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Asia in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to this week's AiR providing you an update on the latest happenings and developments in constitutional politics and governance, geopolitics and international relations in Asia.

I wish you an informative read and extend special greetings to readers in Denmark, Italy, Samoa, Sweden and Tonga which celebrate Constitution Day, National Day and Independence Day in this week, respectively.

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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Law and Politics in East Asia

China: Hong Kong's new election law approved

(dql) Hong Kong's Legislative Council (LegCo), the city's legislature, has approved a bill to revise the city's electoral system. The revision includes changes viewed by critics as a Beijing-masterminded move to rein in chances of the pro-democracy camp to form a strong opposition in the city's parliament.

One major change is the establishment of a vetting committee to review candidates for elected offices to ensure that they are sufficiently "patriotic". Candidates will be approved by national security agents selected from the Hong Kong police force.

Furthermore, the number of seats in the LegCo, directly elected by Hong Kong voters, will be reduced from currently 40 to 20, which means a drastic decrease in influence in the legislature from 57% to 22%. Of the remaining 70 seats 30 will be assigned to the functional constituency consisting of professionals and industry leaders, and 40 to the pro-Beijing Election

Committee, which is also to select the Hong Kong Chief Executive.

The amendment was passed in a near-absence of opposition lawmakers, with 40 lawmakers voting for the bill and only two against. In November last year, pro-democracy legislators had resigned en masse to protest against the ousting of four colleagues deemed insufficiently loyal to Beijing. [The Diplomat] [Reuters] [AiR No. 46, November/2020, 3]

China: Hong Kong's June 4 vigil banned

(dql) For the second straight year, Hong Kong's police have banned the city's June 4 vigil commemorating the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, citing Covid-19 related restrictions on public gatherings. [Deutsche Welle]

The ban has been criticized by the organizers of the annual vigil, the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, which accuses the government of using the Covid-19 pandemic as an excuse for suppressing political assemblies. [South China Morning Post]

China allows citizens to have three children

(dql) In a major policy shift to address the challenges of China's ageing society, the Chinese Communist Party has announced that it will allow parents to have three children.

In October 2015, China replaced its one-child policy with a two-child policy, but the change proved to have only a marginal effect on the greying of the country's population. According to the national census conducted at the end of last year and released in May, China's overall population rose to 1.412 billion in 2020, from 1.4 billion a year earlier. However, annual births have continued to plummet to 12 million in 2020, down from 14.65 million in 2019, marking an 18% year on year and continuing the descent to a near six-decade low. The fertility rate in 2020 was at 1.3 children per woman, which is below the replacement level of 2.1 needed for a stable population. [South China Morning Post] [AiR No. 20, May/2021, 3]

For skeptical voices on the prospects of success of the new policy, see [New York Times] and [Reuters].

Japan faces record low number of pregnancies

(dql) Latest data on pregnancies have deepened the government's worries about Japan's rapidly aging population and surging social security spending heavily burdening the budget.

According to the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, the number of pregnancies in 2020 reached a new low, with 872,227 pregnancies recorded last year, down 4.8% from 2019. This number, in turn suggests a number of babies born in 2021 below 800.000. The annual number of newborns sank below 900,000 for the first time in 2019. The number is likely to further decline to below 850,000 in 2020. [Japan Times]

Japan: New law to stop sex offender teachers from returning to job

(dql) Japan's parliament approved a bill aimed at preventing educators, who have been dismissed on grounds of sexual misconduct at work, from returning to their job. Inter alia, the new law allows prefectural education boards to reject the license renewal applications of offending teachers if they find such a teacher not having appropriately rehabilitated. So far, it has been possible for those who were dismissed to have a license reissued three years after their discharge for sexual misconduct.

The new law also authorizes the central government to set up a nationwide database of teachers dismissed due to misconduct. [Mainichi News]

Japan's government urged to revise gender recognition law

(dql) Human Rights Watch has released a report which calls on the Japanese government to change its Gender Identity Disorder Special Cases Act, the country's transgender recognition law, which the international human rights organization criticizes as "abusive and outdated," as it puts heavy barriers on transgender people seeking legal recognition of their transgender identity, including sterilization surgery and a psychiatric diagnosis.

The report comes amid heightened efforts of activists in Japan to push for the passage of an equality act, that would remove such barriers as well as legalize same-sex marriage. However, the legislation faces resistance from conservative members within Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). [Human Rights Watch] [Mainichi News]

In a related development, the LDP has decided to suspend the submission to the current Diet session of a cross-party bill that aims at promoting awareness among the public of LGBT people and that was agreed on with the main opposition party Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan earlier this month. The decision was made due to the failure to reach a consensus within the party's General Council. Some conservative factions strongly objected the bill's phrase "discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity is unacceptable," arguing that the undefined scope of discrimination could result in frequent lawsuits. [Japan Times] [AiR No. 21, May/2021, 4]

Japan: Bill to designate special security "watch zones" passes House of Representatives

(dql) Japan's House of Representatives has approved bill that regulates the use of land lots deemed important to national security. Under the bill, "watch zones" – remote border islands as well as areas within around 1 kilometer of SDF facilities, U.S. military bases, nuclear power plants and other important places – will be designated where the government is authorized to look into the name and nationality of owners of land lots and buildings and how they are being used. The bill would also allow the government to halt radio interference or other problematic activities in the zones. Non-compliance would be punishable with up to two years or a fine of up to ¥2 million, or both. [Japan Times]

South Korea: Young politician wins primary for opposition party leader, indicating generational shift

(nm) As calls are growing for a generational shift in South Korean politics, both the conservative main opposition People Power Party (PPP) and the liberal

ruling Democratic Party (DP) are stepping up reform efforts.

Based on two opinion polls of the general public and party members, the PPP recently selected five out of eight candidates for its chairposition, with 36-year-old Lee Jun-seok emerging as winner of the primary. Lee, a reform advocate with no prior experience as lawmaker, had been regarded as an underdog until polls preceding the primary indicated strong support, especially by young voters. The PPP will pick its new chairperson in a party convention on June 11. [Korea Times 1] [Korea Times 2]

Following the primary, calls for reform efforts are also growing within the DP which had to face dire poll results in recent weeks. Last week, three-term lawmaker Lee Kwang-jae officially announced his bid for presidency, stating: "We need a political revolution in which a shift in the times, generation and players takes place," similarly alluding to young voters. In addition to Lee, two more DP members have officially declared their bids so far. [Korea Times 3] [Korea Times 4]

South Korea: Plans to revise citizenship pathway for children faces opposition

(nm) The planned revision of a law allowing children of permanent foreign residents to more easily obtain Korean citizenship has triggered protests in South Korea as some people believe the revision aims to benefit the Chinese community. Under a draft of the revised Nationality Act, children under the age of 6 will be immediately eligible for citizenship, while those aged 7 and above will have to have lived in South Korea for a minimum of five years. A petition challenging the draft has garnered more than 317,000 signatures, claiming potentially benefitting Chinese people already enjoyed "many rights" and that the measure was inappropriate for tackling domestic demographic issues. [Korea Times]

South Korea: Vice justice minister offers to resign

(nm) South Korean Vice Justice Minister Lee Yong-gu abruptly offered to resign last week following controversy over an unpunished assault against a taxi driver that had happened last November. In a statement issued to reporters, Lee explained his

decision saying the ministry needed a “new worker” who could help the justice ministry reinvent itself for the remaining year of the Moon government. Lee had been appointed in early December and soon faced criticism as he allegedly got away unpunished following the incident in November. Last week, prosecutors called him in for questioning. They had also been investigating if the case had followed due process norms as allegations emerged that Lee further demanded the driver to destroy evidence of the incidence. [Korea Times] [Yonhap]

Taiwan: Amendment to Criminal Code removes adultery as criminal offense

(dql) Taiwan’s parliament has passed a law to amend Taiwan's Criminal Code, officially removing adultery as a criminal offense. The legislative move comes one year after the Constitutional Court had declared the related article unconstitutional and voided, citing changed perceptions of marriage and family in society and similar actions by other countries. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Date of four national referendums announced

(dql) The Central Election Commission (CEC) has officially confirmed August 28 as the date of four national referendums which will ask Taiwan’s citizens to decide the following issues: the relocation of a liquefied natural gas receiving station to protect a coastal algal reef, the lifting of a ban on pork imports containing traces of the leanness-enhancing drug ractopamine, the scheduling of referendums to allow them to be held in conjunction with national elections, and the re-activation of the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant in New Taipei. [Focus Taiwan] [Nippon]

Law and Politics in South Asia

India: Series of proposed regulations causes resentment and fear in Lakshadweep union territory

(ad) Tensions have been simmering in India's Lakshadweep union territory over a series of regulations proposed by the archipelago's administrator.

Located about 200 kilometers off the southwestern coast of the Indian Peninsula, Lakshadweep is the smallest of India's eight union territories, and the only Muslim-majority territory, apart from Indian-administered Kashmir. Importantly, unlike the states of India, union territories are federal territories governed, in part or in whole, by the Central government.

The current administrator, Praful Khoda Patel, served for four years as Home Minister in the state of Gujarat under then Chief Minister Narendra Modi. In December of last year, he took over Lakshadweep's administration, making him the first non-bureaucrat to hold the position.

Following his appointment, Patel has pushed for numerous laws without the knowledge or consent of locals and their representatives. The contentious proposals range from a ban on beef, disqualification of people with more than two children who wish to contest the village council elections, to introducing for alcohol selling permits, despite the Muslim population's belief against alcohol consumption. [Hindustan Times]

The most consequential regulation, however, might be the Draft Lakshadweep Development Authority Regulation 2021, which would allow the government to claim land from locals at any point for the purpose of development, without protecting the interests of landowners. [Al Jazeera]

While the proposals are currently being considered by the federal Ministry of Home Affairs, opposition leaders, including Indian National Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin are demanding they should be scrapped and the administrator recalled. [NDTV]

India: Facebook-owned WhatsApp sues government over new IT regulations

(lm) Facebook-owned messaging service WhatsApp has filed a lawsuit against the federal government over a new set of digital rules that came into force on May 26, saying the regulations would force the company to violate privacy protections.

Earlier in February, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) promulgated the so-called “Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code” to regulate content on social networks and other web services in India. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp were given until May 26 to comply with these rules. [AiR No. 9, March/2021, 1]

The regulations require messaging platforms to make provisions for the "identification of the first originator of the information", among others. While this would require WhatsApp to unmask only people credibly accused of wrongdoing, the company says it cannot do that alone in practice. For to comply with the law the company says it would have break encryption for receivers of messages as well as originators, and thus violate privacy rights enshrined in India’s constitution. [Reuters]

Other court challenges to the new rules are already pending in Delhi and elsewhere, including one filed by the Foundation for Independent Journalism, a non-profit organization which publishes *The Wire* news portal. [AiR No. 10, March/2021, 2]

The guidelines further require social media platforms with more than five million users to appoint a compliance officer, a nodal contact officer and a resident grievance officer. However, all three of the so-called “significant social media intermediaries” – Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter – are yet to appoint executives as dictated by the regulations. [The Indian Express]

Tensions between the government and Twitter had already been heightened after police visited the company’s offices on May 24. The police, who fall under the control of the central government, said they

had to serve notice about an investigation into the social media giant's tagging of a post by the spokesperson of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as "manipulated media". The tweet accused the political opposition of trying to derail the government's pandemic response. [BBC] [The Straits Times]

India: Court orders COVID-19-related audit of automobile plant after strikes over COVID-19 fears

(lm) A High Court on May 31 ordered officials to inspect coronavirus-related safety protocols at a Renault-Nissan automobile plant in the city of Chennai, after workers had filed a petition seeking a halt of operations over allegations that COVID-19 safety protocols were being flouted at the factory. [The Straits Times]

The city, located in India's southern state of Tamil Nadu, remains a hot spot, reporting almost 30,000 new coronavirus infections a day on average. However, in order to avoid repeating last year's exodus of migrant workers from cities to their home villages, continuous process industries, including auto factories, were exempted from lockdown rules. [The New York Times]

Renault-Nissan, Ford India, and Hyundai Motor India are among more than a dozen major automakers in Chennai that had to suspend their factory operations last week after workers protested or went on strike. The workers argued their safety should not be compromised to meet production targets. They also challenged the state's decision to exempt the auto industry from local lockdown rules.

Japanese car manufacturer Nissan, which owns a majority state in the plant, denied the allegations in court, saying it follows all guidelines. The court filing shows the company has pending export orders of about 35,000 vehicles for the May-October period, plus another 45,000 pending domestic bookings, both of which if not fulfilled could lead to penalties and loss of business.

Nepal: Supreme Court hears 30 writ petitions challenging dissolution of parliament's lower house

(lm) Nepal's Supreme Court (SC) on May 28 begun hearing 30 writ petitions filed against the dissolution of the lower house of parliament. Legal experts estimate that the judiciary may take anywhere from a few weeks to several months to reach a verdict. [The Himalayan Times 1] [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Nepal's President Bidya Devi Bhandari on May 22 dissolved the parliament and scheduled snap elections, prompting court challenges and nationwide protests [see AiR No. 21, May/2021, 4]. 146 lawmakers, including 23 from Prime Minister Oli's ruling party, filed a petition with the apex court three days thereafter, calling for the immediate restoration of Parliament, with Nepali Congress (NC) leader, Sher Bahadur Deuba, as the new prime minister.

On May 30, the third day of the hearings, Nepal's chief justice agreed to take a decision on the five-member bench's composition, after lawyers representing the petitioners had questioned the bench's impartiality. [The Himalayan Times 1] [The Kathmandu Post 1]

This is the second time in less than six months that the SC negotiates the constitutional validity of the dissolution of parliament's lower house. Earlier in February, the apex court initially ordered the reinstatement of the country's parliament, overturning Prime Minister Oli's decision from December of last year to dissolve the House of Representatives. [AiR No. 9, March/2021, 1]

Nepal: Communist Party of PM Oli to face another split

(lm) Caretaker Prime Minister Oli is likely to face another split in his ruling Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) (CPN-UML), as a faction of the party is preparing to register a party of their own. [Deutsche Welle] [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Since last year, lawmakers close to CPN-UML senior leader Madhav Kumar Nepal have been accusing Prime Minister and party chairman Oli of authoritarianism and sidelining them when making decisions and appointing members to key commissions and watchdog bodies. During a meeting on earlier this month, however, both leaders had agreed to form a 10-member taskforce to iron out their differences [see AiR No. 20, May/2021, 3].

But on May 22, preceding President Bidya Devi Bhandari's decision to dissolve the parliament and schedule snap elections [see AiR No. 21, May/2021, 4],

the group threw its weight behind opposition leader Sher Bahadur Deuba's claim to lead the country. Three days thereafter, then, the 23 lawmakers were among the more than 140, who gathered at the Supreme Court with a signed petition calling for the formation of a government under the leadership of opposition leader Deuba. [see article above]. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

In response, during a meeting of the party's Standing Committee the same day, the Oli-led faction decided to oust eleven of the lawmakers from the CPN-UML, including Nepal, while seeking disciplinary action against another 12. [Online Khabar]

Nepal: Two journalists summoned by Supreme Court administration

(lm) The administration of Nepal's Supreme Court is facing criticism after it summoned two journalists and pressured them to disclose their sources and apologize for the publication of a story about an alleged meeting on May 24 between Prime Minister Oli and the chief justice. [Amnesty International]

At the time, the Supreme Court was gearing up to hear writ petitions filed against President Bidya Devi Bhandari's to dissolve the parliament and schedule snap elections. Prior to summoning the two editors, the SC issued a statement refuting the reports and warning of legal action if the misleading news was not corrected. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Faction of People's Socialist Party meets with Prime Minister Oli, seeks ordinance to split party

(lm) The third-largest party in Nepal's House of Representatives, the People's Socialist Party, Nepal, (PSP-N), appears to be on the brink of a split, as a factional feud in the party continues to intensify following the dissolution of parliament's lower house earlier this month.

The PSP-N was formed in 2020 through the merger of the two key Madhesh based parties in Nepal, the Samajbadi Party, Nepal (SPN) and the Rastriya Janata Party Nepal (RJPN). Importantly, both factions have divergent views on whether the PSP-N should support the KP Sharma Oli-led government or help opposition parties form a new coalition government.

The dispute reached a climax when the faction led by former SPN leaders Baburam Bhattarai and Upendra Yadav supported a petition filed with the Supreme Court that called for the formation of a government under the leadership of opposition leader Sher Bahadur Deuba. [The Himalayan Times 1] [see article in this edition]

Against this backdrop, factional leaders Mahanta Thakur and Rajendra Mahato met with Prime Minister Oli on May 31, urging him to introduce an ordinance that would pave the way for splitting the PSP-N. [Khabarhub] [The Himalayan Times 2]

Importantly, while the Thakur-Mahato faction controls most PSP-N lawmakers in the House, it is in a minority in the party's Central Committee. Thus, the Thakur-Mahato faction has so far not been able to secure an official decision from the PSP-N to join an Oli-led government. Further, the Political Parties Act requires a faction to secure at least 40 percent support in both the party's parliamentary group and central committee to split a party.

But the prime minister rejected the idea, mindful that the law could potentially backfire on his own party, where factional leader Madhav Kumar Nepal is seeking to register a party of his own. [The Kathmandu Post] [see article in this edition]

Sri Lanka: Lankans express fears of Chinese cultural hegemony, as mandarin replaces Tamil on sign boards

(lm) Sri Lankans have begun expressing fears of China silently imposing its cultural hegemony on the island nation, after two back-to-back incidents in which Mandarin replaced Tamil on signs related to government projects. [Swarajya]

Sri Lanka's Attorney General's Department on Saturday removed a plaque at a recently opened library on its premises following a social media uproar over the omission of Tamil, an official language, while including Mandarin in the text. The incident came a week after a Sri Lankan lawmaker shared on Twitter an image a sign board of the "Central Park" project coming up at the China-backed Colombo Port City, with text in Sinhala, English and Mandarin. [The Hindu]

Law and Politics in Southeast Asia

Indonesia: Papua heats up as counter-terrorist special ops nabs 10 suspected terrorists

(sa) Densus 88, the National Police's counterterrorism squad, arrested 10 suspected would-be suicide bombers in Indonesia's Papua on Friday, 28th. According to Adjunct Senior Commissioner Untung Sangaji, chief of the Merauke district police, the suspects had planned to bomb multiple churches in Merauke, Jagebok, Kurik, Semangga, and Tanah Miring. [Antaranews]

Densus 88 is the result of a long-term collaboration between Australia, the US, and Indonesia in building up the counter-terrorism capacity of Indonesia following the 2002 Bali attacks. The unit receives funding and training from the Australian and American governments. [The Conversation]

Such events come in the wake of broader developments as the Indonesian state seeks to crack down on terrorist activities in Papua. Earlier last month, the state declared certain armed criminal groups, namely Papuan separatists, as terrorists following their assassination on the Indonesian Armed Forces' provincial intelligence chief (AiR No. 18, May/2021 1).

However, greater troop influx into the region has stoked human rights fears as the UN has received reports of excessive force, including “extrajudicial killings, harassment, arbitrary arrests, and detention of indigenous Papuans” according to UN High

Commissioner for Human Rights Ravina Shamdasani. [Reuters]

Malaysia: Head of public transport operator sacked after response to major train crash

(tcy) Prasarana Malaysia Berhad, Malaysia's public transport operator, has fired its chairman Datuk Seri Tajuddin Abdul Raman amid outcry over his response to a train accident on 24 May that injured more than 200 people. [Bernama 1].

The public has slammed Tajuddin for his unprofessional conduct during the press conference, where he breached standard operating procedures by failing to wear a mask, appeared to joke about the collision, and also mocked and berated a foreign reporter. The Malaysian Public Transport Users Association (4PAM) also criticized Tajuddin for his apparent disregard towards the issue after he failed to promptly visit the accident site, and called his conduct at the press conference "nothing short of rude and disgusting". [Malay Mail 2] Prior to official news of his termination, a petition calling for Tajuddin's resignation garnered 100,000 signatures in less than 24 hours. [Malay Mail 3]

It was also announced that the former Prasarana chairman was detained by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) on two charges of abuse of power, though details of the charges are not immediately disclosed. [Malay Mail 4]

Malaysia: Total lockdown to be imposed amidst simmering anger over government's pandemic management

(tcy) Despite a state of emergency imposed in January, Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin's government has been struggling to rein in the wave of infections as daily infections and deaths hit a record high in the past week, straining the healthcare system and triggering public criticism. Authorities have been blamed for not imposing tougher curbs and taking stronger action against lockdown violations. The vaccination campaign that was launched in February has also sparked accusations that some recipients received lower doses than needed. Twitter users have taken to using the hashtags #KerajaanGagal ("Failed Government") and

#KerajaanBodoh ("Stupid Government") to voice their anger. [Malay Mail 1]

To decisively combat the spread of COVID-19, the Prime Minister's Office has announced that a total lockdown will be imposed on all sectors nationwide for 14 days beginning June 1, a step up from the current movement control order (MCO 3.0) that bars social activities while almost all economic sectors are allowed to operate. [Bernama 1]

Previously, Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin defended the government's decision of not implementing a full-scale lockdown as the first movement control order (MCO 1.0) implemented on March 18 last year almost led to a total economic collapse. [Malay Mail 1] However, the soaring case numbers have led to the Johor Sultan and industry leaders such as the Malaysian Inbound Tourism Association making repeated calls for a total lockdown to stem the surge. [Malay Mail 2] [TTG Asia]

Amidst the escalating situation, there have also been repeated calls for the Perikatan Nasional (PN) government to reconvene Parliament and address the COVID-19 situation. Dewan Rakyat (People's Assembly, the lower house of the Parliament) Deputy Speaker Datuk Seri Azalina Othman Said made calls for the government to reinstate democratic processes so as to re-establish public confidence, citing the vaccination hesitancy in many states as an indicator of public mistrust. [Malay Mail 2] The Johor Pakatan Harapan coalition similarly urged the government to end the Emergency and allow both Parliament and the state legislative assemblies to convene. [Malay Mail 3] UMNO has even offered to withdraw support for the PN government, which would cost the ruling coalition its majority in Parliament, so as to enable the King to take control and end the Emergency against Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin's advice. [Malay Mail 4]

Parliament has not been convened since December last year, after the King declared a nationwide state of Emergency on the advice of Muhyiddin, suspending Parliament at least until the Emergency ends on August 1. [see also AIR No. 21, May/2021, 4]

Myanmar: Tribunal orders 20-year jail term for torching Chinese-financed factories

(lf) A military tribunal has sentenced 28 people to 20 years in jail with hard labour for torching two factories during unrest in the city of Yangon in March. During the unrest in the city's suburb area, a total of 32 Chinese-invested factories were vandalised, with property losses reaching $36.9 million. [Reuters]

Myanmar: US journalist detained

(lf) A US journalist working as managing editor for media outlet *Frontier Myanmar* was detained by local authorities on May 24 as he tried to board a flight out of the country. The news organization said the journalist had been transferred to Insein Prison – one of Myanmar's most notorious prisons – known for its deplorable conditions. [CNN]

He is the fourth international journalist who has been arrested. [Reuters]

Philippines to investigate police liability for suspects' deaths during Duterte's admin

(lp) The Philippine National Police (PNP) allowed the Department of Justice (DOJ) to review only 61 cases where police officers involved have reportedly been found administratively and criminally liable for murder. While Vice President Leni Robredo lauded this move, the National Union of People's Lawyers (NUPL) and Human Rights Watch distrusted it because it allegedly cherry-picks too few cases amongst the much-greater number of almost eight thousand deaths in official law enforcement operations. Such cherry-picking or tokenism was also performed in the DOJ review that covered only 328 cases where the PNP did not follow protocol or examined cops' weapons after they killed allegedly armed suspects resisting arrest. [Manila Bulletin] [Rappler]

Meanwhile, two elderly consultants to the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) were killed in separate incidents. Their deaths increases the number of NDFP consultants killed to six since peace talks between the Front – a coalition of revolutionary social and economic justice

organizations, agricultural and trade unions, indigenous rights groups, leftist political parties, and other related groups – with President Duterte collapsed in 2017. [Inquirer.net]

Singapore: MAS appoints finance minister as deputy chair of its board, fuels speculations on next PM

(tcy) Finance Minister Lawrence Wong has been appointed Deputy Chairman of the Board of Directors of Singapore's central bank and financial regulatory authority, the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS). He will serve as a member of the board for a term of three years starting on June 1, replacing incumbent Health Minister Ong Ye Kung, who has been a board member since August 2016. [Monetary Authority of Singapore] [The Straits Times]

Wong, who was given the finance portfolio in a recent Cabinet reshuffle [see AiR No. 17, April/2021, 4], also serves as the co-chairman of the multi-ministry task force in charge of the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore. This is the second time he has been appointed to the MAS's Board, after he first served from June 2011 to August 2016.

Both Wong and Ong are seen as possible future prime ministers, after incumbent Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat's recent announcement to step aside as leader of the fourth generation of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) [see AiR No. 15, April/2021, 2]. [The Business Times] [Mothership.sg]

Thailand: Rights NGO calls on government to drop politically motivated charges against children

(pr) International rights watchdog Human Rights Watch (HRW) has called on Thai authorities to immediately and unconditionally drop politically motivated charges – including lèse majesté - against children. The statement came against the backdrop of an indictment of a 17-year-old for royal defamation charges related to a speech at a pro-democracy rally in December of last year.

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha ordered authorities to resume lèse majesté prosecutions last November, after pro-democracy protesters had begun openly criticizing the royal institution - once a taboo subject in Thailand. Since then, at least 82 people have been charged with royal defamation in relation to various activities at pro-democracy rallies or comments on

social media. Six of them are children, aged 18 or younger.

Further, at least 41 children have been charged with violating the Emergency Decree, among others, after they had participated in public rallies or otherwise taking part in activities to demand democratic reforms. [Human Rights Watch]

Thailand: Court approves bail request for three key protest leaders

(lm) Thailand's Criminal Court on June 1 approved bail requests for temporary release of two prominent pro-democracy activists on condition that they refrain from activities deemed to defame the monarchy. Human rights lawyer Arnon Nampa and activist Panupong "Mike" Jadnok were released after posting a $6,500 bail bond each. Both must also wear electronic tracking tags and are banned from leaving the country. [The Straits Times]

They have been held in pre-trial detention under Thailand's lèse majesté law which protects the monarchy from criticism. During their detention, both contracted COVID-19 and were sent to the prison hospital for treatment [see AiR No. 19, May/2021, 2]. Several previous applications for bail by the activists were denied [see AiR No. 7, February/2021, 3].

A third protester held on lèse majesté charges, Chukiat "Justin" Saengwong, was also granted bail on June 1 but will remain in detention because he is facing similar charges in two other courts.

In related news, a pro-democracy protestor, who already faced a royal defamation charge [see AiR: No. 19, May/2021, 2], has reported to police for another lèse-majesté charge. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Court of Justice investigates Toyota judicial bribery claims

(pr/lm) Thailand's Court of Justice has set up a 10-member panel to investigate claims that the local subsidiary of car manufacturer Toyota may have bribed sitting judges on the country's Supreme Court. [Bangkok Post 1]

Earlier last week, legal news service Laws360 reported that federal prosecutors in the United States had

impaneled a grand jury in the Northern District of Texas as part of ongoing investigations by US agencies, following a report that detailed the carmaker's internal corruption probe and an ongoing investigation by US law enforcement. [Law360 1]

The probe followed a public filing in earlier in March in which Toyota revealed that it had reported "possible anti-bribery violations" related to its Thai subsidiary, Toyota Motor Thailand (TMT) to the US Department of Justice and US Securities and Exchange Commission in April of last year. The two agencies enforce the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, a law that prohibits companies from paying bribes to foreign public officials.

Before informing US authorities, Toyota had launched an internal investigation, which later suggested that consultants hired TMT may have funneled bribes through a private Thai law firm to Supreme Court judges in an effort to overturn a still-pending $350 million tax dispute. The report included the names of two former presidents of Thailand's apex court who remain sitting senior judges, a former president of the Court of Appeal and three former top attorneys at TMT. [Law360 2]

All three senior judges mentioned in the news report said they would file a complaint with police to take legal action against those who mentioned them by name or shared the article on social media. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Prime Minister Prayut defends defense spending during first reading of fiscal bill

(lm) Parliament started debate on May 31 on a budget bill that projects a bigger $22.41 billion deficit for the 2022 fiscal year starting October 1, as a third wave of COVID-19 infections has clouded the outlook for the tourism-dependent country. The 2022 budget bill will have several readings in Parliament before being submitted to the Senate for approval.

Parliament's lower house kicked off its new session this week after a decree authorizing the Finance Ministry to the Finance Ministry to borrow an additional $15.9 billion until September next year was published in the Royal Gazette May 25 [see AiR No. 21, May/2021, 4]. [see article below]

The budget projects spending of $99.23 billion, down about 5.7 percent as compared to the previous fiscal

year. The gap comes from lower tax revenue, expected at about $77 billion. In the initial reading of the 2022 budget bill, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha – who is also the country's defence minister – defended the Defence Ministry's share of the budget for the upcoming fiscal year, after opposition lawmakers slammed the figure as unusually high when compared to allocations for health care. [Bangkok Post 1]

In the run-up to the session, opposition Pheu Thai Party announced it would vote against the bill and urged constituent parties of the government coalition to follow suit in a bid to sink the government. Observers believe the remarks were a tangential reference to the Bhumjaithai Party, the biggest party in the coalition government, whose chairman, Minister of Public, Health Anutin Charnvirakul, was left out of the government committee tasked with COVID-19 vaccine procurement. [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: Emergency loan decree likely to be tabled in Parliament next week

(pr) An executive decree allowing the Finance Ministry to borrow an additional $15.9 billion until September next year is likely to be tabled in Parliament next week, following on the debate on the fiscal budget bill. The decree was published in the Government Gazette last week, at a time when the finance ministry has almost completely exhausted a 1-trillion baht stimulus package authorized by the Senate in June of last year [see AiR No. 21, May/2021, 4].

A former finance minister petitioned the Supreme Administrative Court last week asking it to revoke the cabinet's approval for the decree. In response, Deputy Prime Minister Wissanu Krea-ngam has defended the decree, saying that the Administrative Court had no jurisdiction over the petition, for the decree already became effective. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Echoing concerns by the former finance minister, opposition Pheu Thai Party also called on the government to divide the loan into one executive decree authorized by the cabinet and multiple loan bills to be scrutinized by parliament for the sake of transparency.

Thailand: Authorities consider linking social media accounts with ID cards to combat illicit content

(lm) Security agencies and the Ministry for Digital Economy and Society (MDES) in the early stages of preparing a draft regulation that would link users' registration on online platforms with their ID cards. The move is meant to limit the dissemination of false information and illicit content, while also support e-commerce activities on social media platforms. The new regulation would be likely be added to the 2007 Computer Crimes Act, the key legislation used by Thai authorities to limit the dissemination of false information. [Bangkok Post]

At present, registration for social media platforms in Thailand requires an e-mail address and a telephone number, with all mobile phone numbers - both prepaid and postpaid systems - registered with ID cards or passports.

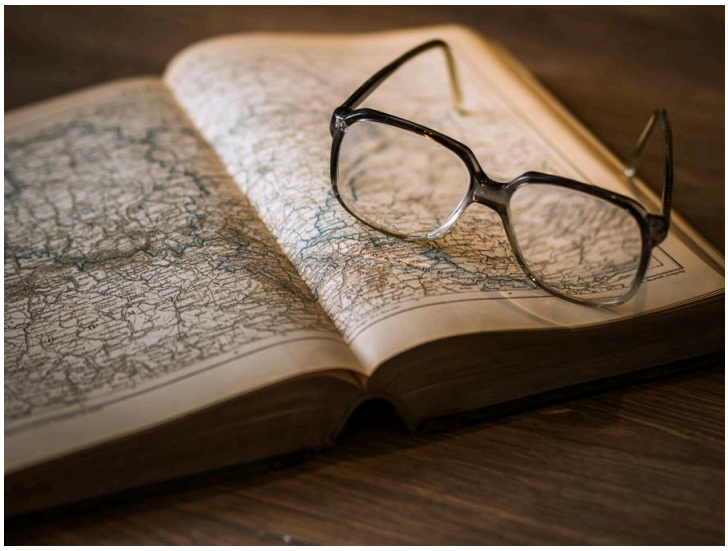
Thailand: Law Proposal by Public Act enters into force

(pr) Eligible voters are from now on able to petition the House of Representatives to propose new laws amendments to existing legislation and the constitution with regard to their rights and freedoms, and state duties. To propose a bill or law amendment under the new regulations, at least 10,000 signatures are required, while a constitutional amendment proposal requires at least 50,000 signatures. [The Nation Thailand] [Matichon, in Thai]

Thailand: Media figure charged for defamation of Prime Minister Prayut

(pr) A prominent TV show host last week reported to police after being summoned on charges filed by the Prime Minister's Office, which accuse the man of defaming Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha in two social media posts last year. [Bangkok Post]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia



China-US trade relations: First trade talk under Biden administration, ban on seafood of an entire Chinese fishing fleet

(dql) Amid tense Sino-US relations, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai and Chinese Vice Premier Liu He, the two countries' top trade negotiators, held their first telephone talk since US President Joe Biden assumed office. Statements, published after the conversation, confirm that the exchange was "candid and constructive", with both sides stressing the importance of improving Sino-US trade relations. In a separate remark, Tai, however, confirmed that the US still is confronted with "very large challenges" in its trade and economic relationship with China that require the Biden administration's attention across the board.

The previous time the two sides' top trade negotiators talked was in August during Donald Trump's presidency after the US and China signed a partial trade deal in January 2020.

The Biden administration is currently reviewing all available options for enforcing the trade agreement when Washington vowed to cut some tariffs in exchange for China committing to buy an additional 200 billion USD worth of American goods and services over the following two years, compared with 2017 levels. [South China Morning Post]

In a separate development, the US Customs and Border Protection has imposed a new import ban on seafood from an entire Chinese fishing vessels fleet. The ban against Dalian Ocean Fishing Co., Ltd., a fishing company based in Dalian, a port city near China's border with North Korea, comes after a year-long investigation revealed what US officials described as signs of forced labor within the fleet's operations,

"including physical violence, withholding of wages, and abusive working and living conditions." [NPR]

China: Xi Jinping pushes for massive investments in science and technology to prepare for global power rivalry

(dql) In a speech on the occasion of China's national day for science and research on Sunday, Chinese President Xi Jinping called on the country's scientists to be prepared for "unprecedented" scientific and technological competition, which he described as "the main battleground" of global power rivalry. Xi added that the country needed to speed up its efforts to eliminate technological barriers to breakthroughs in core areas including artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum technology, life science and energy. He also pledged to increase investment in science and innovation and to reduce red tape for scientists and grant them greater autonomy. [South China Morning Post]

Xi call comes shortly after the US Senate voted to advance a massive package of legislation aimed at boosting the country's ability to compete with Chinese technology. The US Innovation and Competition Act of 2021 would authorize some 190 billion US to strengthen U.S. technology in general, and 54 billion USD specifically to increase production of semiconductors, microchips and telecommunication equipment. [Reuters]

China-US relations: Biden orders new inquiry into Covid-19 origin

(dql) In a move likely to further heighten Sino-US tensions, US President Joe Biden last week ordered US intelligence agencies to follow up with an investigation into the origins of the coronavirus after receiving a report, requested in March, earlier this month. In the related statement, Biden said that the US Intelligence Community has not reached a definitive conclusion whether virus was accidentally leaked from a lab or transmitted by an animal to humans outside a lab. [White House, USA]

It also follows criticism of a report delivered by an international team of experts of the World Health Organization that largely dismissed the possibility that the virus had accidentally escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. [New York Times]

In response to the order, China's Foreign Ministry accused the US of "us[ing] the pandemic to pursue stigmatisation, political manipulation and blame shifting," and of being "disrespectful to science, irresponsible to people's lives and counter-productive to the concerted efforts to fight the virus." [BBC]

China-Australia relations: Chinese Defense Ministry accuses Canberra of fomenting confrontation over Taiwan

(dql) Already strained Sino-Australian relations have been further complicated after China's Defense Ministry has labelled the Australian government's warnings on the threat of war over Taiwan as irresponsible and accused it of inciting confrontation over the island.

The comment comes in response to a flurry of warnings from Australian leaders in April and May, including Home Affairs Secretary Michael Pezzullo whose remark that "the drums of war" are beating have been widely interpreted as referring to the situation in the Taiwan Strait. They were followed by Defense Minister Peter Dutton who warned not to discount the possibility of conflict. [Sydney Morning Herald]

Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, meanwhile, called on countries to unite against China's growing economic and geopolitical coercion. Otherwise, they could risk being singled out and punished by Beijing. [BBC]

Confucius Institutes at Australian universities the next casualties in strained China-Australia relations?

(dql) The Australian government is considering whether the Confucius Institutes are compatible with a foreign policy increasingly wary of Beijing. As part of a system enabling Canberra to vet agreements between foreign governments and subnational bodies, 13 Australian universities are given time until June 10 to submit their contracts to host the Confucius Institutes. Under a law passed last year, Australia's foreign minister is authorized to terminate those agreements in case they are deemed undermine the federal

government's policy towards China. [Sydney Morning Herald]

Confucius Institutes have been a source of international controversy in recent years, with critics claiming the institutes are used by the Chinese Communist Party as Trojan horses to spread propaganda across the world.

China-UK relations: Phone talk between foreign ministers hardens differences on human rights issues

(dql) In a phone call with his British counterpart Dominic Raab, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reaffirmed that China stands ready to discuss with Britain "sensitive issues", but also called on the British government to "respect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity." Wang defended Beijing's Hong Kong and Xinjiang policies as necessary to safeguard the city's stability and its "one country, two systems" model of semi-autonomy, and to combat separatism and violence, respectively.

He urged both sides to cooperate in addressing global challenges, adding that trade ties between the countries demonstrated their "potential and resilience", with China replacing Germany the UK's largest goods trading partner in the first quarter of the year.

Raab, on his side, reiterated Britain's concerns over the situation in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, demanding that Beijing provides UN human rights experts with "unfettered access" to Xinjiang. [South China Morning Post]

China-Europe relations: Foreign Minister Wang Yi holds talks with counterparts from Serbia, Hungary, Ireland and Poland

(dql) Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi past weekend met with his Serbian, Hungarian, Irish and Polish counterparts Nikola Selakovic, Peter Szijjarto, Zbigniew Rau and Simon Coveney to discuss bilateral relations. The meetings signal China's efforts to push for a stabilization Sino-European relations after tensions between Beijing and the European Union over tit-for-tat sanctions over accusations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang, the European Parliament's suspension of

debates on the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) as well as Lithuania's withdrawal from the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries.

Wrapping up the talks, Wang confirmed that all ministers agreed to "pay attention to and calmly reflect on the current difficulties in China-Europe relations," adding that the China's successful cooperation with these four countries serves a "real models" to make policymakers in Europe review their own policies on China. [Global Times]

Echoing this, Serbian Foreign Minister Nikola Selakovic in a separate interview with Chinese state media, reassured that his country won't impose any sanctions against China arguing that "Serbia is a militarily neutral country. Serbia unlike some other states, which are on the European path, won't ruin its relations and has great relations with China [...]." Rejecting accusations of China using vaccine diplomacy to expand its international influence, Selakovic described China's distribution of vaccines as "an issue of humanity and an issue of saving people's lives." [South China Morning Post 1]

Serbia, which is expected to finalize negotiations on its accession to the European Union in 2024, so far has vaccinated 45.3% of its adult population with Sinopharm vaccines and received last week the final batch COVID-19 vaccines from China. [Xinhua]

Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto, meanwhile, announced after speaking with Wang that Hungary would open a planned vaccine plant in Debrecen. His statement came at the heels of the Hungarian government's announcement of plans to produce the Chinese-developed Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine locally. [Deutsche Welle]

Hungary is the only EU member state that has authorized and deployed Russian and Chinese shots before approval by the EU drugs regulator. In April, Chinese shipments to Hungary surpassed 2 million vaccine doses as part of a contract under which Hungary will import 5 million doses from China. [Reuters]

For Poland, Zbigniew Rau confirmed that his country would make active efforts to support the development of healthy EU-China relations, adding that Warsaw welcomes Chinese investment and would not adopt discriminatory measures against its companies. [Bloomberg]

Coveney, finally, agreed with Wang to deepen economic and social relations in various fields including technological innovation, high-quality agriculture, higher education and cultural industries. Ireland is one of the few member states of the EU which has been able to maintain a trade surplus with China. On the EU-China investment deal, Coveney expressed his conviction that it "serves the common interests," and urged both sides to "overcome the current difficulties through candid dialogues." [South China Morning Post 2] [Foreign Ministry, China]

In a separate conversation with French Minister Delegate for foreign trade Franck Riester, Chinese Commerce Minister Wang Wentai called on France to help reinstate discussions on the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) after the European Parliament voted last week to freeze talks until Chinese sanctions on European lawmakers were dropped. [South China Morning Post 2]

China-Russia relations continue to deepen

(dql) During the latest round of the Sino-Russia strategic security consultations last week, held in Moscow and attended by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, both countries reaffirmed their commitment to strengthen their strategic relations, with Russian President Vladimir Putin reassuring that relations between the two countries are "the best in history". [South China Morning Post 2]

In an earlier development, Russian state-run space agency Roscosmos announced that it will incorporate a Chinese superheavy launcher into its home-grown manned spacecraft for future moon-landing missions. Along the with the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the joint construction of an autonomous lunar permanent research base, signed in March between the China National Space Administration (CNSA) and Roscosmos, the announcement reflects the growing Sino-Russian space cooperation. [South China Morning Post 2] [The Diplomat]

Cross-strait relations: Taiwan accuses China of obstructing purchase of German vaccine

(dql) Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen has accused China of being instrumental in preventing Taiwan signing a deal to purchase Covid-19 vaccines from

German firm BioNTech. Shanghai Fosun Pharmaceutical Group signed a deal with BioNTech last year to supply its vaccines to mainland China, and in March offered to supply some of those doses to Taiwan. Under the deal, Fosun was given the exclusive rights to develop and commercialize the vaccines in mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. [The Guardian]

Taiwan-US relations: Congressmen introduce "Taiwan Diplomatic Review Act

(dql) In a move aimed to strengthen relations between the US and Taiwan, US lawmakers of both parties have introduced the "Taiwan Diplomatic Review Act" to rename the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO), Taiwan's representative office in the US, to "Taiwan Representative Office." It also calls for creating diplomatic visas for Taiwanese diplomats serving in the US. So far, Taiwan's officials and diplomatic representatives reside on investor visas. [Taiwan English News]

Meanwhile, Joseph Young, chargé d'affaires ad interim at the US Embassy in Tokyo, on Monday visited the official residence of his Taiwanese counterpart. It was the first such visit since formal ties between the US and Taiwan were severed in 1979 and internal restrictions on interactions by US diplomats with their Taiwanese counterparts were put in place. However, these restrictions were lifted in January by then-US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. [Focus Taiwan]

US to help Taiwan prepare for irregular war?

(dql) Christopher Maier, the nominee for United States assistant secretary of defence for special operations and low-intensity conflict, has floated the idea of the US assisting Taiwan in strengthening its ability to fight an irregular war against China. In a hearing in the Senate Armed Services Committee, Maier argued that special operators could help Taiwanese troops increase their skills in order to, for example, counteract potential enemy amphibious landings, stressing that information operations were a core area in which special operators could help conventional forces deter an aggression from China. [Military.com]

Japan-US relations: Strengthening security alliance against China

(dql) Adm. John Aquilino met with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga in Tokyo on his first overseas trip in his new capacity of the new commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command. During the meeting both affirmed their countries' strong opposition to China's unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the Indo-Pacific region. Aquilino and Suga further agreed to strengthen the Japan-US security alliance and pursue a free and open Indo-Pacific together.

In a separate conversation with Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi, he affirmed the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. [Kyodo News]

Japan, EU share concerns over Taiwan

(dql) Japan and the European Union have agreed on a joint position with regards to Taiwan. In the joint statement following the virtually held 27th EU-Japan Summit last week both sides reaffirmed "the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait," and their commitment to "the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues." [European Council]

The reference to Taiwan was the first in a statement from the leaders of Japan and EU. It follows similar wording in a joint statement issued after Suga's meeting with US President Joe Biden in April.

Inter-Korean ties: North Korea breaks silence on Moon-Biden summit, warning of arms race

(nm) North Korea has broken its silence on the May 21 Biden-Moon summit this week, criticizing the US decision to lift restrictions on South Korea's ability to build ballistic missiles and warning of an arms race on the Korean Peninsula. After having lifted the payload limit on South Korean missiles in a prior decision, Biden and Moon had used the summit to announce the termination of the so-called missile guidelines which had been limiting the range of South Korean missiles to 800 km. Some observers believe support for Seoul's military capabilities is part of US efforts to effectively counter China in the region. The statements

published by Korean state media were, however, attributed to "an international affairs critic," indicating that Pyongyang has yet to develop an official response. Some experts interpret this as leaving room open for dialogue with the US. [Korea Times 1]

The Biden administration had announced the completion of its North Korea policy review in April, saying that it would take a "calibrated" and "practical" approach, followed by the summit with Moon in which both sides stressed the need for diplomatic dialogue by building on the 2018 Singapore Agreement. South Korea has recently tried to build up its defense capabilities as the North had launched its first missile test in a year in March. A recent report by the US think tank 38 North also finds signs of ongoing activity at North Korea's Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center. [The New York Times 1] [SCMP] [38 North]

Following the lift, the South Korean Defense Ministry announced it would push to develop and diversify the nation's military systems, including investments in its space system. Last week, German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer also visited Seoul to declare Germany's support in terminating the arms race on the Korean Peninsula. Seoul's Unification Ministry, meanwhile, also said it would seek to restore communication and dialogue with the North, based on the conditions created by the summit [Korea Herald] [n-tv, German] [Korea Times 2]

For why the specific diplomatic route chosen by the US and South Korea may be miscalculated,
see this opinion piece in [New York Times 2].

If you are interested in a more detailed analysis of the US-South Korean alliance after the summit, see [The Diplomat] or [Council on Foreign Relations].

International climate summit: Global leaders commit to inclusive green recovery

(nm) South Korea hosted the mostly virtual two-day international climate summit P4G Seoul Summit this week, bringing together foreign leaders and international organizations to discuss inclusive green recovery and paths toward carbon neutrality. The summit was concluded by the Seoul Declaration in which participating parties committed to limit temperature rise to well below 2 degrees Celsius in line with the Paris Agreement and to reduce dependency on coal-powered energy generation. It further

recognized the impact of the climate crisis on economic, social, security, and human-rights related issues.

P4G stands for the initiative Partnering for Green Growth and the Global Goals 2030 which seeks to find inclusive solutions to environmental challenges. This year's participants included representatives from the United States, the European Union, Thailand, the International Monetary Fund, and Denmark. Colombia plans to host the next summit in 2023. [Korea Times 1] [Korea Herald] [Yonhap]

Just before the summit, South Korea's President Moon Jae-in and Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen had also agreed to strengthen ties through a "comprehensive green strategic partnership," marking Seoul's first bilateral green partnership with another country. [Korea Times 2]

South Korea-Japan relations: Renewed tensions over islands trigger calls for Tokyo Olympics boycott

(nm) A national petition as well as prominent South Korean politicians are exerting pressure to boycott the Tokyo Olympics set to begin July 23, as Tokyo remains firm on the Korea-controlled Dokdo islets. An official map on the International Olympic Committee's website indicates the islets, which Japan claims and calls Takeshima, as part of Japan's territory, fuelling historic tensions over the disputed islands. The Korean Foreign Ministry has been urging Tokyo to delete the islets from the map altogether ever since they appeared as part of Japan's territory in July 2019, but Tokyo had responded only by making the dots less visible. Chung Eui-yong, Korea's foreign minister, indicated last week that Japan's "wrong behaviour" would not be tolerated, while former Prime Minister and leader of the ruling Democratic Party Lee Nak-yon also wrote that the government would "have to take stern measures by alle means possible, including the Olympic boycott." A petition calling for boycotting the Olympics should Tokyo not delete the islets from the map was signed by 32,000 people. [SCMP] [Korea Herald]

The dispute adds to existing tensions over historic wartime issues in relation to Japan's colonisation of the Korean peninsula and trade issues.

Pakistan rejects speculation about presence of US military or airbase on its soil

(ra) Pakistan's foreign minister has again dismissed the possibility of allowing the United States to operate military bases on Pakistani territory as a base for troops or as a staging point for future counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan, amidst warning by the Afghan Taliban that such an agreement would be "a great and historic mistake". [Geo TV] [Voice of America]

US presence in Afghanistan is set to come to an end by September 11 and Washington is trying to develop options to offset the loss of American combat boots on the ground, and is looking into housing military personnel and assets on bases in neighboring countries. But more than three weeks into the US withdrawal, efforts to get Afghanistan's neighbors, most notably Pakistan, to do more appear to have taken on renewed urgency in recent days.

For Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi delivered his remarks in the country's Senate a day after a phone conversation between Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa and US Defense Secretary Lloyd James Austin.

That conversation followed a meeting on May 23 between US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and his Pakistani counterpart, Moeed Yusuf [see AiR No. 21, May/2021, 4], one of the only known in-person, high-level meetings between the countries under the Biden administration. Both statements described discussions on a "range of bilateral, regional, and global issues of mutual interest."

To be sure, Pakistan is, on one level, a logical candidate: It borders Afghanistan and has agreed to US basing arrangements in the past. Moreover, with the Pentagon indicating that nothing has been ruled out, Islamabad's public denials should not necessarily be taken at face value.

Further, the historical record shows that while Islamabad has persistently criticized the United States' use of unmanned drones to attack militant hideouts in its mountainous border region, it has secretly allowed small groups of US Special Operations units to operate on its soil. [The Diplomat]

However, Russia is already busy trying to counter Washington's potential next moves in the region,

increasing its military support for its Central Asian neighbors. What is more, Russia's presidential envoy for Afghanistan said on May 24 that Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – both bordered by Afghanistan to their south – will not allow the US to establish military bases on their territories. [Asia Nikkei]

Moreover, COAS Bajwa and Moscow's ambassador to Pakistan met last week to discuss issues of mutual interests, amongst which is the Afghan Peace process. [The Express Tribune]

China-India border dispute: As snow thaws, could conflict reignite?

(ad/lm) As the snow melts in the Himalayan heights, analysts and military officials warn that the warmer weather could lead to renewed conflict between India and China, as both sides have resumed patrols into forward areas along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), while also strengthening logistics and adding infrastructure along the de facto border. [South China Morning Post]

After several rounds of talks, both sides in February began withdrawing troops and artillery from their positions on the southern and northern banks of Pangong Lake. But China has shown no inclination to withdraw from the other newly occupied areas from Hot Springs, Gogra Post and the Depsang Plains in eastern Ladakh, which did not feature in the piecemeal disengagement process [see AiR No. 45, November/2020, 2]. The situation was best summarized by Indian Army chief General M.M. Naravane, who earlier this month said there had been "disengagement but no de-escalation" [see AiR No. 21, May/2021, 4].

India, on its part is poised to approve the construction of a new tunnel, which will allow all-weather access connecting the states of Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh [see AiR No. 21, May/2021, 4]. The army has also reportedly accelerated construction of all-weather outposts for additional troops to be deployed along the border.

China, in turn, has been seeking to strengthen its deterrent measures against India. Specifically, the Xinjiang Military District, which is part of the Western Theater Command, is receiving greater attention in terms of upgrades with new equipment, including combat vehicles and self-propelled rapid-fire mortars. According to observers, there is a good case to believe that China would prefer to maintain the status quo as

it is currently dealing with a range of geopolitical challenges, and thus does not want to open multiple battlefronts. [Asia Times] [The Diplomat]

China is gradually invading Bhutanese territory to gain military advantage over India, says report

(lm) A new report, published by *Foreign Policy*, has claimed that China has built a village eight kilometers within territory belonging to its Himalayan neighbor, Bhutan, as part of its move to expand and develop its infrastructure in the border regions of Tibet.

The new village is located in Bhutan's northern district of Lhuntse but has been marked as being part of Lhodrak in the Tibetan Administrative Region (TAR) by China. The report says that Beijing has been gradually and stealthily seizing chunks of lands from Bhutan for years, following a 2017 drive flagged off by Chinese President Xi Jinping to fortify the Tibetan borderlands. Thus, the researchers argue that China is following the same piecemeal, step-by-step approach in Bhutan it previously used in the South China Sea, that is, shifting the status quo without triggering a major conflict with its neighbors or the United States. [Foreign Policy]

China reportedly claims roughly 12 percent of Bhutan's territory – four areas in the west of Bhutan, three in the north, and one in the east – with no mutual understanding between the two nations on what constitutes the border. In July of last year Beijing for the first time publicly put on record that is has a border dispute with Bhutan over the country`s eastern sector, and – in a tangential reference to India – said that "a third party should not point fingers" in the Sino-Bhutan border dispute [see AiR No. 28, July/2020, 2]. During a four-day meeting of experts between China and Bhutan this April, then, the two sides agreed to resume long-delayed talks on their disputed boundary [see AiR No. 16, April/2021, 3].

Importantly, the report suggests does not actually need the land it is settling in Bhutan but rather is planning to use it as a security to force the Bhutanese government to cede other territory that may give it a military advantage in its struggle with India. [Bloomberg] [The EurAsian Times]

For China has tried building roads into Bhutan before —but mainly in its western areas and with limited success. In 2017, China's attempt to build a road across the Doklam plateau in southwestern Bhutan, next to

the trijunction with India, resulted in a 73-day military standoff between India and China. Consequently, China had to put its road construction through Doklam on hold. Back then, New Delhi - which has historically close ties and considerable influence over Bhutan - supported Thimphu's claims, in part because the area is close to the Siliguri corridor, a narrow stretch of land also known as the 'Chicken's Neck' that connects India's north-east with the mainland. [The Week]

In November of last year, then, an Indian media outlet reported that Beijing had set up a village more than two kilometers within Bhutanese territory and built a road in the same area. China denied the claim, but it is possible, as some analysts have speculated, that Bhutan had quietly ceded that territory to China but not announced it to the outside world. [AiR No. 48, December/2020, 1]

It is also possible that Beijing wants to use the territory as leverage to pressure Bhutan to open full relations with China, which would allow Beijing to have a diplomatic presence in Thimphu. This would offset India's influence in Bhutan, an aim that China has largely achieved in Nepal.

Indian foreign minister on week-long official visit in United States

(ad) Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar has spent the past week in the United States seeking help amid a devastating second wave of COVID-19 infections at home. While in Washington, Jaishankar met with top US officials, including Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Indo-Pacific Coordinator Kurt Campbell.

Jaishankar's meetings in Washington and New York mostly revolved around increasing vaccine manufacturing, and delivery, as well as an intellectual property rights waiver on vaccines, emphasizing an agreement reached during the inaugural Quadrilateral Security Dialogue leaders' summit in March [see AiR No. 11, March/2021, 3]. While the US administration under President Biden was initially slow to respond to New Delhi's catastrophic surge in infections, it has recently signed off of large COVID-19 relief packages to India and also plans to send vaccines.

While the current meetings have made it clear that battling COVID-19 is a top priority, observers see a broader strategy centered around China behind the pandemic cooperation between the US and India.

While India and the US work towards a global vaccine supply, they are faced with competition from China and Russia. Moreover, China's influence in the region continues to grow, a clear and imminent threat to both India and the US. [Foreign Policy]

India says Nepal's political developments are its 'internal matters'

(ad) India last week said recent political developments in Nepal, which resulted in President Bidya Devi Bhandari dissolving parliament and calling for fresh elections later this year, were "internal matters" of the Himalayan nation. New Delhi's distant attitude towards Kathmandu's deteriorating political situation comes off as a surprise, especially since India was seen competing with China over influence in the Himalayan nation. [The Wire]

Relations between the two countries have witnessed major ups and downs since Nepal's Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli came to power in 2018. His efforts to move Nepal closer to China while retaining ties with India did not go down well in New Delhi, and bilateral ties derailed in May of last year, after India had announced the inauguration of a new Himalayan link road built through the disputed area of Kalapani that lies at a strategic three-way junction with Tibet and China. But since last August, relations between India and Nepal were again improving with increasing diplomatic exchanges between the two nations [for a summary see AiR No. 2, January/2021, 2]

Is India's stance on Palestine changing?

(ad) India and Israel recently reached "a three-year work program agreement" to progress their agricultural cooperation. The cooperation assumes added significance, for it comes against the larger backdrop of both the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the farmers' protest across India. [The Indian Express]

Historically, India was one of Palestine's staunch supporters in the 1970s, as part of its anti-colonial solidarity following its independence from British rule in 1947. But bilateral ties between India and Israel have strengthened significantly in recent decades, especially under Indian Prime Minister Modi and his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu. [for a comprehensive summary, see The Wire 1]

Consequently, while Israel has recently faced global condemnation for its actions in occupied East Jerusalem and continued bombing of the Gaza Strip, it has found support in India where pro-government activists have thrown their weight behind Israel, including top members of Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). [Al Jazeera]

Moreover, India – currently a non-permanent member United Nations Security Council - abstained from the United Nations Human Rights Council's vote to set up a permanent commission to probe Israel's alleged human rights violations in the recent violence in Gaza. [The Wire 2]

Furthermore, the program agreement could have been a move to quell the farmers' protest and to demonstrate the Centre's work on the agriculture sector.

India-Pakistan relations dependent on status of Kashmir, says Pakistan PM Khan

(ad) The holding of the ceasefire between Indian and Pakistani armies along the Line of Control (LoC) in the disputed Kashmir valley for the last three months has contributed to a feeling of peace and security, according to Indian Army Chief General Naravane.

Calling the ceasefire "the first step in the long road to normalisation of bilateral relations" during an interview last week, the Indian army chief also stated that it is on Pakistan to prevent terror and hostility in order to engage in normal relations. [The Indian Express 1]

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan on May 30, however, ruled out the possibility of normalizing bilateral ties with India, saying such a move would be a betrayal to the Kashmiris. While he acknowledged that restoration of trade links with India would immensely benefit Pakistan's economy, the prime minister also said that stalled talks could be resumed only if New Delhi reverses its scrapping of the longstanding semi-autonomous status of Indian-administered Kashmir. [Al Jazeera]

New Bangladeshi passport fuels speculation over Israel ties

(lm) Bangladesh has removed the clause "except Israel" from its new e-passport, fueling debates on whether

the country might normalize ties with Israel and pave the way for Bangladeshi nationals to visit the Middle Eastern country. The government hadn't made any public comments on the change until two Bangladeshi nationals claimed two weeks ago they received passports with "this passport is valid for all countries of the world" written on them. [Deutsche Welle]

The timing of the change assumes added significance, coming on the heels of Israel's military assault on Gaza Stripe, which Bangladesh condemned. Like all Muslim-majority countries in South Asia, Bangladesh does not recognize Israel as a state and has kept citizens from visiting for decades.

In response, Bangladesh's Foreign Minister A.K. Abdul Momen said the move does not represent a change in policy and that the travel ban to Israel remains in place. He explained the change was "made to maintain the global standards," as no other country's passports feature the "except Israel" clause.

Pakistan, Egypt exchange views on expanding cooperation

(ra/lm) Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan last week held a phone conversation with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi during which both leaders exchanged views on expanding bilateral cooperation. Khan also appreciated the significant role played by Egypt for brokering an end to the 11-day conflict between Israel and Gaza-based Hamas that killed more than 250 people, mostly Palestinians, earlier this month. [Geo TV]

In related news, military forces of both countries on May 26 commenced the "Guardian of the Sky-1" joint air defense exercise, held to improve the experience-sharing and capacities of two countries' armed forces. [Anadolu Agency]

Both events come against the larger backdrop of deepening defense and security relations between Pakistan and Egypt.

During a visit to Cairo earlier in February, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Pakistan and Egypt have agreed to boost bilateral cooperation, particularly in the fields of economics. Qureshi's visit followed an invitation from his Egyptian counterpart, Sameh Shoukri, and came after meetings between President Al-Sisi and Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan. [AiR No. 8, February/2021, 4]

In March, then, a high-ranking Egyptian official visited Pakistan Ordnance Factories (POF), the largest state-owned defense contractor, and discussed the potential for military collaboration in a meeting with POF chairman Lieutenant General Ali Amir Awan. [Gulf News]

Pakistan delivers three JF-17 Thunder fighters to Nigeria

(lm) Nigeria's Air Force on May 20 officially took delivery of three Pakistan-made JF-17 Thunder fighter aircrafts during a ceremony marking the 57th anniversary of the branch. The fighters were handed over by Pakistan defense contractor Pakistan Aeronautical Complex, which constructed the aircraft and was responsible for their delivery. [The EurAsian Times]

The Nigerian acquisition of the JF-17 Thunder multi-role fighter jets is part of an ongoing fleet modernization program that includes the procurement of eight Russian-made Mi-35M attack helicopters and 12 A-29 Super Tucano close air support aircraft from the United States.

Myanmar military unilaterally declares ceasefire, as rise of civilian groups fuels fears of full-scaled civil war

(lf/lm) The Myanmar military announced on May 30 the extension of its non-operation period against ethnic armed groups to the end of June. The extension is meant to facilitate talks with the ethnic armed organizations to strengthen the peace process as envisioned under the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and aims for a peaceful reopening of schools on June 1. [Nikkei Asia] [Xinhua]

The announcement comes as fighting between Myanmar's military, the so-called Tatmadaw, and ethnic armed groups and anti-junta protesters continues to intensify, with communities increasingly taking up arms to protect themselves from a relentless campaign of military violence.

The number of internally displaced people in the country's northern Sagaing Region has reached about 20,000, after more than 1,500 residents from a village fled their homes following a raid by security forces on May 26. In eastern Kayah state, in turn, tens of

thousands of people have been displaced over the past week by intense fighting between the military, the newly formed Karenni People's Defence Force and the Karenni Army, an established ethnic armed group. [Myanmar Now] [The Irrawaddy 1] [The Irrawaddy 2]

At least 58 defense forces have formed across the country, of which 12 are active, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), a non-profit that tracks conflict. These groups are formed at a local level and are not necessarily officially linked to the NUG. Groups have revealed little about the nature of their training, but their resources and intensity vary.

One of the ethnic armed organizations (EAO), the Chin National Front, on May 29 signed an agreement with the National Unity Government (NUG), becoming the first EAO to take sides with the country's shadow government formed to topple the military regime. Importantly, the group – which represents the mainly Christian Chin minority in western Myanmar – is one of the eight EAOs that in 2015 signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement with the with the ousted National League for Democracy government. [Al Jazeera]

Another group, the Three Brotherhood Alliance, on May 31 launched an attack on security forces in a township in Myanmar's northern Shan state. Importantly, the tripartite alliance - comprising of the Arakan Army, Ta'ang National Liberation Army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army - was in the process of signing bilateral ceasefire agreements with the Myanmar military in the leadup to the coup on February 1 [see AiR No. 11, March/2021, 3]. The talks have collapsed since then. [The Irrawaddy 3]

Total, Chevron suspend payments to Myanmar junta from gas projects

(lf/lm) French oil and gas group Total and United States energy company Chevron have suspended cash distributions from a gas joint venture comprising of three foreign energy companies and state-owned energy producer Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), reflecting a shift in corporate dealings with the Myanmar's junta. [The Straits Times]

But the move suspends less than five percent of the military's overall gas revenues, which amounted to more than $3.3 billion in 2020, according to UN data. Neither does it affect the military's share of gas revenues, royalties from the country's gas field operations or taxes from the pipeline, which together

constitute the vast majority of payments to the junta facilitated by the foreign energy companies. International rights watchdogs, thus, urge governments and energy companies to take stronger action. [Human Rights Watch]

Specifically, the decision announced by Total and Chevron concerns a 15 percent dividend paid by a pipeline company, Moattama Gas Transportation Company (MGTC), from profits from transportation fees it earns from moving gas from Myanmar's offshore Yadana fields to power plants in Myanmar and Thailand.

Total is the biggest shareholder with 31.24 per cent, while Chevron holds 28 per cent. Thailand's state-owned gas company PTTEP and MOGE hold the remainder. Total acts as the "operator" of the Yadana wellheads and MGTC's pipeline infrastructure. The suspended payments are dividends to these companies based on their ownership share. [Nikkei Asia]

French daily newspaper *Le Monde* earlier this month published an article alleging that Myanmar's military has received hundreds of millions of dollars through a finance scheme linked to the Myanmar-Thailand pipeline. [Le Monde, in French]

So far, neither the United States nor European Union have imposed sanctions on MOGE, although they have targeted some military-owned conglomerates and businesses, as well as individuals linked to the junta. Indicating the effectiveness of these sanctions, recent reports suggest that the junta is seeking to auction off large quantities of illegal timber that had been seized by the government prior to the coup. [The Irrawaddy]

ASEAN member states want to drop proposed UN call for Myanmar arms embargo

(lf) All ASEAN member states, excluding Myanmar, have proposed watering down a UN General Assembly draft resolution on Myanmar, including removing a call for an arms embargo on the country, in a bid to win the unanimous support, "especially from all countries directly affected in the region". Observers believe that ASEAN member states are afraid sanctions would restrict the influence the bloc could have on Myanmar's military leadership. [The Straits Times]

The resolution was drafted at the request of Liechtenstein, with the support of 48 countries, including the United Kingdom, European Union and United States. A previous vote on the non-binding resolution scheduled for May 18 was postponed indefinitely, because of a lack of support from Asian countries in the region [see AiR No. 20, May/2021, 3].

While many western nations have put targeted sanctions on junta chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and a combined 38 senior figures and also black-listed military conglomerates, ASEAN nations have so far largely avoided measures that would hit the junta's finances.

The Myanmar junta in late April rebuffed a plan by ASEAN leaders to help end violence in the country, saying any "suggestions" would need to fit with its stated road map and come after "stability" is restored. Leaders of the nine countries, together with coup chief Min Aung Hlaing, had earlier appeared to reach a five-point "consensus" during a special summit that included an immediate cessation of violence and the appointment of a special emissary to mediate talks between all parties in Myanmar [see AiR No. 17, April/2021, 4].

Indonesia releases Iranian tanker

(sa) An Iranian-registered tanker, labelled MT Horse, had been released on Saturday. It was seized by Indonesia in January on the grounds of suspected illegal oil transfer. A court decision earlier last week had allowed the vessel to leave. [Reuters]

Indonesia pushes for seafarer welfare

In the ASEAN meeting "Intersessional Discussion on Covid 19: Responses of ASEAN Member States to Seafarer Access to Crew Change, Repatriation, and National Vaccination Programs" held virtually last week in Thailand, Indonesia reaffirmed its commitment to the wellbeing of seafarers.

Capt Hermanta, director of shipping and maritime affairs at the directorate general of sea transportation under the Ministry of Transportation, who led the Indonesian delegation, emphasized Indonesia's actions towards seafarers through assisting in crew changes, repatriation, as well as their future inclusion in Covid-19 vaccination.

He revealed that since April 24, 2020, Indonesia had helped 6,653 sailors through crew changes and "the return of 57,142 Indonesian migrant workers". Furthermore, as of May 6, 2021, a total of 8,123 vaccines had been administered with 1,487 seafarers receiving their second shot. The Indonesian Government planned to vaccinate a total of 15,000 seafarers by the end of the year.

The meeting was attended by nine other ASEAN countries, as well as dialogue partners China, Federation of ASEAN Shipowners Associations (FASA), and South Korea, and also the International Maritime Origination (IMO). [Tempo]

Malaysia, Russia discuss measures to strengthen relations in industry and trade

(tcy) In the inaugural meeting of the Working Group on Cooperation in Industry and Trade under the framework of the Joint Malaysia-Russia Commission for Economic, Scientific, Technical and Cultural Cooperation, the two countries discussed the way forward in strengthening bilateral economic relations. The Ministry of International Trade and Industry (Miti) said that 8 areas of cooperation were identified, namely aerospace, pharmaceutical and medical equipment, shipbuilding, innovation and IT technologies, oil and gas, chemical and power engineering equipment, commodities, halal, and food safety. Russian companies were also urged to leverage on Malaysia's strategic location in the heart of South-East Asia and the newly reformed investment agenda, the National Investment Aspirations for the promising ventures in Malaysia.

In addition to being amongst Malaysia's top 30 trading partner globally, Russia is also Malaysia's largest trading partner, exports destination and source of imports among the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a regional interngovernmental organization that was formed following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia to escalate trade dispute with EU to WTO over ban on palm oil

(tcy) Malaysia has requested for the establishment of a World Trade Organisation (WTO) panel to adjudicate on a trade dispute with the European Union and two member states. As the world's top two palm oil

producers, both Malaysia and Indonesia are separately contesting the EU's implementation of a renewable energy directive that restricts the use of palm-oil based biofuels. [Malay Mail 1]

The Council of Palm Oil Producing Countries' (CPOPC), of which Malaysia is a founding member, has criticized EU measures for conferring "unfair benefits" on other producers of biofuels, such as rapeseed, canola, and sunflower oil, and for violating the free trade principles outlined by the WTO. [Malay Mail 2] [CPOPC]

Malaysia: Eight Abu Sayyaf group members handed over to the Philippine authorities

(tcy) On May 28, Malaysian security forces handed the eight members of the Abu Sayyaf group previously detained in Beaufort on May 8 over to the Philippine security forces. The detainees include a 'sub-leader' in the Abu Sayyaf group wanted by the Philippine security forces. The Sabah police commissioner said that security and intelligence control would be stepped up to track down the remaining members of the Abu Sayyaf terrorist group in the state. [Bernama]

Malaysia, UN Sec-Gen discuss situation in Myanmar and Palestine

(tcy) In a telephone call on May 27, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin discussed cooperation between UN and ASEAN in searching for a resolution to the political crisis in Myanmar, focusing in particular on the Five-Point Consensus reached during the ASEAN Leaders' Conference. [see AiR No. 17, April/2021, 4] Muhyiddin also mentioned that the appointment of a special envoy of the ASEAN Chair is being finalised in the effort to seek a peaceful solution in the interest of the people of Myanmar.

Both leaders also discussed the issue of Palestine and regretted the violence inflicted by Israelite army on the Palestinians, hoping that a solution to ensure lasting peace for both sides would be found to end the conflict. Muhyiddin also stressed the consistent stand of Malaysia in the establishment of a free and independent Palestinian nation from the occupation of Israel through the two-state resolution based on the pre-1967 borders with Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. [Bernama]

Malaysia's Foreign Ministry has also joined other members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in stating that they want the Human Rights Council (HRC) to establish a Commission of Inquiry (COI) to ensure accountability and humanitarian support for the Palestinians. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia: Singapore refutes Malaysian news outlets' claims of Israeli security threat, says Israeli plane was doing 'commercial product demo'

(tcy) In response to online articles by Malaysian news outlet MalaysiaNow, Singapore's defence technology firm ST Engineering has clarified that the Israeli aircraft that circled over Singapore's airspace had been performing a "commercial product demonstration" and that the demonstration was done solely within Singapore's airspace and territorial waters. [TODAY] Malaysia's Ministry of Transport has since also confirmed that there were no abnormal flight patterns or loitering carried out within Malaysian airspace by the aircraft. [Bernama]

MalaysiaNow had previously alleged that the aircraft, which belongs to a subsidiary of the state-owned civil and military aviation manufacturer Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), was meant for intelligence purposes, describing the flight as a move that "could trigger tension between the city-state and neighbouring Muslim countries amid renewed anti-Israel sentiments worldwide". [MalaysiaNow] The incident came amidst a period of heightened sensitivity in Malaysia, after a video clip that claimed Malaysia was among the nations that would receive security threats from Israel for being one of the leaders of the Palestinian struggle worldwide went viral on social media. [see AIR No. 20, May/2021, 3]

Malaysia: Two Malaysian glove makers under US probe over forced labour allegations

(tcy) Following petitions by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to investigate the firms, the US is investigating Malaysian glove makers Hartalega Holdings and a unit of Supermax Corp over allegations of forced labour. Both Hartalega and Supermax have

responded that they adhered to labour laws in their recruitment and treatment of migrant workers. [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2]

Recently, Malaysian firms have increasingly come under regulatory scrutiny over their treatment of foreign workers, who make up a sizable portion of the country's manufacturing workforce. Previously this month, the CBP also seized glove shipments from Malaysian firm Top Glove over similar allegations. [see AIR No. 20, May/2021, 3]

Philippines increases protests, patrols against China's presence in the South China Sea

(lp) During President Rodrigo Duterte's administration, the Philippines has already lodged one hundred diplomatic protests against China for the latter's repeated, continuous incursion into the Philippines' exclusive economic zones in the South China Sea. Despite their numbers, these protests have hardly kept Chinese vessels in line. On the other hand, the Philippines has recently boosted patrols in the area, thereby, at least, increasing the country's monitoring capacity. [The Star] [South China Morning Post]

Despite these protests and patrols, the income of Filipino fisherfolks has dramatically plummeted due to, at least partially, the continued presence of Chinese vessels in fishing grounds in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, Senator Risa Hontiveros warned that amendments to the Public Service Act (PSA), which would permit complete foreign ownership of public utilities, could facilitate China's control over critical infrastructure in the Philippines. [Manila Bulletin] [ABS-CBN]

Philippines lifts short suspension for travel to work in Saudi Arabia

(lp) The Philippine government lifted on Saturday a one-day suspension of travel to Saudi Arabia to Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), which temporarily left over 200 OFWs stranded at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA). The suspension was lifted because the Saudi government clarified that, contrary to the Philippines' worry, OFWs would not have to cover the costs of mandatory 'institutional quarantine' and other COVID protocols. [Arab News]

Meanwhile, the Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA) is seeking the influx of Saudi investors to expand their engagement beyond the industries of engineering, architecture, design. [Manila Bulletin]

Philippines to get Russian, South Korean, Turkish armament

(lp) The Philippines will get 90 Russian-made troop carriers, as announced by the Philippine Department of National Defense. The two countries also seek to strengthen their ties in the areas of vaccine, defense, space and energy cooperation. Moreover, the Department of National Defense (DND) will buy patrol vessels, submarines from South Korea for the Philippine Navy. And the Philippine Air Force expects to receive a first pair of Turkish T-129 attack helicopters in September. [Philippine Information Agency] [Inquirer] [Manila Bulletin]

Singapore, Japan discuss areas of cooperation for post-COVID-19 recovery

(tcy) During a call on May 25, the Prime Ministers of Singapore and Japan, Lee Hsien Loong and Yoshihide Suga, exchanged views on regional and international developments. Prime Minister Lee expressed interest in deepening economic and public health cooperation with Japan in order to support the post-COVID-19 recoveries of both countries, including cooperation in areas such as the mutual recognition of health certificates. [The Straits Times 1]

It was also announced that Singapore is satisfied with the results of its food safety surveillance tests of imports from Fukushima and will be lifting these requirements. Previously, imports from Fukushima were subjected to pre-export tests and had to come with certificates of origin after an earthquake caused a nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in 2011. [The Straits Times 2]

Singapore, Cambodia deepen cooperation on environmental issues

(ad) Singapore is interested in cooperating with Cambodia on waste management and clean water

production, and will assist Cambodia through improving and providing training and capacity building.

Singapore has previously supported educational development in Cambodia through scholarships and exchange programmes and look to support the Kingdom even more. Through bringing in expertise from Singaporean companies in wastewater management, Singapore hopes to train Cambodian government officials. [Phnom Penh Post]

Announcements

Upcoming Online Events

2 June 2021 @ 1:15 - 2:15 p.m. (GMT-5), STIMSON, USA

Renewing Commitments on Small Arms and Light Weapons Issues (The UN PoA at 20: Reviewing the United Nation's Small Arms and Light Weapons Agenda)

This online event will discuss Small Arms and Light Weapons issues facing the international community with focus on the roles of General Assembly and Security Council.

For more information, see [Stimson].

2 June 2021 @ 12:30 - 2:00 p.m. (GMT+2), The German Marshal Fund of the United States, USA

Women, COVID-19, and the EU Recovery Plan

This event will look at the state of women's participation in the labor market in the aftermath of the coronavirus crisis. It will explore the social and economic impact of the coronavirus crisis on women from job losses to reinforced gender roles.

If you wish you join the event, please register here [GMF].

3 June 2021 @ 4:00 - 5:15 pm (GMT+8), ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

Filling the voids left by the Formal Sector: Informal Borrowings by Poor Households in Northern Mountainous Vietnam

This event will discuss the current accessibility, loan purposes and effects of informal credits on poor households in Thai Nguyen province, Vietnam.

Further event details are accessible via [ISEAS].

3 June 2021 @ 4:00 p.m. (GMT+2), Egmont Institute, Belgium

A Concert of Rivals?

Against the backdrop of a rise of authoritarian structures, global tensions between the US, Russia, Europe, and China, the persistence of conflict in the Middle East and Africa and of transnational non-state actors, this webinar discusses if and how these challenges can be addressed, and by whom.

For more information, please visit [Egmont Institute].

3 June 2021 @ 8:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Asia Society Policy Institute, United States

Challenges and Opportunities for US-Japan-Korea Trade Relations

In cooperation with Korea Society and Japan Society, this panel discussion on the dynamics of trade relations and regional economic integration looks at how the US, Japan, and Korea can overcome hurdles to

cooperation on shared challenges, as well as what the Biden administration means for US trade policy.

If you would like to join the event, please visit [Asia Society].

3 June 2021 @ 2:00 p.m. (GMT+8), Philippine Institute for Development Studies, Philippines

Paving the Road to the Philippines' Digital Integration with the Asia-Pacific

This event which is co-organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific will take a closer look at the digital integration and regional health integration within the Asia-Pacific region, presenting recent research findings.

For more information, please follow [PIDS].

4 June 2021 @ 5:00 p.m. (GMT+8), Civic Exchange, Hong Kong

COP26: Race to Zero Webinar series | Scenarios for TCFD-aligned disclosures

As Hong Kong's regulators plan to make climate-related financial disclosures mandatory for relevant sectors by no later than 2025, this e-learning webinar organized by the Hong Kong Institute of Certified Public Accountants looks at how participating banks have assessed climate risks in a pilot stress test. The report is followed by a panel discussion and Q&A period.

For more information, please follow [Civic Exchange].

4 June 2021 @ 11:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, United States

Gendering the Uyghur Genocide

In this online panel, experts will take a closer look at the human rights situation in Xinjiang from a gendered perspective and how the US and other countries might react.

Details are accessible under [Newlines Institute].

4 June 2021 @ 3:00 pm (GMT+7), Asia Centre, Thailand

Timor-Leste: Internet Freedoms Under Threat

Across Southeast Asia freedoms of expression have been backsliding, Timor-Leste has not escaped this regression. While the Constitution has rights guarantees, national laws, however, are inconsistent with the Constitution and the international standards to which it subscribes. With gaps that may lead to litigation or censorship. Learn more about these developments at this webinar.

For more information see [AsiaCentre].

4 June 2021 @ 10:00 - 11:15 pm (GMT+8), ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

Well-being among Thailand's 'Lost Generation' of Students during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Southeast Asia

This webinar will address the following issues: 1) The overall impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Thai education sector and student well-being; 2) Related public policy and government measures, and the responses of Thai educational institutions to such measures; and 3) The 'new normal' of the Thai education system in a post-Covid-19 world, along with public responses, emerging problems and their potential policy solutions.

More about the event is provided here: [ISEAS].

5 June 2021 @ 6:00 - 9:30 pm (GMT-7), Berggruen Institute, USA

Ethics in Digital Governance

This online event will address issues pertaining to the ethics of artificial intelligence from a global perspective.

For more information, see [Berggruen].

7 June 2021 @ 2:00 p.m. (GMT+5), Centre for Land Warfare Studies, India

Deepening Partnership: India-Vietnam Relations

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies in cooperation with the Institute for Defense Strategy invites you to a discussion and subsequent Q&A on the deepening partnership between India and Vietnam.

If you are interested in joining the webinar, please visit [CLAWS].

7 June 2021 @ 4:30 p.m. (GMT+2), Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Sweden

Prospects for US-Russia Strategic Stability

Ahead of the 16 June US-Russia Summit, this virtual discussion takes a closer look at US-Russia strategic stability issues, including future measures, nuclear and conventional arms control, and military confidence building.

For more information, visit [SIPRI].

7 June 2021 @ 9:30 am (GMT-7), Berggruen Institute, USA

From Local to Global: The Fight Against Climate Change

With less than a decade left to prevent irreversible climate change, this online event features an experts conversation exploring how we can tackle the biggest challenge our planet has ever seen.

Further details are available at [Berggruen].

7 June 2021 @ 10:00 - 11:30 am (GMT+8), ISEAS, Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

A Near-Term Economic Outlook for Post-Coup Myanmar

This webinar will discuss the near-term prospects for the economy and people's lives in Myanmar.

See event and registration details at [ISEAS].

8 June 2021 @ 10:00 - 11:00 am (GMT+8), ISEAS, Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

Revisiting the Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Challenges and Prospects

This event will discuss the issues and problems associated with BRI implementation, as well as the readjustment of the BRI at a critical conjuncture.

Please register here: [ISEAS]

8 June 2021 @ 1:30 p.m. (GMT-4), Centre for International Governance Innovation, Canada

National Security Challenges in the 21st Century

This webinar invites Vincent Rigby, National Security and Intelligence Advisor to Canada's Prime Minister, to discuss the Prime Minister's role in supporting the government in reacting to national security challenges in the 21st century, an evolving threat landscape, and international best practices to those threats. There will be a Q&A period.

For more information, please visit [CIGI].

8 June 2021 @ 1:00 p.m. (GMT+2), The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Sweden

The Eastern Partnership: Progress and Prospects

Ahead of the EU's next Eastern Partnership Summit in autumn of 2021, this webinar seeks to analyze what the Eastern Partnership program has delivered and what an EU policy on the region could and should look like.

If you are interested in this event, please see [UI] for more details.

8 June 2021 @ 2:00 p.m. (GMT+2), Bruegel, Belgium

The Recovery and Resilience fund: Accelerating the Digitalisation of the EU?

The newly established Recovery and Resilience Fund as part of the Next Generation EU programme seeks to supplement national digital and green funding and EU funds, financed by EU borrowing. This webinar tries to understand if it can effectively accelerate digitalisation in the EU, considering the programme's aims, regulatory reform, oversight and coordination mechanisms, as well as possible risks.

Details are accessible under [Bruegel].

8 June 2021 @ 3:00 p.m. (GMT+2), European Centre for International Political Economy, Belgium

The Impact of Nord Stream 2 on Europe

As work on the pipeline has restarted, fundamental concern revolving around its impact on Europe's gas supply, energy security, and geopolitical frictions with Russia sustain. This virtual discussion asks: Is greed and folly shaping Europe's security?

Please visit [ECIPE] for more information.

8 June 2021 @ 6:00 p.m. (GMT+2), European Council on Foreign Relations, Germany

New Ideas for German Foreign Policy

As geopolitical changes challenge Germany's traditional status quo approach to foreign policy and with federal elections in September, this webinar invites representatives from Germany's major parties to discuss their party's vision on German foreign and security policy. Registration is required.

Please visit [ECFR] for more information.

9 June 2021 @ 2:00 p.m. (GMT+2), European Council on Foreign Relations, Germany

Crisis of European confidence: How Europeans see their place in the world

Building on new public opinion polling, this webinar seeks to disentangle the public mood in the EU ahead of US President Biden's first visit to Europe for the G7 and EU-US summit. Can the union regain public confidence through its international role? Prior registration is required.

If you are interested in joining the panel, please visit [ECFR].

9 June 2021 @ 4:00 p.m. (GMT+2), Egmont Institute, Belgium

20 ans après le 11-Septembre, la fin de la guerre contre le terrorisme?

This webinar takes a closer look at the past 20 years after 09/11, asking: What have been the phases the war on terror has gone through since and what are the lessons to be learned? Please note that the event will be held in French only.

For more information and mandatory registration before June 7, see [Egmont Institute].

9 June 2021 @ 10:00 - 11:30 am (GMT+8), ISEAS, Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

A Tale of Two Cities: Banzu and Temasek

The webinar will explain the linguistic linkage between Lenggakar and Manggakar, and elaborate on the types of materials that were unearthed along the Rochor River.

Please register here: [ISEAS]

9 June 2021 @ 8:00 am (GMT+1), International Institute for Strategic Studies, UK

Adelphi book launch – The Responsibility to Defend: Rethinking Germany's Strategic Culture

This online book launch will address the problem of Germany's current strategic culture, with the authors arguing that informs a security policy which fails to meet contemporary strategic challenges, thereby endangering Berlin's European allies, the Western order and Germany itself.

For more information, see [IISS].

10 June 2021 @ 11:00 am (GMT-5), Institute for Policy Studies, USA

The Water Defenders: A US Role in the World Series Program

This event will discuss the relation between mining and the flow of refugees from Central America to the US border.

Event details are available at [IPS].

Recent book releases

Jeffrey P. Crouch, Mark J. Rozell, and Mitchel A. Sollenberger (eds.), *The Unitary Executive Theory: A Danger to Constitutional Government*, The University Press of Kansas, 2020, 212 pages, November 30,2020, reviewed in [LPBR].

Akhill Reed Amar, *The Words That Made Us: America's Constitutional Conversation*, *1760-1840*, Basic Book, May 4, 2021, 832 pages, reviewed in [Washington Post].

Calls

The **Trinity College Dublin** and the **University of St Andrews** invites to submit papers for the workshop ***Rethinking the Avant-Garde: Radical Politics and Culture in Europe and the World*** to be held on November 11-12, 2021. Closing date for submission is June 15, 2021. For more information, see [H-net].

The **Lincoln University Center** and **Voices Underground** has opened the call for papers for the conference ***Seeking Freedom: The Underground Railroad in the Mid-Atlantic,*** scheduled for March 31, and April 1-2, 2022. Closing date for submission is December 15, 2021. For more information, see [H-net]

Jobs & positions

The **International Labour Organisation** is offering a position of ***Legal Officer*** . Closing date for application is June 14, 2021. For more details, see [UN jobs]

The **Queen's University Belfast** is recruiting a ***Senior Lecturer/Reader/Professor in Law and Technology***.

Closing date for applications is June 28, 2021. For more details, see [Researchgate].

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