In December of last year, President Bidhya Devi Bhandari issued ordinance to enable the Constitutional Council (CC) – a key agency that appoints officials at various constitutional bodies – to achieve quorum of as few as three of its six members, including the prime minister, attend a meeting. Soon thereafter, the CC met with a newly reduced quorum and made 38 nominations to vacant positions on 11 constitutional bodies. These included all five seats on the NHRC, as well as nominations to bodies established to protect the rights of Dalits, women, and marginalized minorities, and to investigate corruption allegations. [AiR No. 51, December/2020, 4].

Since then, several writ petitions have been filed with the Supreme Court (SC) challenging the constitutional validity of the appointments, but the hearings are yet to take place. The crux of the matter: As per the constitutional provisions, the Chief Justice of Nepal is also a member of the CC, and thus is named as defendant in one of the petitions. While other members of the Constitutional Bench can recuse themselves, however, the Chief Justice does not have such right. [AiR No. 2, January/2021, 2]

Pakistan: Federal government unveils electoral reform plan

(lm) The federal government on May 3 unveiled a series of amendments to the 2017 Election Act as part of its electoral reform agenda, which seeks to ensure fair and transparent elections in the country. The ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party also plans to introduce two constitutional amendments to parliament to introduce open balloting in Senate elections and allow overseas Pakistanis to contest elections. [Dawn] [Pakistan Today 1] [The Express Tribune]

The PTI currently enjoys the majority in both chambers of Parliament and hence does not require the support of the opposition parties for general electoral reforms, save the constitutional amendments. Thus, two days prior to the announcement, Prime Minister Imran Khan on May 1 once again called on opposition parties to come forward for discussion on electoral reforms, including the introduction of electronic voting machines (EVMs), which he said would help restore people's trust in the electoral process. [Asia News International]

Most big opposition parties have dismissed the proposed electoral reform, with Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) President and National Assembly Opposition Leader Shehbaz Sharif saying that the whole world — including the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) — has already turned down the concept of electronic voting. [Pakistan Today 2]

Pakistan: Watchdog reports 40 percent increase in attacks on journalists

(lm) Pakistan has seen a dramatic escalation in the climate of intimidation and harassment of media and its practitioners, with violence against journalists having increased by 40 percent compared to the previous year, according to a report published by Pakistan-based media watchdog Freedom Network. [Associated Press] [Geo News]

Since May of last, at least 148 attacks were documented – an average of 12 cases per month or every third day. The violations include six murders, seven attempted assassinations, five kidnappings, 25 arrests or detentions of journalists, 15 assaults and 27

legal cases registered against journalists. [Freedom Network]

Pakistan has long been a deadly place for journalists. In December of last year, the International Federation on Journalists (IFJ), the largest union worldwide representing journalists, listed the country among the top five "most dangerous countries for practice of journalism in the world" [see AiR No. 50, December/2020, 3]. Although the Pakistan government says it supports freedom of speech, rights activists often accuse Pakistan's military and its agencies of harassing and attacking journalists.

Sri Lanka: Cabinet clears proposed ban on face and head coverings in public

(lm) Citing national security grounds, Sri Lanka's Cabinet on April 27 approved a proposed ban on the wearing of burqa. To become law, the proposal needs a final nod from parliament, where the ruling Sri Lanka People's Freedom Alliance (SLPFA) holds a two-third majority. [Al Jazeera] [TRT World]

The government's intention to ban face veils was first announced in March, with the country's minister for public security calling burqas "a sign of religious extremism" with a "direct impact on national security." Back then, the minister also revealed plans to ban more than 1,000 out of the nearly 2,300 Islamic seminaries, or madrasas, which, he said, were 'flouting national education policy.' [AiR No. 11, March/2021, 3].

The decision is the latest move affecting the Indian Ocean island nation's minority Muslims, who make up nearly 10 percent of its total population of 22 million, where Sinhalese Buddhist account for 70 percent of the census. The wearing of the burqa in the majority-Buddhist nation was temporarily banned in the wake of the 2019 Easter Sunday suicide bombings that killed more than 260 people and injured 500 more [see AiR (4/4/2019)].

Law and Politics in Southeast Asia

Cambodia: Warrant for Rainsy's arrest

(nd) Acting President of banned opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), Sam Rainsy, was issued an arrest warrant for incitement, allegedly calling on the public to disobey the pandemic-related lockdown. The warrant for arrest is based on an interview Rainsy gave, stating the government must eliminate systemic corruption in order to tackle the pandemic, and shall seek international help. The court argued these statements could amount to "provoke a serious national security issue."

Cambodia is currently fighting against a recent spike in Covid-19 cases, imposing a strict lockdown, providing high penalties, which has been enforced by police rather violently, detaining many people forced to work outside for food. Hundreds of people protested food shortages in the capital Phnom Penh on Friday.

Rainsy is living in self-imposed exile in France. [Radio Free Asia 1] [Radio Free Asia 2]

Cambodia: NagaWorld to lay off 15% of personnel

(nd) Cambodia's largest casino, Chinese-run NagaWorld, will lay off 1,300 people and pay only a fraction of the severance that they are owed, calculating them on the basis of reduced wages in 2020. According to worker's union and advocates, this highlights how the pandemic makes labor laws worldwide erode. In an effort to support the private sector, many countries have eased regulations for business, which comes at the expense of worker's rights. NagaWorld profits dropped to US$102 million in 2020 from US$521 million in 2019. Activists warned

this could set a dangerous precedent. [South China Morning Post]

Indonesia: Firebrand cleric's lawyer arrested

(nd) Indonesia's counterterrorism police arrested the lawyer of firebrand cleric Rizieq Shihab, Munarman, for inciting people to commit terrorist acts and pledging allegiance to the Islamic State.

Munarman was the general secretary of the Islam Defenders Front (FPI), which was disbanded in December last year. At his house and the former FPI headquarters, police found chemicals for use in explosives. The raids were in connection with the attack on a Catholic church on Palm Sunday in Makassar. Munarman, a former human rights lawyer, has been Shibab's lawyer since his trial for breaches of pandemic restrictions began in March.

Indonesia has been fighting against terrorism, mostly carried out by al-Qaida-linked group Jemaah Islamiyah, since the Bali bombings in 2002. [The Diplomat]

Indonesia: Another cabinet reshuffle

(dql) In the second Cabinet reshuffle in just over four months, President Joko Widodo's plan to reorganize several agencies and create an investment ministry were approved by parliament. The new ministry will be headed by the current head of the Investment Coordinating Board (BKPM), coordinating both foreign and domestic investments, and improve investment climate on all levels. The Education and Culture Ministry was combined with the Research and Technology ministry. The current head of the Indonesian Institute of Science (LIPI) was appointed chief of the newly formed National Research and Innovation Agency.

In the previous cabinet reshuffle in December last year the health minister was ousted for mismanaging the pandemic response, while substitute ministers were appointed for the two embroiled in corruption cases. It also saw new appointments for trade, tourism and religious affairs. [Channel News Asia]

Indonesia: Papuan armed groups declared terrorists

(nd) Following the lethal attack by the Free Papua Movement (OPM) on the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) provincial intelligence chief, the Indonesian government has declared armed criminal groups (KKB) in Papua terrorists. Before, at least another nine guerillas were killed by Indonesian forces. The attack happened near the Grasberg mine, the world's second-largest copper mine.

Indonesia's easternmost province has been the site of decades of guerilla warfare for independence against local security forces. The government said it has reached its decision after consulting with the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), the State Intelligence Agency (BIN), the National Police chief, the TNI commander, figures from regional administrations and legislatures, local public figures and grassroots leaders. Information accessibility is a problem in Papua, where allegations of extrajudicial killings and breaches of human rights, also against peaceful protesters and citizens, have shadowed the reputation of security forces and authorities. [Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Landslide at controversial construction site kills three

(nd) A landslide caused by heavy rainfall at Batang Toru plant construction side killed at least three people, with many remaining missing. The China-backed hydropower plant construction is controversial due to its environmental impacts on endangered Tapanuli orangutans living there, and its soil being prone to earthquakes. A lawsuit against the project in 2018 was unsuccessful. It is the second deadly landslide at the construction site, which forms part of several infrastructure projects built across the Indonesian archipelago as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). [Radio Free Asia]

Indonesia: Criticism of Indonesian navy

(nd) In a reaction to the sunken submarine, Indonesian lawmakers are urging to ground its sister ship until proven seaworthy. Additionally, they stated this incident highlighted the threat of Indonesia's ageing military equipment, criticizing the government for

failing to modernize quickly enough. The sunken vessel was made in 1977 in former West Germany, the sister vessel in 1981. Existing equipment was not maintained well enough, and salaries and allowances for personnel are below average.

The debate emerges amid the economic repercussions of the pandemic and increasing Chinese incursions in the disputed South China Sea, leaving Indonesia in dire need of a functioning navy. China is aware of this weakness and President Joko Widodo's primary focus on modernizing infrastructure and economic wellbeing, which has been significantly tied to China. [South China Morning Post]

Malaysia: Youth group to inquire in police custody death

(nd) Following another death in police custody, eighteen youth groups in Malaysia have called for a public inquiry, citing a pattern of institutional abuse. It was criticized that neither the government nor the police have addressed or investigated this issue themselves, leading to an erosion in public trust. The detainee, ethnic Indian, A. Ganapathy spent 12 days in police custody, before being admitted to a hospital, according to his family, with a bruised and swollen leg, suggesting a beating. [Malay Mail 1]

Amid the trending hashtag #JusticeForGanapathy, district police chief Arifai Tarawe warned the public against commenting, making videos and posting them on social media, threatening prosecution. [Malay Mail 2]

Myanmar: AAPP threatened by military

(nd) The junta announced severe action against the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), alleging the group inaccurately accounts for the fatalities of the military forces. News media, international governments and the UN rely on their numbers. Its numbers are close to lists documented by local media. While AAPP listed 726 deaths until April 15, the junta only counted 258, accusing AAPP of not giving documents on their numbers and inciting fear and unrest.

AAPP was founded 2000 in Thailand, advocating the release of political prisoners. It started working inside

Myanmar after the civilian government was installed in 2011. [Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Ongoing fighting, protesters seeking training by ethnic armies

(nd) Following refueled fighting between the military and Karen state fighters, thousands of ethnic Karen villagers are considering to flee to Thailand. As of last week, 2,267 civilians had crossed the border to Thailand, according to a foreign ministry spokesman.

The two have clashed near the Thai border for weeks now, with fighters last week overrunning an army unit at the border, which was answered with air strikes by the military. Last week, two air bases by the military were attacked, with the attackers yet unclear. The government also clashed heavily with Kachin forces in the north. Both Karen and Kachin and other insurgent groups have expressed support for the pro-democracy protesters. [Reuters] [Asia Times]

Reportedly, protesters have turned to the ethnic fighters for being trained to fight back, according to one of the oldest and largest ethnic armed groups, the Karen National Union (KNU). They added, ethnic Karenni, Rakhine and Shan rebel groups were doing the same, further fueling fears of civil war, voiced by UN representatives, as the fighting is dripping into Myanmar's middle and ethnic majority, the Bamar. Some seem to have given up on peaceful resistance amid the death toll of at least 750. The public and private sector remains crippled by the Civil Disobedience Movement, with hunger and displacement rising. [Voice of America] Due to the crackdown by the junta and a lack of support, social support groups are forced to cease their activities. [Radio Free Asia 1]

Last week, the 10 ethnic armed groups that have signed a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, organized as the Peace Process Steering Team (PPST), announced to reach out to non-signatory groups. This raises the possibility for greater coordination also with the anti-coup movement and the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), made up of parliamentarians from the ousted National League of Democracy government, who recently founded an interim National Unity Government (NUG). While the aims of the different groups remain divided, few are willing to cooperate with the military. Efforts by the

military to revive talks with ethnic armies were unsuccessful. [The Diplomat] [Radio Free Asia 2]

Myanmar: Detained protest leader charged

(nd) Recently detained co-protest leader Wai Moe Naing will foreseeably be charged with murder and treason. He was arrested two weeks ago when security forces rammed his motorcycle leading a motorbike protest with their car. The 25-year-old emerged as one of the most high-profile leaders of opposition to the coup.

Meanwhile, the National Unity Government (NUG) ruled out to talk to the junta prior to the release of all political prisoners. An agreement reached between the ASEAN and the junta over a special meeting in Myanmar inter alia provides a dialogue for a peaceful situation. NUG, which was not invited to the meeting, doubted the agreement and urged the ASEAN to engage with it as the legitimate representative of the people. Since the original wording, which included the release of political prisoners, was washed down and the military already announced to merely "consider" the agreement, critics say the ASEAN has fallen short of providing a viable way out of the violence. [Reuters] [Asia Times]

US senators from both parties have urged President Joe Biden to impose more sanctions, including cutting off royalties from US businesses to Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, supplying individuals already sanctioned. [Reuters]

Myanmar: Ethnic-urban alliance broadening

(nd) According to the UN, half of Myanmar's population could be living in poverty next year, due to a combination of the pandemic and the political crisis caused by the military coup, reversing progress which has been made since 2005. The massive protests following the power grab were met with a brutal crackdown on civil society, killing almost 800 people and arresting over 4,500. 30,000 have been displaced, a third of which has fled to bordering Thailand. The Civil Disobedience Movement has crippled large parts of the economy. Armed ethnic groups in Karen and Kayin state have clashed heavily with the military. Over the weekend, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA)

shot down a Myanmar military helicopter while conducting air strikes.

The yet unacclaimed attacks on military targets, including a recent one on an airbase, are according to analysts likely to be the joint work of an alliance between ethnic rebels and pro-democracy protesters. This, in turn suggests an spill-over effort of ongoing civil wars with minority groups from the periphery to major cities and the majority of the country, causing a broader coalition against the military junta.

Analysts have drawn parallels to the situation after the coup in 1988, when young urban dissidents formed the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), and fought alongside ethnic rebels in the frontier areas equipped with arms from Thailand. With growing ties between Myanmar and Thailand, however, such acquisitions are less feasible, the latest ethnic-urban alliance has been using hunting rifles and homemade explosives, with more and more local resistance emerging, which the military seems yet ill-equipped to answer. However, military insiders have hinted that veterans of previous ruling juntas, namely the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), are starting to be annoyed of Min Aung Hlaing's actions and decisions deemed ineffective. [Asia Times 1] [Radio Free Asia] [Irrawaddy] [Asia Times 2]

Philippines: Anti-Terrorism Act on trial

(lp) The government asked the Supreme Court (SC) to dismiss the 37 petitions that challenge the constitutionality of the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA), which was enacted in 2020. The petitions accuse the ATA of facilitating red-tagging activities to oppress dissent or disrupt democratic processes. The government contends the ATA protects Filipinos not only from the threats of terrorism, but also from economic and financial insecurity. The Philippines shall pass an anti-terrorism law soon, otherwise the country might be blacklisted by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an intergovernmental anti-money laundering watchdog, for failing to comply with international obligations. Moreover, the government argued that the ATA is involved in some pending trials and has been invoked against the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army. Furthermore, the government claimed that since the petitioners allegedly did not suffer any injury from ATA's implementation, they lack legal standing to challenge the Act. [Manila Bulletin]

However, recent criticism against the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) has called attention to the possible role of ATA in facilitating red-tagging activities. [Manila Standard] The oral arguments with the SC are expected to resume on May 4.

Thailand: Opposition joint statement for Prayut's removal

(nd) In a joint statement, six opposition parties, including main opposition Pheu Thai Party, and Move Forward Party, demanded Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha to resign over his alleged failure to manage Covid-19 outbreaks. Additionally, they will submit a petition with the same content to the National Anti-Corruption Commission. They added that the Constitution also has to be rewritten and cited public support for Prayut's removal. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Judgment against Federalist group members upheld

(nd) The Court of Appeal upheld a 3-year prison sentence ruling against four protesters charged with forming a secret society under Section 209 of the Criminal Code for distributing leaflets, and wearing and selling Federationist shirts. The defendants had argued that their statements given at the military camp were made without any lawyers or relatives present, lacked their signature and attest of an officer, making the testimony unlawful. The charges were originally filed on 24 October 2019. 21 people have been prosecuted in 10 cases regarding the republican Thai Federation movement, a group that promotes a change of the system of government to a federation. Out of five movement leaders, four disappeared in self-exile. [Prachatai]

Thailand: Amnesty International demands release of activists

(nd) Following reports on their declining health, Amnesty International has called for the immediate release of student activists Parit Chiwarak and Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul. Parit has been on hunger strike for 45 consecutive days. Both are among those charged under Section 112 and denied bail. Early this

week saw protests against the refusal of bail, followed by Parit's admittance to the hospital where he is being force-fed. [Benar News]

According to the Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (TLHR), as of March 2021, at least 581 individuals have been charged for participating in political protests, at least 88 of which have been charged with Section 112, carrying up to 15 years of imprisonment. Bail requests have been denied numerous times. Thailand has recently not made use of Section 112 but resumed it in November 2020 to contain protesters calling for a reform of the monarchy. [Prachtai]

Thailand: More powers to PM

(nd) In a decree published in the Royal Gazette last week, Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha transferred ministerial powers covering 31 laws under his direct control, including immigration, health and procurement, and also several areas of defense and cybersecurity, in an effort to control a recent spike in Covid-19 cases. There was no expiration date given for this measure. Analysts and the opposition have criticized the move in fears of Thailand sliding deeper into authoritarian rule, calling it "Prayut's enhanced Covid coup."

Prayut seized power in a coup in 2014, with a controversial election in 2019 consolidating his rule. Due to the stagnating vaccine campaign, rising case numbers and drastic economic repercussions, Prayut has become deeply unpopular among the public.

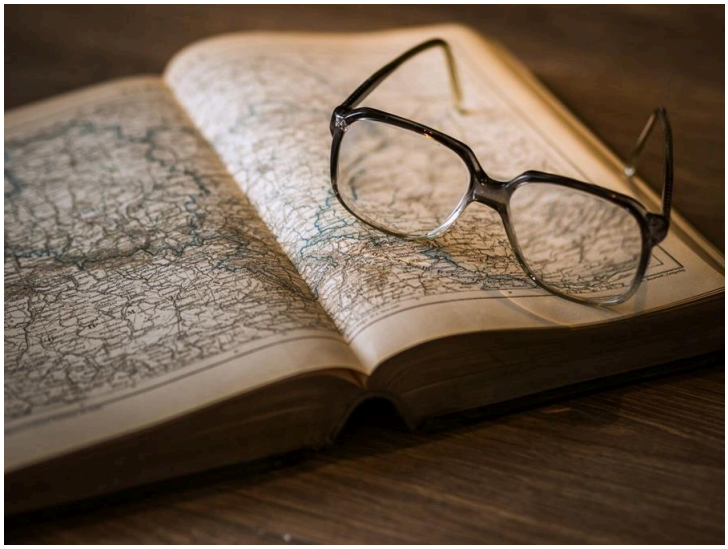
Amid the recent surge in case numbers, ongoing pro-democracy protests have moved online, making the possibility for Prayuth to directly control the Cyber Security Act and Computer Crimes Act a mayor weapon against the movement.

Just recently, the publication of the Freedom of Press Index highlighted how many Asian states, including China, the Philippines, and Cambodia have used the pandemic as a pretext to broaden executive power and crackdown on critics and media. [See also AiR No. 17, April/2021, 4] [Voice of America] [Benar News]

Thailand: Center of DSI to investigate "fake news" on Covid-19

(nd) A center of the Department of Special Investigation (DSI) will be investigating "fake news" in conjunction with the government's efforts to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, ranging from the promotion of herbs to recommendations by "senior doctors". They will be focusing on online platforms. No figures were available on how much of such posts are circulated online. [Bangkok Post]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia



China-US relations: Blinken's warning against Chinese widening influence in Africa

(dql) In a virtual meeting with alumni of the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has cautioned Africa to beware of China's growing influence, saying that "[w]e're not asking anyone to choose between the United States or China, but I would encourage you to ask those tough questions, to dig beneath the surface, to demand transparency and to make informed choices about what is best for you and your countries."

YALI is a US Department of State program aimed at educating and networking young African leaders with activities including the Mandela Washington Fellowship which provides study trips to the US for six weeks.

In subsequent talks with the Presidents of Nigeria and Kenya, Blinken promised greater US commitment to

Africa, while iterating that “China is a global competitor and competition is a good thing as long as it's basically fair and the playing field is level,” adding that “[b]ut as we look at it, we have different approaches to governance, we have different approaches to business, we have different approaches to security, and the fundamentals sometimes of our partnerships are quite different.” [Channel News Asia] [VoA 1]

In earlier remarks in April before the US Senate Armed Services Committee, US Army General Stephen Townsend, leader of US Africa Command, said that China over the past two years has “completed a very large and capable naval pier that adjoins their base," with the capacity to “dock their largest ships, to include the Chinese aircraft carrier as well as nuclear submarines,” and to “rearm [them] with munitions and repair naval vessels.” [VoA 2]

China-Africa trade continue to rise

(dql) Trade between China and Africa rose by 26.9% in the first quarter of this year compared with 2020, with two-way China-Africa trade totaling 52.1 billion USD in the first three months of the year after most countries eased trade and travel restrictions that had been imposed to curb the spread of the virus. China exported goods worth 29.8 billion USD to Africa in the quarter, up 39.2% from last year. African countries sold China goods worth 22.3 billion USD during the period, a 13.6% increase. [South China Morning Post]

A special role is played by Congo in China's trade with Africa. While China is still the world’s largest oil importer, the availability of crude from the Middle East – whose shipments would traditionally have gone to the US but no longer do because of sanctions – means it is no longer heavily reliant on African suppliers. However, Beijing still needs from Africa copper, cobalt and other rare minerals. This has led to China’s engagement in Africa shift towards Congo, the world’s leading producer of cobalt and Africa’s biggest copper producer. Latest numbers of the China Africa Research Institute demonstrate this development: while the country received only 2.7 billion USD worth of Chinese loans between 2000 and 2019, the total value of Chinese foreign direct investments was 5.6 billion USD as of 2019. [South China Morning Post 2]

In January, China announced that it would scrap Congo’s debts which were due end of last year, as part of its extended debt relief worth over 2 billion USD to developing countries under a G20 framework aimed at

giving those hammered by the COVID-19 crisis some financial breathing space. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, according to a recent of report of law firm Baker McKenzie, China remains the top international investor in infrastructure in Africa, with China's lending to Sub-Saharan Africa energy and infrastructure projects totaling 3.3 billion USD in 2020, a slight increase from 2.8 billion USD in 2019, but well below its 2017 peak with 11 billion USD. [Baker McKenzie]

China and Russia dominate vaccine diplomacy, reject EU-sponsored WHO reform resolution

(dql) According to a report of the Economist Intelligence Unit, the research and analysis division of London-based media company Economist Group, the West is losing the COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy battle in key developing regions of the world to Russia and China and will suffer long-term strategic consequences.

For China, the report concludes that the Chinese government has been able to keep new daily cases under 200 since April 2020, allowing China to pursue domestic and overseas vaccination drives in parallel, with so far 115m doses worth 1.8 billion USD administered on each track. The EU, the US and the UK, meanwhile, have so far mostly been absent from the vaccine diplomacy scene, due intense political pressure in these countries to vaccinate their own population first.

Against this background, the report concludes: "Overall, the vaccine diplomacy efforts of Western states are likely to begin too late to catch up with those of Russia and China, which are so far winning the public relations battle," and warns that "damage to the reputation of Western countries has already been done and will be hard to repair."

This will, in further consequence, boost the global standing and leverage of Beijing and Moscow in emerging countries in the near future, helping both to gain influence and pursue their interests around the world. [9 News] [EIU]

For a similarly critical assessment of the EU's performance in vaccine diplomacy with focus on the Balkans, see Michael Leigh in [Bruegel] who argues that "EU should reinforce its position in the region with

more inclusive policies, clearer signaling and robust measures to counter disinformation."

The European Union, meanwhile, has accused China and Russia of systematically seeking to sow mistrust in Western COVID-19 vaccines in their latest disinformation campaigns over the past months, with the intention to divide the West. In a latest special report, released last week, the European External Action Service, the EU's diplomatic service and combined Foreign and Defence Ministry, concludes that Chinese and Russian vaccine diplomacy comes along with "disinformation and manipulation efforts to undermine trust in Western-made vaccines, EU institutions and Western/European vaccination strategies," with state-controlled media outlets, channels and social media being used to achieve these goals. [EU vs Disinfo] [Reuters]

Furthermore, China and Russia are reportedly joining hands in pushing back an EU-led resolution which calls for increased cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO) during public health crises and for which both countries are demanding changes to the text of the resolution. Among those is the inclusion of the formulation "in accordance with national and international laws and regulations" to a paragraph in the resolution on sharing samples and genetic sequences of pathogens with pandemic potential. In another paragraph referring to member countries strengthening their public health surveillance, China and Russia (and Syria) seek to replace a reference to "investigation" of public health events with "assessment." [Politico]

The move comes as China continues to face accusations of withholding data from the WHO's investigation into the origins of the pandemic.

China-Australia relations: Canberra reviews Chinese ownership of Port Darwin

(dql) A blow to already frosty relations between China and Australia, the Australian Defense Ministry is reviewing a Chinese company's ownership of the strategically important Port of Darwin in proximity of which US Marines are stationed. Australian Prime Minister made clear that he would take action, should he "receive from the Department of Defence or intelligence agencies that suggest there are national security risks there."

Under a deal in 2015, the Northern Territory government sold a 99-year lease to the Port of Darwin

to Landbridge Group, a Shandong-based private multinational company with business interests in port and logistics, oil and gas, real estate and tourism, and manufacturing and trade. The deal was concluded four years after then President Barack Obama secured an agreement to base about 2,500 Marines in Darwin, which is on the doorstep of the Indo-Pacific. [Aljazeera]

The Defense Ministry's review comes at the heels of Canberra's decision to scrap Victoria's Belt and Road (BRI) infrastructure agreement with China. [ABC]

Adding fuel to the fire, Australian newspaper Sydney Morning Herald reports on a secret briefing by Major-General Adam Findlay to Australia's special forces soldiers last year, in which the then Special Operations Commander warned of the "high likelihood" of a conflict with China and called on them to prepare for the possibility of war with China, while describing China as the biggest threat to the region. [Sydney Morning Herald]

China, Germany hold sixth round of government consultations

(dql) Co-chaired by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, China and Germany held government consultations on April 28 via video link. It was the sixth round of the consultations since their establishment in 2011 with the aim to deepen Sino-German cooperation. Last week's talks focused on "political and economic bilateral cooperation, as well as on overcoming global challenges – especially with regard to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and climate policy," with work reports of from 25 departments of the two countries exchanged. "Letters of intent" were also signed for increased cooperation in various areas, including climate research and environment, health policy, food safety, development policy and transport. [Federal Foreign Office, Germany] [Foreign Ministry, China]

In their respective opening statements, Li and Merkel reaffirmed areas of cooperation and addressed differences.

Against the background of recent tensions between the European Union and China over accusations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang, Li remarked "that China and Germany have differences of opinion on some issues," but insisted that Sino-German communication needs to be based on "equality and non-interference principles." He highlighted trade as

example of fruitful “win-win cooperation,” from which “people in both countries benefit directly.”

Merkel, meanwhile, called the EU-China investment agreement, agreed in principle in December, a “cornerstone” of economic relations but also addressed the need to abide to by International Labour Organization norms on forced labor, while avoiding making any reference to Xinjiang. She addressed the human rights situation in Hong Kong, speaking of “differences of opinion” about this issue, but expressing hope to see the Sino-German “human rights dialogue back on track as soon as possible.” [Global Times] [Politico]

For a critical account on the consultations and current Sino-German relations between “profitable economic relations” and “systemic rivalry,” see [Deutsche Welle].

Shannon Tiezzi in [The Diplomat], similarly, highlights mounting frictions in relations between Berlin and Beijing, including human rights in Xinjiang, market access in China, and 5G networks in Germany. She also draws attention to uncertainties in Sino-German ties in the wake of the end of Merkel’s 16-year long chancellorship in September and a possible victory in the general election by the Greens whose newly elected candidate for chancellorship has recently been very outspoken about China’s rights abuses and national security threats. [VoA]

Cross-strait relations: Taiwan accuses China of stealing technology

(dql) Taiwan’s government has made allegations against China of waging economic warfare against Taiwan’s tech sector by stealing technology and poaching away engineers, adding that the theft was not only about economic interests, but also aimed to “make Taiwan poorer and weaker.”

At the same time, lawmakers of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) are stepping up efforts to revise Taiwan’s commercial secrets law to widen the scope of what is considered a secret and to sharpen penalties.

The allegations of technology theft refers especially to the semiconductor industry, in which Taiwan is world-leading, with Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) controlling 84% of the market for chips with the smallest, most efficient circuits on which the world’s biggest technology brands rely for their

products and services. [South China Morning Post] [Aljazeera] [The Economist]

In a related development, Taiwan's Labor Ministry has urged local recruiters to remove all listings for jobs in China, in particular those in critical industries such as semiconductors. The Ministry defended the drastic measure as a necessary protective move against China: "Due to geopolitical tension between the U.S. and China, China's semiconductor development has suffered some setbacks, and as a result China has become more aggressive in poaching and targeting top Taiwanese chip talent to help build a self-sufficient supply chain." [Newsweek]

On the transformation of the semiconductor industry into a high-stakes geopolitical issue and a source of tension between the US and China and the specific role of Taiwan therein, see the report "Geopolitics of Semiconductors" in [Eurasia Group].

For the impact of Taiwan's worst draught in more than 50 years on the Taiwanese semiconductor industry and the global electronics sector, see [BBC].

Taiwan-US relations: Change from 'ambiguity' to 'clarity' to have destabilizing effect, US spy chief says

(dql) Speaking at the Senate Armed Services Committee, US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines has voiced caution over a shift from the long-standing 'strategic ambiguity' to 'strategic clarity' regarding Taiwan, arguing that China would find such a change "deeply destabilizing." She added that this would cement Chinese perceptions of the US aiming at "constraining China's rise, including through military force, and would probably cause Beijing to aggressively undermine U.S. interests worldwide." [Focus Taiwan]

Haines's remarks come amid recent warnings of high-ranking US military officials of a Chinese takeover of Taiwan by force in the near future, including former US Asia-Pacific commander Philip Davidson testifying in the same committee in March that China could invade Taiwan within a timeframe of six-years. [The Guardian]

For insights into positions in the debate in the US on a potential end of the decades-long approach of 'strategic ambiguity' see [The Diplomat] and [New York Times]. Dean P. Chen in [The National Interest], meanwhile, argues that "[u]nless the United States can decisively make up its mind on doing away with the

"One China" policy irrespective of Beijing's reactions, strategic ambiguity inevitably remains."

Taiwan-Canada relations: President Tsai receives John McCain Prize for Leadership in Public Service

(dql) Taiwanese President was awarded the 2020 John McCain Prize for Leadership in Public Service of the Halifax International Security Forum (HFX). Now an independent, nonprofit organization headquartered in Washington, D.C., HFX was founded by the Canadian government and receives considerable funding from Ottawa.

The conferment of the prize upon Tsai is expected to further worsen already fraught relations between Canada and China over the 2018 arrest in Vancouver of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou at the behest of the US. Meng is currently fighting extradition to the US, where she is wanted over charges of breaching sanctions against Iran. Shortly after Meng's arrest, China detained Canadian national Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor and later charged them with espionage. Both sides have accused each other of arbitrary and politically motivated detentions. [CNN]

Taiwan: Advancing naval military capabilities

(dql) Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration (CGA) took delivery of the "Chayi," a homegrown 4,000-ton vessel and CGA's largest patrol boat to date. Designed to carry out maritime patrols, crack down on illicit activities on the open seas, and conduct search and rescue missions, the vessel is expected to significantly enhance the CGA's capability to protect Taiwan's waters.

The "Chiayi" is one of four CGA patrol ships of that size, commissioned by the government and being built by CSBC at a total cost of 392 million USD. [Focus Taiwan]

The delivery of the vessels comes as China's second aircraft carrier and the first one domestically produced aircraft carrier, the Shandong, and its naval support group have concluded exercises in the South China Sea, that, according to the Chinese Navy, were "legitimate," and served to "enhance Chinese capabilities to protect national sovereignty, security, and development interests. The drill was the first in the

disputed water this year and the latest in a string of many military muscle flexing activities of China there. [Aljazeera]

Japan: Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership ratified

(dql) Japan's parliament approved the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest free trade deal, signed by 15 Asia-Pacific countries including besides Japan, Australia, China, New Zealand, South Korea and the ten ASEAN member states. It covers about 30% of the world's gross domestic product, trade and population and eliminates tariffs on 91% of goods while providing common rules on investment and intellectual property aimed at promoting free trade.

The pact will come into effect 60 days after it is ratified by six of the ASEAN members and three of the other countries. Thus far, Singapore and China are those other countries which have completed ratification procedures.

The RCEP ratification marks Japan's first trade deal involving both China and South Korea, the country's largest and third biggest trade partners. The Japanese government expects that the trade pact will increase the country's GDP by 2.7% and create 570,000 jobs. [Japan Times]

Japan, India, Australia, formally launch Supply Chain Resilience Initiative

(lm/dql) Against the larger backdrop of simmering trade and political tensions, the trade minister of Japan, India and Australia on April 27 formally launched the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) in the region. [South China Morning Post]

During the first phase, the three nations will share best practices on supply chain resilience, hold investment promotion and buyer-seller matching events for diversification of their supply chains. To quickly take forward the trilateral effort, the ministers explored convening the Trilateral Ministerial Meeting, once in four months.

After the coronavirus pandemic had brought to the fore the importance of diversification away from trade and supply chain dependence, informal talks had been

ongoing since Japan first broached the idea with India in July of last year [see AiR No. 34, August/2020, 4]. In September, then, the three nations initiated high-level consultations [see AiR No. 36, September/2020, 2].

The proposal centers around a two-stage plan, which aims at attracting foreign direct investment to turn the Indo-Pacific into an "economic powerhouse" by linking up all the separate existing bilateral relationships, such as the recently established Indo-Japan Industrial Competitiveness Partnership. Moreover, the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) may be brought into the loop to establish new "China+1" strategies for supply chains outside China and build momentum towards a new trade-based quadrilateral alliance.

See in this regard, John Blaxland and Ashok Sharma in [East Asia Forum], who argue that a strategy of the Quad focusing solely on security "is not going to be enough to significantly alter the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific or deter further abrasive assertiveness" on China's side," and suggest that the Quad has to "venture into the realm of trade and investment with a focus on environmental issues to address the needs of states buffeted by growing great power competition."

China's Foreign Ministry was quick to criticize the initiative warning that "[a]rtificial industrial 'transfer' is an unrealistic approach that goes against the economic laws and can neither solve domestic problems nor do anything good to the stability of the global industrial and supply chains, or to the stable recovery of the world economy." [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

South Korea-US relations: Moon-Biden summit set for May 21

(nm) South Korea and the US have confirmed that the countries' Presidents Moon Jae-in and Joe Biden will meet on May 21 in Washington to discuss bilateral ties and cooperation. It is the second in-person visit of a foreign leader during Biden's president, after Japanese Prime Minister Suga visited the White House in April, signaling the elevated role of the two East Asian countries for Biden's China policy.

Although a detailed schedule has not yet been set, Moon and Biden are expected to have an in-depth discussion on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, the nations' stances towards China, furthering economic and trade ties, as well as joint

responses to global challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

When asked about the thornier issue of the possibility of Seoul joining the US-led regional security alliance denominated the Quad, a Cheong Wa Dae official maintained Seoul could participate in such formats as long as it complies with the principles of "transparency, openness and inclusiveness" and as it abides by international norms. Regarding speculations that Moon might request US support for Seoul's vaccination efforts, the official responded the two sides have yet to fine-tune the pandemic-related agenda. [The New York Times] [Nikkei Asia] [Korea Herald]

In a latest development, Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and his US counterpart Antony Blinken this Monday also agreed on close cooperation in their efforts to achieve the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, in bilateral talks at the margins of a G7 gathering and shortly after the Biden administration completed its North Korea policy review. The ministers also agreed to try to find common ground between their governments' regional policies and to collaborate on Covd-19 vaccination efforts and climate change. [Korea Times]

South Korea-Japan-US relations: Military chiefs discuss cooperation on North Korea

(nm) South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Won In-choul and his counterparts Gen. Mark Milley of the US and Gen. Koji Yamazaki of Japan held trilateral talks in Hawaii last week, affirming their commitment to strengthen their cooperation in response to North Korea's missile and nuclear programmes. They further discussed the "importance of promoting a rules-based international order in the region."

During the meeting, the US official asserted the US would "[remain] prepared to provide extended deterrence," and reaffirmed its "ironclad commitment" to defending the US allies. General Won emphasized the importance of the cooperation for the peace on the Korean Peninsula as well as in the Northeast Asia region, while Japan's official stressed cooperation regarding the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions. [Korea Times]

The talks were held on the sidelines of a change-of-command ceremony at the US Indo-Pacific Command, with Navy Adm. John Aquilino succeeding outgoing commander Navy Adm. Philip Davidson, and amid efforts of the Biden administration to re-strengthen

the US alliance with Japan and South Korea to counter China in Asia.

Davidson, who looks back on a 39-year long career in the US Navy, said during the ceremony: ""Make no mistake, the Communist Party of China seeks to supplant the idea of a free and open international order with a new order, one with Chinese characteristics, one where Chinese national power is more important than international law." [Korea Herald] [Stars and Stripes]

South Korea-Vietnam relations: Foreign Ministers discuss bilateral ties

(dql) South Korea's Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong held phone talks with his Vietnamese counterpart Bui Thanh Son on Wednesday to discuss bilateral ties and regional issues. Both ministers agreed to cooperate on promoting the strategic cooperative partnership of the two nations as next year marks the 30th anniversary of diplomatic ties. The top diplomats assessed that the two nations have continued bilateral trade and investment despite the COVID-19 pandemic and agreed to continue cooperation to facilitate trips by essential workers including business people.

In particular, Chung expressed concerns over Japan's planned release of radioactive water from its crippled Fukushima nuclear power plant into the ocean. The ministry said that Son, in turn, stressed transparency, responsibility and safety with regard to the marine environment. [KBS]

South Korea: Advancing military radar technology

(dql) South Korea's Agency for Defense Development, the country's national agency for research and development in defense technology, announced that it has completed the development of a new high power and high sensitivity radar technology capable of detecting stealth fighter jets. In a thinly veiled reference to North Korea, the agency added that the new technology will be used for wide area surveillance to monitor military aircraft operated by neighboring countries near the Korean Peninsula. [Yonhap]

North Korea warns US against “hostile policy” as US launches long-awaited policy review

(nm) Pyongyang last week issued a series of three statements warning the US would face “a very grave situation” if it maintained its “hostile policy” towards the North. The statements were made after President Biden had made a brief reference to North Korea’s nuclear programme in a speech before Congress, calling it a “serious [threat] to American security and the security of the world,” which the US and its allies would meet “through diplomacy as well as stern deterrence.”

Last week, the Biden administration also announced its long-awaited North Korea policy review, calling for the complete “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” and indicating that the US would try to find a middle ground between Trump’s more direct outreach to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and Obama’s “strategic patience” approach, which aimed at compelling Pyongyang to negotiate, using sanctions and other forms of pressure. According to the White House, the US would seek “a calibrated, practical approach that is open to and will explore diplomacy” with North Korea. More details, however, remain yet undisclosed.

Pyongyang reacted to the developments on Sunday, stating talks of diplomacy were merely “a spurious signboard for covering up its hostile acts,” and, in a separate statement, that the Biden administration was using criticism of the North’s human rights record as “a political weapon for overturning our social system.” [The New York Times] [SCMP 1]

For an explanation of the potential relevance of the wording “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” please see [Vox].

In a separate warning towards South Korea, Pyongyang also criticized Seoul for allowing a North Korean defector group to send 500,000 propaganda leaflets over the border by balloon. Kim Jong-un’s sister, Kim Yo-jong, called the manoeuvres “a serious provocation,” adding the North would “look into corresponding action.” South Korea’s police chief has since ordered a probe into the group that, if the case is confirmed, would be the first to fall under a new South Korean government ban on such activity. [SCMP 2] [Korea Herald] [Reuters]

North Korea-China relations: “Export processing zone” near Chinese border announced

(nm) North Korea last week announced it would build a “Musan Export Processing Zone” near its border with China, apparently seeking to recover trade after a year of strict border closure which in addition to international sanctions due to missile and nuclear tests let the nation’s trade contract to almost zero.

Although the North’s official state media did neither specify the goods to be dealt with nor details on its opening, experts believe the zone might be used to manufacture products using materials imported from China before then exporting them back.

The announcement comes about a month after Chinese president Xi Jinping vowed to “provide the peoples of the two countries with better lives,” while North Korean leader Kim Jong-un called for stronger bilateral cooperation in defiance of “hostile forces.” Trade between the two allies fell by 75% during the first ten months of 2020, according to South Korea’s spy agency, leading to a shortage of raw materials in the isolated North. In a low-level party meeting last month Kim had surprisingly acknowledged that his country is facing its “worst-ever situation,” comparing it to the devastating 1990 famine. [Korea Herald] [SCMP] [The Guardia n]

Cross-strait relations: Taiwan to toughen punishments for army servicemen leaking confidential information to China

(dql) Taiwan’s Cabinet approved a draft amendment to the island’s Criminal Code of the Armed Forces that provides punishments for serving members of the armed forces who pass on confidential information to a newly defined category of people, to include now “foreign governments and nationals, citizens of Mainland China, residents of Hong Kong and Macau and or any middlemen sent on their behalf.” The current law identifies the country’s enemies as “any country or organization that engages in or whose forces confront the Republic of China.”

Under current law, leaking confidential information is punishable with a jail term of 3-10 years in peacetime and 7 years to life during war. Furthermore, anyone who discloses or delivers materials of a secret nature

related to Taiwan's defense to anyone in the new category faces 5-12 years in prison during peacetime and 10 years to life during war. However, individuals who disclose more confidential information can be sentenced to a maximum of 18 years.

The draft amendment also expands the definition of enemies from "any country or organization that engages in or whose forces confront the Republic of China," to any country, organization, or "political entity," that does so. [Focus Taiwan]

The draft bill comes after China's Ministry of State Security, the country's civilian intelligence, security and secret police agency, in April issued new anti-espionage regulations, the first counter-espionage working regulations at a national level and across different sectors, including government departments, social groups and companies. They allow the agency to draw up lists of companies and organizations suspected of foreign infiltration and to require them to adopt security measures to prevent foreign infiltration. [AiR No. 17, April/2021, 4]

The legislative move comes also at a time of heightened cross-strait relations amid Chinese military activities of unprecedented frequency close to Taiwan on the one side and US warnings of a Chinese takeover of Taiwan by force in the near future on the other. [AiR No. 17, April/2021, 4] [AiR No. 11, March/2021, 3] [The Guardian]

Meanwhile, Taiwan's High Court upheld a guilty ruling against two former guards of President Tsai Ing-wen charged with breaching the National Security Act and spying for China, trying to obtain the itinerary of President Tsai, as well as US and Japanese politicians who visited and met with her in 2018. [Taipei Times]

India, Russia agree to establish 2+2 ministerial dialogue on foreign and defense affairs

(lm) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced on April 28 that he and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin had agreed to establish a two-plus-two meeting between the two nations' foreign and defense ministers. Taking to Twitter Modi said he had had "an excellent conversation" with his "friend" the Russian president, and that they had decided to launch a two-plus-two to add further momentum "to our strong strategic partnership". [Nikkei Asia] [South China Morning Post] [The Economic Times]

Importantly, the meeting between Modi and Putin followed on the heels of an official two-day visit to New Delhi by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who met with his Indian counterpart S. Jaishankar on April 4 to discuss closer military cooperation between the two countries [see AiR No. 15, April/2021, 2].

Thus, there is a good case to believe that despite the positive language the dialogue was aimed at further clearing up misunderstandings on various thorny issues, most notably India's involvement in the informal strategic dialogue known as the Quad. For Russia now has become part of a small group of countries – the United States, Japan and Australia - with whom India holds foreign and defense ministerial dialogue.

Observers therefore consider the announcement of a Russia-India two-plus-two a balancing act, as both countries are trying to broaden their diplomatic relationships.

A state that has traditionally adhered to the principle of non-alignment, India is seemingly keen to signal to the United States that it retained its "strategic autonomy", especially after Washington has recently been trying to pressure India into withdrawing from its planned purchase of the Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile system, which under US law can attract sanction similar to those imposed on Turkey last year [see AiR No. 52, December/2020, 5].

Moscow, conversely, wants to signal to Beijing that despite their relatively warm ties it planned to continue supplying advanced weaponry to New Delhi – a sore point for China which has spent much of the past year in a military stand-off with India over their disputed Himalayan border.

Chinese defense minister visits Sri Lanka, Bangladesh

(lm) China's Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe on April 28 arrived in Sri Lanka on a two-day visit for bilateral talks with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and other top officials. Earlier the day, Wei visited Bangladesh to meet with President Abdul Hamid and Chief of Bangladesh Army Staff General Aziz Ahmed. [South China Morning Post] [The Daily Star] [The Hindu]

General Wei is the second high-ranking Chinese official to visit the strategically located island nation within

months. A Chinese seven-member delegation led by Yang Jiechi, a Communist Party Politburo member and top foreign policy official, had visited Sri Lanka on October of last year, preceding the four-nation tour by then US Secretary of State Pompeo, which aimed to bolster allies against Beijing's growing assertiveness in the region. [AiR No. 44, November/2020, 1]

Wei's visit assumes added significance, for it is likely to coincide with a ruling by Sri Lanka's Supreme Court on a bill related to the contentious Colombo Port City (CPC), a Chinese-funded $1.4 billion development project to be built on reclaimed land. Several petitions have been lodged against the proposed piece of legislation since it was tabled in parliament earlier this month, with opponents saying it violates the country's sovereignty, constitution and labor laws. [see AiR No. 16, April/2021, 3, AiR No. 17, April/2021, 4].

Pakistan PM Imran Khan to visit Saudi Arabia next week

(lm) Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan is scheduled to visit Saudi Arabia from May 7 to 9, a crucial trip coming at a time when the shift in the new US Administration's Middle East policy is providing both countries with a reason to get their relationship back on track. [The Express Tribune]

During his two-day visit, Khan will be accompanied by several members of his Cabinet, including Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry and other high-ranking officials. Islamabad and Riyad are expected to sign several accords and Memorandums of Understanding (MoU), including a $500 million loan agreement, and to discuss the release of Pakistani nationals currently imprisoned in the kingdom. [Profit by Pakistan Today] [Geo News]

The visit comes against the larger backdrop of quiet efforts by both sides to repair bilateral relations, which had led to a telephonic conversation between Prime Minister Khan and the Saudi Crown Prince earlier in March – the first contact between the two leaders in 15 months.

In the lead-up to his trip, Prime Minister Khan on April 28 welcomed the kingdom's outreach for peace, after Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in a televised interview earlier last week said his country wants "good relations" with Iran, marking a break from Riyadh's usually tough stance against its traditional archrival Tehran. [Anadolu Agency]

Prior to the interview, senior Saudi and Iranian officials had been holding the first round of direct talks in Iraq's capital Baghdad on April 9, according to reporting by the Financial Times. Aimed at easing tensions between the regional rivals, the secret talks also included discussions about attacks by Iranian-aligned Houthi rebels, who had stepped up their attacks against Saudi cities and oil infrastructure. [Financial Times]

Pakistan to seek debt restructuring from Chinese power producers

(lm) In a bid to preempt a possible raise of power tariffs, Pakistan will seek debt restructuring of $3 billion in principial repayments to Chinese power producers. The initiative is part of a Circular Debt Management Plan (CDMP), which aims to reduce the amount of unpaid government subsidies within the next 3 years. [Dawn]

In recent years, China has financed two dozen power plants as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is part of Beijing's international infrastructure strategy known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Because repayment of the debt is included in the electricity tariff, Islamabad will request Beijing to consider restructuring of the repayments for 10 to 12 years, which in turn will reduce the tariff increase requirements. [The Express Tribune]

India, France conclude bilateral maritime exercise

(lm) India and France have concluded the 19th edition of the Varuna naval exercise in the strategically important Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Notably, the United Arab Emirates for the first time joined the drills [see AiR No. 12, March/2021, 4]. [Naval Technology] [The EurAsian Times]

The exercise – which launched on April 25 – comes less than a month after India for the first time joined La Pérouse, a French-led naval exercise attended by the United States, Japan and Australia – all member states of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). [AiR No. 12, March/2021, 4]

Bangladesh, Indonesia push for early trade deal

(lm) During the inaugural session of their Foreign Office Consultations (FOC), Bangladesh and Indonesia on April 29 agreed to work towards the singing of a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) to boost bilateral trade between the two countries. [Prothom Alo] [United News of Bangladesh]

With the third phase of the IBTA (Indonesia-Bangladesh Trade Agreement) still pending, both sides agreed to sign pending Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) and agreements on a fast-track basis to expand the volume of bilateral trade and investment.

Sri Lanka opposition alliance meets with Western diplomats

(lm) The leader of Sri Lanka's eight-party opposition alliance Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) met with several Colombo-based envoys on April 27 to discuss the economic and political situation in the island nation. [ColomboPage]

The meetings were held on the same day China's Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe arrived in Sri Lanka on a two-day visit for bilateral talks with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and other top officials. [see article in this edition]

Western countries to demand release of prisoners in Myanmar

(nd) 16 western countries and the European Union urged Myanmar's military regime on World Press Freedom Day to immediately release arrested media personnel. Since the coup on 1 February the junta cracked down on media, closing outlets, targeting and arresting journalists, with more than 80 remaining detained. Access to the internet is severely restricted. During the civilian-led government of ousted Aung San Suu Kyi, media was relatively free, with the exception of reports on massacres against Muslim Rohingyas. [Radio Free Asia 1]

Meanwhile, the junta charged a Japanese journalist with spreading fake news. Japan, one of Myanmar's top

donors, has so far not imposed sanctions but been pressing for the journalist's release. [Channel News Asia] Additionally, the US urged ASEAN to push for the implementation of the agreement reached during a special summit of the bloc with the military junta last week. The United States urged ASEAN to press Myanmar to implement actions agreed at a regional summit. The Junta said it would "consider" it, and the killing of civilians continued. [Radio Free Asia 2]

Myanmar: A "new Cold War"

(nd) A recent statement by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), saying they "instructed their foreign ministers to hold their meetings with the People's Republic of China and the United States as soon as possible", suggests the bloc being entangled between two poles of global competitors, prompting names such as a "new Cold War". Other dialogue partners like Japan, Russia and India were not mentioned.

The statement also contained the "five-point consensus" reached during a special summit last weekend, suggesting the bloc to move away slowly from its principle of non-interference. It was agreed on the appointment of a special ASEAN envoy to mediate. So far, the results of the meeting have not been put into action, with fighting between the military and ethnic armed groups further escalating and continued reports of killed protesters. So far, Christine Schraner Burgener, UN special envoy to Myanmar, has yet not been allowed into the country. ASEAN has a reputation to lose if the junta does not comply with the agreement and has already been criticized for inviting the junta and no representative of the National Unity Government, thereby legalizing the coup.

China and Russia's veto in the UN security council are still prohibiting further action against the junta. The comparison with the Cold War also highlights, that US President Joe Biden's dichotomy of democracy and autocracy will not be an easy choice for ASEAN, with its members leaning towards both directions. [Nikkei Asia]

Russia's plans in Myanmar

(nd) Russia never denounced the military coup in Myanmar but expressed hope for a "a peaceful settlement of the situation through the resumption of political dialogue", calling the military the only viable

guarantor of the multi-ethnic country's unity and peace. Together with China and India, they blocked harsher actions by the UN Security Council. Deputy Minister of Defence, Alexander Fomin, was the highest-ranking foreign official to attend Myanmar's Armed Forces Day parade in the capital Naypyidaw, and his speech emphasized the strategic partnership of the two countries.

Since the 1950s, Russia has maintained a close relationship with the military, proving military training. Following China, Russia is the second largest arms provider to Myanmar, and is currently awaiting the delivery of fighter jets and an air defense system, including surveillance drones. Due to its already strained relation with the West, Russia's support for Myanmar comes at no diplomatic costs.

Still, it is unclear whether and how Russia will coordinate with China on this issue. China's relation to the military is complicated due to supporting ethnic Chinese insurgency groups in Myanmar's Western border with China. Additionally, while Russia maintains one-dimensional military ties, eyeing access to the Indian Ocean, neighboring China has to consider social and economic interaction as well. [East Asia Forum]

China to donate vaccines to Myanmar

(nd) China has donated 500,000 doses of its Covid-19 vaccine to the Myanmar junta, amid an ongoing boycott of millions of civilians and health workers of the regime's vaccine program. China commented the donation was to show "Paukphaw" [fraternal] friendship between China and Myanmar. The vaccines were promised to ousted State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in January by foreign minister Wang Yi, which also led to the signature of agreements on the economy, trade and technical cooperation and the faster implementation of infrastructure projects with respect to the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), which forms part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Social media users posted skeptical content about the vaccines. Anti-China sentiment grew since the coup, following China's repeated veto against UN Security Council sanctions. [Irrawaddy]

Meanwhile, the junta opened a private hospital, whose nightly room rates are much below what an average Burmese can afford to pay. It is yet unclear how involved coup leader Min Aung Hlaing and his family are. [Irrawaddy 1]

Over the weekend, security forces arrested HIV/AIDS patients at a HIV care center in Yangon, which was founded and run by elected lawmaker and National League for Democracy (NLD) member Daw Phyu Phyu Thin. [Irrawaddy 2]

Chinese-Indonesian copper mine deal to be cancelled

(nd) A deal which foresaw the construction of a US$2.5 billion copper smelter on the eastern Indonesian island of Halmahera in a joint project of Freeport McMoran Copper & Gold (FCX) and China's Tsingshan Steel have collapsed. Following the end of the deadline of 31 March, the government has acknowledged the project will return to its original site at a Gresik, East Java. Global copper prices have mounted to a record price of US$10,000 per ton on the London Metal Exchange, driven by global demand for electric vehicles. [Asia Times]

Philippines to remain patrolling South China Sea

(lp) Chinese ships still remain in parts of the South China Sea over which the Philippines has territorial claims. What is more, China urged the Philippines to "respect China's sovereignty and rights" through a cease of maritime exercises in the area. Moreover, the Chinese Ambassador to Manila named the territorial conflict as mere "differences", despite being summoned some weeks ago in request to remove the Chinese vessels from Philippine territory. [Manila Bulletin 1]

In turn, the Philippines continue to patrol the South China Sea with military and non-military ships, rejecting China's plea to back off. According to a maritime expert, the diplomatic protests recently issued might have resulted in the decreasing presence of Chinese vessels in the area. Moreover, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) distributed relief supplies to fishermen to alleviate the negative impacts that Chinese incursion and continued patrols they might be incurring. [South China Morning Post 1] [Benar News] [ABS-CBN 1]

Meanwhile, President Rodrigo Duterte communicated his lack of confidence that the US or the UN will assist the Philippines if conflict escalates. Duterte also claimed he considers China a "good friend" to which he

owes a debt of gratitude for their vaccine donations. [Manila Bulletin 2] [ABS-CBN 2]

Via social media platform Twitter, the war of words got ugly, with Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jnr calling China an “ugly oaf” and demanding it “get the f*** out” of Philippine maritime waters. It prompted analysts to warn of an actual war respectively further tensions as Chinese reaction. [South China Morning Post 2]

Japan to equip Philippine military

(nd) Japan supplied self-defense equipment to the Philippines to strengthen defense ties in the wake of facing an ever more aggressive China in the East and South China Sea. In 2015, Japan altered its foreign aid charter, enabling the government to support foreign armed forces in noncombat areas through official development aid, including for disaster relief, infrastructure building and coast guard activities. August last year saw a $100 million agreement to enable Mitsubishi Electric Corp. to export an air radar system to the Philippines armed forces. The latest deal has an estimated ODA of 120 million yen ($1.1 million). Upon the completion of the delivery, trainings by Japanese forces will take place. [Jakarta Post]

Malaysia to detain Vietnamese fishing boats

(nd) Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) has chased away three Vietnamese vessels, which were trying to prevent MMEA from detaining Vietnamese fishing boats that have encroached into Malaysia’s exclusive economic zone, off Kuala Terengganu. Since last June, 87 foreign fishing boats and 960 crew members have been found encroaching Malaysian waters. [Bernama]

Vietnam opposes Chinese annual fishing moratorium

(lm) The Vietnamese government has again rejected a recent Chinese fishing ban imposed on waters in the South China Sea and called on Beijing to comply with international laws. [The Star]

China on April 27 announced an annual fishing moratorium in the waters Beijing has claimed in the South China sea. The ban, which came into effect on May 1 runs until September 16 and covers parts of the Gulf of Tonkin and waters surrounding the Paracel Islands, both of which are claimed by Vietnam. Imposed since 1999, Beijing claims the restrictions a part of the country's efforts to promote sustainable marine fishery development and improve marine ecology [see also AiR No. 19, May/2020, 2].

Announcements

Upcoming Online Events

4-7 May 2021 @ 9:00 a.m. (GMT+2), Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Sweden

Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development 2021

This year's Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development will revolve around the theme "Promoting Peace in the Age of Compound Risk," exploring novel approaches and solutions to promoting peace in the age of compound political, social, economic, and environmental risks reinforced by the Covid-19 pandemic. The focus will be on collective action measures.

To discover the full programme and any additional inquiries, please visit [SIPRI].

5 May 2021 @ 9:00 - 10:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Eventbrite, USA

Artificial Intelligence: Challenges and opportunity

This public workshop is hosted by the G20 Interfaith Forum working group on Research and Innovation for Science, Technology and Infrastructure, which is presently tasked with offering policy advice to G20 officials on maximizing digital opportunity for all peoples.

If you are interested in joining the event, please register here: [Eventbrite]

5 May 2021 @ 10:00 - 11:00 a.m. (GMT-4), The German Marshall Fund, USA

Finding New Common Ground: Building Trusting Relationships and Advocacy Across the Atlantic

This event will examine ways our societies on both sides of the Atlantic look at policy innovations which advance equity or the need to reverse policies that directly or indirectly have contributed to the disenfranchisement of citizens.

For more information, see [GMF]

6 May 2021 @ 11:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Berggruen Institute, USA

Possible Worlds: How Will We Live Together

Possible Worlds - A Lecture Series Presented by the UCLA Division of Humanities and the Berggruen Institute, featuring at this event Alejandro Aravena, Chilean architect and executive director of the firm Elemental S.A and winner of the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2016.

Please register here:[UCLA]

6 May, 2021 @ 2:00 - 3:00 p.m. (GMT-4), The Dialogue, USA

Online Event: Healthcare Investment & Economic Recovery in the Americas

The pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of those with poor health in Latin America and the Caribbean, as people with obesity and other pre-existing conditions are at highest risk of serious illness and death. Chronic health problems are also damaging the region's growth prospects. Even in a normal year, poor health reduces global GDP by 15 percent, according to a recent report from the McKinsey Global Institute.

Please register here: [TheDialogue]

6 May 2021 @ 9:00 - 10:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Berggruen Institute, USA

Moving Forward: Ukraine's NATO Track

This online event will host a timely conversation on Ukraine's NATO track, continued security challenges posed by Russia, and ongoing hot conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

More information is available at [GMF].

6 May 2021 @ 10:00 a.m. (GMT+1), International Institute for Strategic Studies, UK

Quantum warfare: potential and pathways

In this webinar, Dr Michal Krelina, Czech scholar and founder of the start-up Quantum Phi, will give an overview of the military potential of quantum technologies, drawing on his article 'Quantum Warfare: Definitions, Overview and Challenges.' Dr Greg Austin will provide an overview of the challenges governments will face in adapting these technologies to military use. He will also address the latest developments under the US strategy, 'National Strategic Overview for Quantum Information Science', and the US National Quantum Initiative Act.

For more details, see [IISS].

6 May 2021 @ 11:00 a.m. (GMT+2), Globsec, Slovakia

Going for Growth in Central Europe

This virtual dialogue will feature an expert discussion on the strategic economic transformation of the Central European Region by high-level policymakers, think-tank leaders and the media.

For more information, see [GLOBSEC]

6 May 2021 @ 2:00 p.m. (GMT+2), Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, Switzerland

Restrictions on Civil Society Organizations: Strengthening Accountability and SDG16 Accountability and SDG16 amid the Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to new and unprecedented restrictions on civil society organizations overseeing the security sector. Considering this background, this event will highlight different ways in which CSOs are able to continue carrying out their monitoring role as well as practical examples of how they contribute to the achievement of SDG 16.

If you wish to join the discussion, please follow [DCAF].

6 May 2021 @ 10:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Center for a New American Security, United States

Building a Clean Network for International Security

As the United States increasingly considers China's ambitions for access to sensitive sectors as a national security challenge, this online panel discusses possible US strategies for addressing these developments.

Please see [CNAS] for more information and registration.

6 - 9 May, 2021 @ 7:30 pm PST, Institute for Policy Studies, US

Is a Better World Possible After COVID? A Livestream with John Feffer

Many believe that COVID-19 has exposed everything that's wrong with decades of the world's governments betting on militarism, competition, and wealth

creation. But is a better world really possible after this crisis?

For more information, see [IPS]

7 May 2021 @ 1:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Lowy Institute, Australia

What can the world do about the Myanmar crisis?

After Myanmar's military seized power in February 2021 the country spiraled into political and economic crisis. Against this background, a panel of practitioners and experts, including former US ambassador to Myanmar Khin Ohmar will discuss how the world can help resolve the crisis.

For more information, please see [Lowy].

7 May 2021 @ 2:30 p.m. (GMT+2), Italian Institute for International Political Studies, Italy

EU, US & China: The Impossible Triangle? Global Economic Governance after the Pandemic

This webinar will take a closer look at the fragmentation and regionalization of the post-pandemic world, asking: Is time really running out for globalisation? What are the prospects for the interplay between Washington, Brussels, and Beijing? What is the impact on developing and poor countries? And: Is there still room for renewed multilateral economic cooperation?

For more details, please see [ISPI].

7 May 2021 @ 12:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Berggruen Institute, USA

Living with Machines: Future Perspectives and Analysis

This event will discuss the theoretical and practical prospects of humans living with machines: How do we assess cognitive and affective capacities in humans and non-humans? What are the relevant theoretical

models? What are the relevant practical strategies, both in the lab and in everyday life?

For more information, see [Berggruen]

10 May 2021 @ 1:30 p.m. (GMT+2), Italian Institute for International Political Studies, Italy

T20 Forum on Climate Change | The Future is Now: People, Planet, Prosperity

Ahead of the G20 summit in Rome in Octobre 2021, this webinar seeks to gain an understanding of the scientific, socio-economic and political aspects of a changing climate and how these changes affect and challenge stakeholders involved. Key topics include the economic dimension of climate challenge, the geopolitics of renewable energy sources, trends in multilateral efforts, as well as the impact on human security including food and water security.

For more information, see [ISPI].

10 May 2021 @ 2:00 - 2:45 p.m. (GMT-4), The Heritage Foundation, USA

Space Force: What's Next?

As it blazes an entirely new trail in military history, it is important to discuss the current state of the Space Force and what efforts and concepts should shape its future.

If you want to join the event, find registration details here: [Heritage]

11 May 2021 @ 11:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Institute for Policy Studies, USA

From Injury to Insult: America's CEOs and the Great Pandemic Plunder

If you want to know how far America's CEOs went to enrich themselves while their companies, employees, and the entire nation suffered through the global pandemic, join this webinar.

For more information, see [IPS]

11 May 2021 @ 7:00 - 8:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Institute for Policy Studies, USA

Canada's Toxic Legacy / El Legado Tóxico Canadiense

This event provides an opportunity to hear from frontline communities and organizations in Latin America who have lived or observed the arrogant disregard of peoples' rights, lasting environmental disasters, and forced displacement to make way for mining projects.

Please find more about the event at [IPS].

11 May 2021 @ 3:00 p.m. (GMT+2), The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Sweden

Does Geography Matter? The European Council torn (or divided) by North and South, East and West

In this event, a group of experts will discuss Europe as a divided continent: Is geography the main factor behind these divisions and in which sense? How is geography related to other issues? And how does this connect to the work of the European Council?

For more information, please visit [UI].

11 May 2021 @ 3:00 p.m. (GMT+9), Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, Japan

15th Asia Pacific Roundtable on Sustainable Consumption and Production: Facilitating Transition to Sustainable Lifestyles

This episode of the Asia Pacific Roundtable on Sustainable Consumption and Production series will discuss the latest action measures and research results regarding cooperation between communities, local governments, and businesses in the realm of sustainable lifestyles.

Details are accessible via [IGES].

11-13 May 2021 @ 8:00 a.m. (GMT-4), University of Michigan, United States

Sexual Reproductive Health and Right for All

The University of Michigan Summer Institute invites practitioners, researchers, and students to a three-day event on sexual reproductive health and rights for all with a particular focus on the connection between the global and the local level through programme development, evaluation, and policies.

If you wish to learn more about the event, its fees and registration, please visit [UMichigan].

12 May 2021 @ 11:00 a.m. (GMT+2), The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Sweden

Climate Diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific

Against the backdrop of an increased European interest in the Indo-Pacific, a region vulnerable to climate change as well as subject to complicating geopolitics, this webinar asks: How can the Indo-Pacific become more resilient to the consequences of climate change and what role can the EU play?

If you wish to learn more, please follow [UI].

12 May 2021 @ 12:30 a.m. (GMT+10), Australia-China Relations Institute, Australia

The shortest history of China – in conversation with Linda Jaivin

Expert in Chinese politics, language and culture Linda Jaivin will discuss her new book *The Shortest History of China*, telling a short account of Chinese history, from the philosophical origins to the country's political system, the Covid-19 pandemic, and future trajectories.

If you are interested in this webinar, please visit [UTS].

12 May 2021 @ 10:00 a.m. (GMT-2), Hudson Institute, United States

US and Japan National Security and Defense Strategies

After the recent summit between US President Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Suga it has become evident that the US and Japan share a strong alliance, but equally that there are challenges the two countries need to confront, including in the Indo-Pacific region. This event argues that, in order to deal with these issues, the US and Japan need to adopt a coherent national security and defense strategy, in addition to further integrating their alliance.

For more information, please follow [Hudson Institute].

Recent book releases

Andreas Televantos, *Capitalism Before Corporations: The Morality of Business Associations and the Roots of Commercial Equity and Law*, Oxford University Press, 224 pages, February 3, 2021, with further details at [Oxford].

David Rundell, *Vision or Mirage: Saudi Arabia at the Crossroads,* I.B. Tauris, 336 pages, September 17, 2020, reviewed in [New York Times]

Calls

The **University of California** invites submissions for its edited collection ***"Post-Politics and the Aesthetic Imagination".*** Deadline for submission is May 20, 2021. For more information, see [H-Announce].

The Journal of American History and Politics invites submission for its 5th issue of USAbroad titled ***"Social Change and Political Representation on the Long Cycles of American History"***. Manuscripts can be submitted until May 10, 2021. For more details, see [USAbroad].

Social Change and Political Representation in the Long Cycles of American History

to reflect on the ***"long cycles" of Social Change and Political Representation in the Long Cycles of American History***. Deadline for submission is May 20, 2021 For more information, see [USA]

Jobs & positions

The **Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB)** is offering a fulltime ***Research and Teaching Position in Legal***

History or Anthropology of Law. Deadline for applications is May 31, 2021. More about the job offer at [Academic Positions].

The **University of Luxembourg** is recruiting a ***Postdoctoral Researcher in the field of digital public history***. Closing date for application is July 1, 2021. Find more information at more detail, see [Academic Positions].

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