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Asia in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to this week's Asia in Review issue updating you on the latest events and developments in constitutional politics and governance, geopolitics and international relations in Asia.

I wish you an informative read.

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in East Asia

China: Xi Jinping's status further consolidated by propaganda agency's new slogan

(tp) The Communist Party's latest slogan "the two establishments" has been procured by propaganda officials to highlight Xi Jinping's status as China's "core" leader and establishing his political doctrine, which was enshrined in the country's constitution in 2018.

The slogan first appeared in November in a resolution of history that cemented Xi's status, putting him on par with Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. The resolution described Xi's "two establishments" in supporting the party, the armed forces and the people. It said they were of "decisive significance" for advancing the party's "core" and China's rise. [SCMP 1]

Party officials have described the “two establishments” as the party’s biggest achievements since 2012, when Xi came to power. Communist Party’s ideology chief, Wang Huning, told state news agency Xinhua, “to do well in this year’s work on propaganda and thought, [we] must highlight the historical significance of the ‘two establishments’.”

Wang also added that more must be done to improve “internal communication” and that “[We] must innovate on external publicity”, addressing key state media figures CCTV, Xinhua and People’s Daily. Officials are now being called on to “profoundly study and understand” the historical significance of the “two establishments.” [SCMP 2]

China: Residents in Xi’an trading goods for food amid lockdown shortages

(tp) Amid the ongoing lockdown of the 13-million city of Xi’an, social media posts showing residents in Xi’an trading goods such as cigarettes and tech for food, raised concerns over supplies running low and prompting the impression that – weeks ahead of the Lunar New Year and the Winter Olympics – the Chinese government is determined to carry out its strict “zero Covid” strategy in the fight against the pandemic at all costs of the people’s hardship, despite low numbers of infections. This impression has been underscored by a video of a pregnant woman miscarrying after a hospital denied entry without a Covid test.

On December 22, to harsh lockdown was imposed on Xi’an after more than 200 coronavirus infections were recorded within a week. Among others, the new lockdown measures require all residents to stay home unless there is an urgent reason to go out and suspended transport to and from the city. Only one person per household is permitted to buy household necessities every two days, leading many residents concerned of insufficient supplies. [Al Jazeera] [BBC] [CNN]

China: National air quality standards met for the first time

(tp) In 2021, Beijing met its national air quality standards for the first time following a concerted effort to cut coal consumption, reduce transportation emissions and relocate heavy industry. This comes after China declared war on pollution in 2014 following

a series of smog build-ups that were hazardous to the population.

Data from Beijing's environmental protection bureau shows that the number of hazardous airborne particles was down 13 percent compared to 2020, reaching 33 micrograms per cubic metre in Beijing over 2021. While this met China's interim standard of 35 micrograms for the first time, it remains much higher than the recommended World Health Organisation level of 5 micrograms.

In the lead up to the upcoming Winter Olympics, President Xi Jinping has promised to cut pollution and emissions further, with 26 Olympic venues powered entirely by renewables. Beijing has since made concerted efforts to switch to cleaner natural gas, built solar farms, and have imposed tougher standards on cars and industrial facilities aimed at controlling emissions. [Al Jazeera] [Reuters]

China: Second Hong Kong activist jailed over banned Tiananmen Square vigils

(tp) Prominent Hong Kong activist Chow Hang-tung has been sentenced to 15 months in prison for allegedly inciting for a banned vigil to commemorate the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989.

The 36-year-old lawyer was the former vice chairwoman of the now-disbanded Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China.

June 4 vigils were banned by police two years ago, citing the pandemic, however the annual event still drew thousands of lit candles across the city in 2020, and smaller in 2021.

Chow represented herself in the trail, pleading not guilty to the charges, saying she wanted to "incite others not to forget June 4" rather than encouraging a gathering. "It can be foreseen that the public space to discuss June 4 will disappear entirely," Chow told the court after the verdict. "Tyranny is greedy, red lines will keep expanding."

Chow is also facing separate charges for inciting subversion under the national security law imposed by Beijing in Hong Kong in June 2020. [BBC] [Al Jazeera] [See AiR, No.26, June/2002, 5]

China: More Hong Kong media outlets closed

(tp) A further two more media outlets, Citizen News and Mad Dog Daily have closed this week citing the "deteriorating" media environment and concerns about the safety of their journalists. [Al Jazeera]

This comes less than a week after 200 police raided the office of Stand News, another independent news outlet, accusing its senior editors of sedition [see AiR, No. 1, January/2022, 1].

China: Xi stresses need to adopt hi-tech training for troops to be ready for war 'at any second', state media report

(tp) A state media report released on Tuesday, January 4, announced President Xi Jinping's plans to expand China's two million-strong military to adopt the latest technologies in its training so that it can win future wars.

In his first order of the year, Xi ordered that the military "must grasp the changing landscapes of national security and combat circumstances accurately and follow the evolution of technology, warfare and rivals closely." This includes the use of computer simulations, online combat in drills, and the exploration of more opportunities to add hi-tech and the internet in training.

According to state media news agency Xinhua, Xi also directed the armed forces to double their efforts to "better combine training with combat operations" as well as strengthen systematic training and the use of technologies to develop "an elite force that is capable of fighting and winning wars."

Jinping stressed the need for "full-time combat readiness" and that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) must use frontline frictions to polish troop capabilities.

Since ascending to power in 2012, the president has consistently pushed the PLA to be prepared for war. Xi has carried out a number of aggressive military reforms, including the reorganisation of its command controls, army consolidation, and increased funding for the navy, air force, and rocket division to strengthen strategic outreach capability. [SCMP]

China: Firms required to undergo cybersecurity test before foreign IPOs

(tp) Firms seeking to list their shares overseas must first undergo a security review by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) from February 15.

The regulator said on Tuesday, January 4, that such firms should apply for cybersecurity reviews before submitting listing applications to foreign securities regulators, according to statements published on its WeChat account.

This comes after a series of recent regulatory changes by the government to tighten the rules governing offshore listings.

Last year, the Data Security Law and the Personal Information Protection Law came into effect to cover data storage and data privacy respectively. The new rules were first proposed by CAC in July, saying that the security review will focus on data risks, controlled, or manipulated by foreign government after overseas listings. The regulator said that companies will not be allowed to list abroad if it finds that national security could be impacted. [Al Jazeera 1] [Al Jazeera 2]

The CAC also announced January 6, its intensions to speed up the establishment of a comprehensive internet governance system and build a solid national cyber security barrier. The regulator also stressed the need to expand and strengthen mainstream online opinion. [Reuters]

China: Copyright authority cracks down further on technology sector

(tp) In a bid to crackdown on private sector monopolistic behaviour, the National Copyright Administration of China (NCAC) announced on Thursday, January 6, that digital music platforms are not allowed to sign exclusive copyright agreements except in special circumstances.

This marks a further step in the regulator's crackdown on China's technology sector, which has seen new laws in areas of monopolistic behavior, unfair competition, and consumer rights. For example, Tencent Holdings last year was ordered by the NCAC to end all exclusive music copyright agreements on the basis it held more than 80% of exclusive music library resources. The regulator was concerned that this volume gave

Tencent Holdings more leverage over upstream copyright parties and restricted new sector entrants.

Though the NCAC did not mention which companies this new law is directed at, it is likely to effect smartphone maker Xiamoi, telecommunications provider China Mobile, and Internet tech giant Netease. [Reuters]

Japan: Finance Minister expresses concern about falling yen, emphasizing the need for currency stability

(la) Japan's Finance Minister Shunichi Suzuki emphasized the critical importance for currency stability on Friday, January 7, in the wake recent declines of the yen against the dollar. He mentioned potential demerits of a falling yen, which pushes up import costs and households' living costs amidst a recovering economy from the COVID-19 pandemic. The dollar currently hovers near a five-year record high, with 1 dollar corresponding to 116.355 yen hit on Tuesday, as the U.S. Federal Reserve has embarked on a steady interest rate hike, while the Bank of Japan has been keeping rates ultra-low.

Japanese economic policymakers have traditionally favored a weak yen under the assumption that it gives exporters a competitive advantage, but Bank of Japan Governor Haruhiko Kuroda warned last month the comparative advantage in higher export volume of a weak yen relative to its disadvantages may have declined over the years as Japanese companies have increasingly started to move production abroad. Kuroda added that Japan’s increasing reliance on imports for raw materials might make the hit to households from a weak yen even bigger amidst rising inflation following the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the negative repercussions of a weak yen, Japanese policymakers maintain a reserved stance towards currency intervention, as many argue a softening yen could be positive in mind of Japan’s weak economy, staggering competitiveness, and unfavorable public finances. [Reuters]

Japan: Prime Minister calls for wage increases in push for economic redistribution

(la) Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida demanded aggressive wage raises from business leaders in order to achieve his goal of wealth redistribution and to boost the staggering economy ridden by consequences of the corona pandemic. Kishida calls for a pay hike of over 3 percent by companies that have restored their earnings to prepandemic levels, emphasizing the necessity of these raises as means for future investment, and with that future economic growth. This way, the Prime Minister intends to set a "virtuous cycle of growth and distribution" in motion. The government is also planning to offer tax reductions to companies that go ahead with the wage hikes.

Kishida's call for wage growth is part of his broader agenda to create a new type of capitalism that ensures both wealth redistribution and economic growth, which he announced during the national elections in October. [Kyodo News]

South Korea: Seoul Court blocks vaccine pass mandate at educational facilities

(aml) The Seoul Administrative Court on Tuesday, January 4, temporarily blocked the vaccine pass requirement at educational facilities after local community groups asked for an injunction. The court ruled that the mandate that requires students to present a proof of vaccination or a negative PCR test result to access cram schools, reading rooms and book cafes "seriously disadvantages people who are not vaccinated". The court took into consideration that infection rates among unvaccinated people are usually notably higher, but it also argued that hospitalizations and deaths due to Covid-19 are less common among younger people who frequent these study places. According to the court, exacerbating the access to educational facilities could "amount to a direct infringement of their freedoms to choose an occupation and also that of education" which is protected by the constitution.

The Ministry of Health and Welfare announced to appeal immediately, elaborating that if 6.2% unvaccinated citizen make up 30% of the infected and 53% of the hospitalized and dead, the vaccine pass mandate is necessary to protect the health of the unvaccinated. [The Korea Herald]

The decision is expected to influence other pending or future lawsuits, including a one filed by medical workers who call for the government to withdraw the whole vaccine pass system and a petition at the

Constitutional Court that challenges the expansion of the vaccine pass to teenagers. [The Korea Times 1] [The Korea Times 2]

South Korea: Same sex couple loses suit against state health insurer over spousal coverage

(aml) On Friday, January 7, the Seoul Administrative Court ruled against a same sex couple demanding the spousal health insurance coverage. The couple filed the lawsuit in February last year after the National Health Insurance Service (NHIS) had denied claimant So Seong-wook the insurance coverage of his partner's employer, as it is possible for heterosexual couples. The court argued that since South Korea doesn't recognize same-sex marriage, there is no legal ground to expand the concept of marriage to that of homosexual unions. It thereupon explained further that it considered them fundamentally unequal. The couple already announced that they will appeal the decision. [The Korea Times]

Human Rights Watch criticized the rulings as reflecting the "lack of legal protections for same-sex couples in the country," and warning that LGBT South Koreans remain "highly vulnerable to mistreatment and abuse." [Human Rights Watch]

South Korea: F-35 fleet grounded

(dql) In a major setback to South Korea's air force, South Korea last week grounded its entire fleet of F-35 fighter jets following a landing gear malfunction which one of the units faced during a training session and which made an emergency landing necessary. Operations are suspended pending results of a joint investigation with the US from which the jets had purchased in 2019 under a deal concluded in 2014 for 40 jets. Seoul has so far received 30. [Yonhap News Agency]

Taiwan: Special weapons budget approved in extra parliamentary

(dql) Taiwan's parliament on Tuesday, January 11, approved a special budget to allocate NT$236.95 billion (US$8.55 billion) in funding over the next five

years for procuring weapons aimed to boost Taiwan's anti-air and anti-surface capabilities, shore-based anti-ship missiles, field and ground-based air defense systems, unmanned aerial vehicles, air-to-ground and surface-to-surface cruise missile systems, high-performance submarines, and weapons systems for Taiwan's Coast Guard. [Focus Taiwan]

The special budget is among those decisions for which Taiwan's parliament on Wednesday, January 5, began a three-week extra session. Othe major items on the agenda are the NT$2.2391 trillion (US$80.14 billion) central government general budget plan, which was proposed at the end of August 2021, and constitutional reforms pertaining the lowering of the threshold for future constitutional revisions and a transition from the current semi-presidential system to a parliamentarian system.

The session, which the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) pushed through using their majority in parliament, became necessary after the lawmakers failed to complete the review and passage of two budget plans by the end of its regular session on Dec. 31. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan: Ruling party wins Taichung district legislative by-election

(dql) Lin Ching-yi of ruling Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) secured victory on Sunday's legislative by-election in Taichung's second district. With 88,752 votes, or about 51.46 percent of the total, he defeated the the main opposition party's, the Kuomintang's candidate Yen Kuan-heng (80,912 votes, or 46.92 percent) and three other candidates. Voter turnout, including invalid votes cast, was at 58.26 percent.

The by-election had become necessary after former lawmaker Chen Po-wei of the Taiwan Statebuilding Party was removed from the Legislature in a recall election last October. [Focus Taiwan]

Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in South Asia

Bangladesh: President continues dialogue with political parties on formation of new Election Commission

(sk/lm) Bangladesh's President Abdul Hamid has continued his dialogue series with representatives of registered political parties to discuss issues relating to the reconstitution of the Election Commission (EC), while also inviting nine more political parties to join, bringing the total number of political parties so far invited to 25. [The Daily Star]

The five-year tenure of the current EC will expire this February; the next Commission will be tasked with arranging the country's next parliamentary election, which is scheduled to be held between November 2023 and January 2024. In light of this, President Hamid has been consulting with political parties since last December [see AiR No. 51, December/2021, 3].

Representatives of the Bangladesh Samyabadi Dal (NL) on January 4 recommended that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina establish an election-time government. The NL also suggested legislation to establish an EC, the development of a search committee of constitutional bodies, the swift prosecution of election abusers who use religion, money, guns, or muscular force, and a reduction in businessmen's membership in the Parliament. [Bangladesh Live News]

The Bangladesh Islami Front and Jamiat Ulema-E-Islam Bangladesh political parties independently proposed the implementation of a time-fitting law and empowering the EC during elections. [Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha]

The Gono Front made a 14-point proposal which includes keeping the incumbent prime minister as head of a polls-time government, enactment of a time-befitting law, formation of a nine-member EC with

three female members, and keeping a clear declaration in the election law so there would be no government interference in the polls. [The Business Standard]

The Krishak Sramik Janata League (KSJL) placed six proposals including enactment of a law in line with the Constitution, formation of an election-time government, and recommended that the Election Commission refrain from developing election rules without first consulting the country's registered political parties. They opposed the formation of a Search Committee for EC reconstitution.[Dhaka Tribune]

Meanwhile, Bangladesh's main opposition Nationalist Party (BNP) has announced it would not meet with the president. The BNP was officially invited to talks with President Hamid on the formation of the new EC on January 12. However, the BNP had earlier stated that it would boycott the talks because the crisis was not over the EC formation, but rather over a polls-time government. [The Business Standard]

In the same vein, the Revolutionary Workers Party of Bangladesh have also decided to not participate in the dialogue, alleging that the dialogue would be meaningless as the president had nothing to do without consulting with the prime minister. [New Age]

Other political parties that have announced they would refrain from attending include the Communist Party of Bangladesh, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, Samajtantrik Dal, and Islami Andolon Bangladesh.

Bangladesh: Main opposition party kicks off second phase of protests demanding leader's treatment abroad

(sk/lm) Defying a ban on public gatherings, Bangladesh's main opposition Nationalist Party (BNP) on January 8 organized a protest in the city of Brahmanbaria, kicking off the second phase of demonstrations aimed at forcing the government to allow the party's ailing chairperson, Khaleda Zia, to travel abroad for medical treatment. [New Age]

Zia, Bangladesh's first female prime minister and archrival of current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's, was admitted to the critical care unit of a hospital last November, with doctors treating her saying they fear for her life if she is not allowed to fly abroad for medical care [see AiR No. 47, November/2021, 4].

However, the leader of the BNP has been barred by a court from leaving the country after being convicted and jailed on graft charges in 2018.

Late last month, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said the application filed by Zia's family in November to travel abroad for advanced medical required further scrutiny, as there was no legal basis for the request. [AiR No. 1, January/2022, 1]

Against this backdrop, the BNP plans to hold rallies on another five days in its 40 organizational districts over the course of this month. Late last December, the party held rallies in 32 districts to press the same demand [see AiR No. 51, December/2021, 3]. [Prothom Alo]

Prior to the latest protest, the BNP on January 5 warned that everyone in the current Awami League-led government will be charged with "murder" if any accident happens to Zia for lack of advanced treatment abroad. [The Independent]

Bangladesh: Fifth phase of union council elections conducted amid violence

(sk/ap) At least eleven people were killed in rioting and violence, and several ballot snatching occurrences were noted, on January 5 during the fifth phase of elections to Union Parishads – the smallest rural administrative and local government unit in Bangladesh. [The Business Standard]

In the latest round of the polls, independents won more seats than nominees of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's ruling Awami League. According to party insiders, more than 150 of the winning independents were disgruntled AL leaders who ran as independents after failing to secure the party's nomination. [The Daily Star]

According to unofficial results AL candidates won in 2,015 out of a total of 3,677 Union Parishad elections held so far. Most opposition parties, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, have indicated that they will not participate in any election under the current Election Commission. [see entry in this edition]

The sixth phase and seventh phase of the elections are scheduled for January 31 and February 7 respectively. [Daily Sun] [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Prime Minister Hasina addresses nation on third anniversary of government

(sk) Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on January 7 delivered a recorded address to the nation to mark the third anniversary of her current government following parliamentary elections held in December 2018. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: High Court orders police Inspector General to take action against officers who defied court order

(sk) Bangladesh's High Court has ordered the Inspector General of Police to take appropriate action against 19 police officers who refused to testify as witnesses in a trial for the murder of a minor in 2005. Moreover, the Court acquitted the two accused in the case, who have been on death row awaiting execution since their conviction by a trial court in 2016. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: High Court directs appointment of 84 successful civil services candidates

(sk) Bangladesh's High Court has ordered the government to appoint 84 individuals who passed the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) exams but were not hired because an intelligence report termed them unfit. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: High Court requests government to initiate policy against polygamy

(sk) Bangladesh's High Court has issued a rule requesting authorities to explain why they will not issue an order to formulate a policy against polygamy to protect family life. The court requested responses from the secretaries of the Ministry of Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Chief justice forms committee to investigate allegations of corruption in Supreme Court

(sk) Bangladesh's newly appointed chief justice has formed a committee to investigate charges of irregularities and corruption against employees in several areas of the top court. The committee will submit a report to the chief justice after completing its investigation, based on which further action will be taken. [The Business Standard]

Chief Justice Hasan Foez Siddique formed the committee January 6, less than a week after he was sworn in on December 31, succeeding Chief Justice Hossain who had retired after he turned 67, the age boundary for a Supreme Court judge in Bangladesh. [AiR No. 1, January/2022, 1]

While announcing the formation of the committee, Chief Justice Siddique also expressed interest in setting up a High Court monitoring cell to reduce case clutter in lower courts and increase transparency.

Bangladesh: Transparency International Bangladesh slams Department of Environment for corruption

(sk/ap) Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), a branch of the Berlin-based anti-corruption civil society organization, has criticized the Department of Environment (DoE) for alleged corruption, negligence, and lack of expertise. [Dhaka Tribune]

Through surveys of over 350 industries in Bangladesh and interviews with environmental exports and DoE officials, TIB found that the DoE provided certificates and authorization for bribes, failed to carry out industry inspections, is understaffed and lacks officials who are experts in the field.

In light of this, the anti-corruption watchdog made recommendations to restore good governance at the DoE, including selecting officials with technical expertise at all levels, boosting monitoring and enforcement actions against large corporations, and updating backdated environmental regulations.

Bangladesh: Ministries vie over $300 million World Bank healthcare loan

(sk) Two ministries are at odds about which one will oversee primary healthcare services in all city corporations, including in the capital Dhaka, after receiving a World Bank loan of $300 million for the expansion of urban health services in Bangladesh. [Prothom Alo]

Community clinics, mother and childcare centers, union health and family welfare centers, and Upazila (a subunit of districts in Bangladesh) health complexes are all under the control of the Health Ministry in rural areas. On the other hand, the City Corporation Law of 2009 gives the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development, and Co-operatives the authority for urban health services.

Bangladesh: World Bank loans $295 million for digital technology project

(ap) Bangladesh has signed a $295 million loan agreement with the World Bank to implement the Enhancing Digital Government & Economy (EDGE) project, which aims to improve cyber security, build crisis resilience, reduce pandemic-related vulnerabilities, and prepare for the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The loan comes with a repayable tenure of 34 years and 4-year grace period for the EDGE project, which is to be implemented between within the next four years. [The Business Standard]

The World Bank in December had approved $500 million to help Dhaka expand and modernize the electricity distribution system and support the sustainable transformation of its electricity system.

Bangladesh: Blaze at Rohingya refugee camp leaves more than 5,000 homeless

(sk/lm) A fire tore through a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh's district of Cox's Bazar on January 9, leaving thousands of people homeless and renewing calls for the fencing that encages refugees to be removed. [CNN] [The Guardian]

Fires are a continual hazard in Cox's Bazar, where more than one million members of the largely Muslim

minority group live in extremely crowded conditions, with bamboo and tarpaulin shelters packed closely together, surrounded by fencing. A devastating fire last March swept through another area of the camp, killing at least 15 refugees and forcing 50,000 people to flee [see AiR No. 12, March/2021, 4].

The incident occurred a week after another blaze tore through a COVID-19 treatment center run by the International Organization For Migration on January 2, causing no casualties. [UN News]

Bangladesh: Thousands of "illegal" Rohingya shops demolished in Cox's Bazar camps

(sk) Bangladesh authorities have bulldozed more than 3,000 shops belonging to Rohingya refugees in camps in Cox's Bazar district, where more than one million members of the largely Muslim minority group live in extremely crowded conditions. [The Guardian]

While Bangladeshi government officials claimed relief groups were ensuring the refugees were still getting daily necessities, members of the Rohingya groups said that the shop owners are struggling to survive. [The Independent, $]

Last December, authorities bulldozed about 1,000 shops belonging to Rohingya, saying they were demolishing "illegal" shops in all camps to build shelters for the refugees. However, an international rights group researcher at the time alleged that the move was aimed at pressuring the Rohingya to agree to relocate to Bhashan Char, a remote, flood-prone island in the Bay of Bengal. [AiR No. 50, December/2021, 2]

Bangladesh: Border guards seized smuggled goods, arms, drugs worth over $1 million in 2021

(sk) The Border Guard Bangladesh, a paramilitary force responsible for the border security of Bangladesh, confiscated smuggled items, guns, and drugs worth over $1 million, during several drives around the country in 2021. Smugglers were prosecuted in 3,600 cases and 2,250 Bangladeshis and 86 Indians were detained for illegally crossing the border. [Prothom Alo]

India: Election Commission announces dates of five local assembly elections, despite surge in COVID-19 cases

(lm) India's Election Commission (ECI) has announced dates of local assembly elections in five states, including the politically consequential state of Uttar Pradesh, despite a surge in coronavirus cases in large parts of the country. [The Straits Times 1]

Local polls in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Goa and Manipur will be a crucial indicator of sentiment ahead of the 2024 general elections. Prime Minister Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) controls four out of the five states and a weaker showing this time could see the prime minister make concessions to different voter groups to secure a third consecutive term in the national elections.

The most crucial is predominantly agricultural Uttar Pradesh, which accounts for about 17 percent of India's voters. The BJP swept that state in 2017, which contributed to building the party's image of electoral invincibility. Losing ground in the state would almost certainly make the 2024 election more open and competitive, according to observers, not least because the prime minister is an elected lawmaker from Uttar Pradesh.

In light of this high-stake battle, Prime Minister Modi has been campaigning personally in most of the states for the past weeks, inaugurating projects and holding rallies that focus on winning over women voters and farmers. [The Straits Times 2]

Polling will be held over seven phases starting in Uttar Pradesh starting on February 10. Punjab, Goa, and Uttarakhand will vote on February 14. Manipur will vote in two phases, on February 27 and March 3. Counting for all states will take place on March 10 and results will be declared the same day.

A day after the announcement of election dates, India recorded 160,000 known cases on January 9, with the number of new cases rising sixfold in one week. The major urban centers of Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata have been hit hardest.

Against this backdrop, a national debate has continued over whether to press forward with the high-stakes campaign season, which health experts have warned could spread the virus. Some officials, including high court judges in Uttar Pradesh, have urged election

officials to delay voting and ban the rallies [see AiR No. 1, January/2022, 1].

The Election Commission, for its part, has temporarily banned public campaign rallies and car processions until January 15, when the moratorium will be reevaluated. The officials also urged parties to instead hold virtual rallies on social media. [The Washington Post, $]

India: Foreign-funding license of Mother Teresa charity renewed following international backlash

(sr/lm) India has restored the license for a charity founded by Maria Teresa to receive foreign donations, after an initial decision to block its renewal around Christmas was met with an international backlash. [The Hindu 1]

All charities in India must have a license to receive donations from abroad under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) and renew it after the expiry of five years. The central government late last December refused to renew the license for the Kolkata-based Missionaries of Charity (MoC) citing "adverse inputs", just days after the organization faced a police investigation for "hurting religious sentiments of Hindus" [see AiR No. 1, January/2022, 1].

The decision was roundly criticized by rights groups, the Church in India, and opposition parties. Key opposition leader and West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee, for example, criticized the Modi administration for the alleged "freezing" of the charity's bank accounts, although the home ministry denied it had done this and said the NGO had itself requested its accounts be frozen. [National Catholic Register] [The Independent, $] [The Hindu 2]

India: Supreme Court to hear petition challenging Inner Line Permit in Manipur state

(sr/lm) India's Supreme Court on January 3 issued notices to the central and Manipur state governments, while agreeing to entertain a Public Interest Litigation seeking to revoke the system that restricts entry and exit of non-permanent residents of the state. [The Economic Times]

Besides Manipur, the Inner Line Permit (ILP) is required in the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram. It is obligatory for Indian citizens from outside those states to obtain the travel document before entering the concerned state.

Calling the ILP a draconian, colonial-era system, the petition claims that the system violates the fundamental rights of the citizens of Manipur state as it allegedly provides unbridled power to the state for restricting the entry and exit of non-indigenous people. [The Times of India]

India: 'Auction' of Muslim women on apps reveals widespread online abuse, rising Islamophobia

(sr/lm) More than 100 prominent Indian Muslim women, most of whom were vocal on social media platforms, found that online images of themselves were being used without permission on a fake auction site, which went up on January 1 and was taken down again within about 24 hours. [South China Morning Post]

The open-source app called "Bulli Bai" — a derogatory term used to describe Muslim women — had shared pictures of dozens of women without their consent before it was taken down. Users could bid on journalists, activists, celebrities and artists, with their photos and names displayed as "Bulli Bai of the Day."

Police in the cities of Mumbai and Delhi have arrested four people so far for allegedly creating the app. All four suspects – aged between 18 and 25 years – are believed to be influenced by Hindu right-wing ideology.

The app came just six months after a similar app, called "Sulli Deals", had taken publicly available pictures of nearly 80 Indian Muslim women and created profiles, describing the women as "deals of the day". That one remained up for weeks and was taken down only after complaints from victims. Though police had opened an investigation at that time, a man believed to be responsible for creating that app was arrested only last week. [BBC]

In both cases, there was no actual sale, but the purpose was to degrade and humiliate Muslim women, many of whom have been outspoken about the rising tide of Hindu nationalism under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. [The New York Times, $]

Moreover, the publication of the second app came just days after other attacks on India's 170 million Muslims and on the Christian minority. A fortnight ago, far-right Hindu leaders at a meeting in northern Indian state of Uttarakhand called for "genocide" against Muslims. This followed hot on the heels of Hindu vigilantes disrupting Muslims in Gurgaon, an upscale suburb of New Delhi, trying to pray out in the open in spaces officially earmarked for this purpose. [France24]

Against this backdrop, *The Wire* reported on January 6 that an application software called Tek Fog was used by users to "amplify right-wing propaganda to a domestic audience." The news outlet also claimed the app had links to Prime Minister Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Two days later, opposition Indian National Congress leader Rahul Gandhi tweeted about the "hate factories" created by the BJP, which he claimed led to the radicalization of the makers behind the Bulli Bai app. [Deutsche Welle]

India: Supreme Court to set up panel after security breach traps Prime Minister Modi

(lm) India's Supreme Court on January 10 announced that it would set up an independent committee to investigate and fix responsibility after Prime Minister Narendra Modi was trapped on a flyover for 20 minutes by protesters in Punjab state, an incident that is being reported as a serious security lapse. [The Hindu]

The prime minister was supposed to fly to a war memorial and later address a rally in the city of Ferozepur, ahead of crucial state elections, on January 5. But the trip was delayed by bad weather, and the convoy finally went by road when visibility did not improve. It then got stuck some 30 kilometers from the memorial due to blockade by protesters and returned to the airport. [BBC]

The protesters were demanding the resignation Ajay Mishra, Punjab's junior home affairs minister, whose son has been accused in an incident that had sparked a national outcry and drawn renewed attention to year-long protests against contentious agriculture laws. A car linked to Mishra had ploughed into protesting farmers in Uttar Pradesh state, killing four men. Farmers alleged that the son, Ashish Mishra, was behind the attack, but the Mishras deny the allegation. [AiR No. 41, October/2021, 2]

In light of the security lapse, both the central and state governments later set up their respective inquiry

panels to probe the incident. On January 10, however, the Supreme Court clarified that the two inquiry panels will suspend their proceedings in the wake of the top court's decision to constitute a high-power committee for investigating the incident. [Hindustan Times]

India: Central government downgrades security cover of four former Jammu and Kashmir chief ministers

(sr) India's central government has downgraded the proximate security cover of four former chief ministers of the Jammu and Kashmir union territory, a move that local political parties called "political", coming as it does at a time when the security situation in the region is deteriorating. [The Hindu]

The decision to reduce the strength of the Special Security Group (SSG) protection of Farooq Abdulla, Omar Abdulla, Mehbooba Mufti and Ghulam Nabi Azad was taken by the Security Review and Coordination Committee, which is charged with analyzing the threat perception regarding important leaders in the union territory. [Hindustan Times]

According to government records, at least 168 militants, 34 civilians and 30 Indian troops have been killed last year in the Kashmir Valley. In the last quarter of 2020, the Muslim-majority region witnessed a wave of civilian killings, with militants seemingly targeting non-Kashmiris, including migrant workers, and members of the minority Hindu and Sikh communities. Indian forces responded to this with a widespread crackdown [see AiR No. 41, October/2021, 2].

In light of this, former chief minister Omar Abdullah contended that the decision to resize the SSG was a political one that sought to silence all four politicians, as they were becoming more vocal in political discussions. [NDTV]

India: Central government calls on states to share intelligence through Multi Agency Centre

(sr) India's Home Minister Amit Shah has called on the director generals heading the state police forces to share more intelligence inputs through the Multi Agency Centre (MAC), a common counter-terrorism

grid under the Intelligence Bureau (IB) that was made operational in 2001. [The Hindu]

Designed as the nodal body for sharing intelligence inputs, the MAC brings together representatives from numerous agencies, different ministries, both central and state.

However, it has been reported that states are reluctant to make use of the platform: As noted in a 2016 parliamentary report, the major contributors of intelligence inputs to the MAC were the Defence Intelligence Agency and the Research and Analysis Wing.

India: Areas in Jammu and Kashmir union territory declared "strategic land" for armed forces

(sr/lm) The government of India's Jammu and Kashmir union territory has declared nearly 70 hectares of land in the in Gulmarg and Sonamarg districts as "strategic areas", paving the way for India's armed forces to use these patches for operational, residential and training purposes. [The Hindu]

The decision assumes added significance, being the first of its kind issued after India's central government in a surprise move in October 2020 enacted a series of new land laws – and amended some – ending the protections on land rights in the Jammu and Kashmir union territory [see AiR No. 44, November/2020, 1]. According to the union territory's administration, the decision came in response to a request by the Corps Commander for "special dispensation" to the forces.

In light of this, the move has garnered multitudes of backlash by citizens over social media, and by local political parties. They claim that the allocation of land to the military, especially from tourist areas, would further militarize the union territory, thereby hampering the ability of civilians to live in the region. [Sunday Guardian]

Nepal: Prime Minister, opposition leader hold first meeting, discuss House obstruction, MCC

(ns/lm) Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba on January 8 met with the leader of largest opposition

party, K.P. Sharma Oli, marking the first meeting between the two politicians since the Supreme Court in July last year reinstated the lower house of parliament and appointed then-opposition leader Deuba the country's new prime minister [see AiR No. 28, July/2021, 2]. [The Kathmandu Post]

The main issue on the docket was concerned with the continuous obstruction of proceedings in both houses of Parliament by Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) (CPN-UML). The reason behind the party's obstruction is to insist on the suspension of 14 former party lawmakers, including Madhav Kumar Nepal, whose newly created Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Unified Socialist) in August had joined the ruling coalition government [see AiR No. 34, August/2021, 4].

Another topic included the the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC)-Nepal Compact, a contentious $500 million grant from the United States, which is yet to be ratified by Parliament. Oli backed the MCC accord while in power but since his replacement by Deuba has been non-committal.

Right now, only 61 lawmakers of Deuba's Nepali Congress party and 13 members of the Unified Socialists can be counted as backers of the deal in the 271-member House of Representatives. Oli's CPN-UML, the largest party in Parliament's lower chamber, controls 94 seats.

Nepal: Ruling party official highlights need for foreign aid, but warns against "unreasonable conditions"

(ns) Against the larger backdrop of Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba struggling to get Parliament to approve a contentious $500 million grant from the United States, the general secretary of the country's ruling Congress party (NC) stated that "foreign aid with unreasonable conditions is unacceptable". On the other hand, the party official was not shy to warn against over-the-top nationalist beliefs, as Nepal is still very much in need of support from more developed countries. [The Himalayan Times]

Under the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC)-Nepal Compact, Washington will provide $100 million in grants a year over five years to support the implementation of two major infrastructure projects in Nepal, while Kathmandu would chip in $130 million.

The agreement, however, has become a hotly debated political issue in the Himalayan nation, with some political parties objecting to it on grounds that the US program is an attempt by Washington to counter Beijing's growing economic and political clout in the buffer country squeezed between India and China. [South China Morning Post]

Nepal: Maoist Centre political party decides on candidates for upcoming Senate polls

(ns) The recently re-elected chairman of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) (CPN(M)), Pushpa Kamal Dahal, has selected five candidates for the upcoming elections to parliament's upper house, scheduled to take place on January 29. [The Kathmandu Post]

Earlier this month, the ruling five-party coalition internally divided the 20 seats that will be up for election— six for Prime Minister Deuba's Nepali Congress party, five each for the (CPN(M)) and the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Unified Socialist), two for the People's Socialist Party and one for the Rastriya Janamorcha [see AiR No. 1, January/2022, 1]. Last week then, the coalition decided to create a coordination committee. [Khabarhub]

Nepal: Anti-Deuba camp in ruling Nepali Congress party elects Shekhar Koirala as new leader

(ns/lm) A faction of Nepal's ruling Nepali Congress party (NC) rivalling the leadership of party chairman and prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba has elected Shekhar Koirala as its new leader. [The Kathmandu Post]

Koirala, who belongs to one of the most prominent political families of Nepal, lost the election for party president in the recently held 14th general convention of the party to Deuba in a run-off last month. [AiR No. 51, December/2021, 3]

The meeting on January 5 brought together invited senior party leaders to chart out the future strategy of the anti-Deuba camp as well as how to challenge and check the prime minister, who controls more than 80

percent of the party office bearers and members of the party's central working committee.

The Koirala camp also decided to oppose any kind of electoral alliance with any political party during the upcoming federal, provincial and local elections.

Pakistan: Judicial Commission confirms nomination of first female Supreme Court judge

(lm) Pakistan's top judicial commission (JCP) on January 6 confirmed the elevation of a female judge to the Supreme Court for the first time in the country's history, an action that ruling party members and legal experts said all but ensures her appointment. [The Straits Times]

The move to pave the way for Justice Malik to join Pakistan's top court has been widely hailed by lawyers and civil society activists as a defining moment in the struggle for gender equality in Pakistan.

But decision has not been without opposition, with a number of lawyers' bodies threatening to strike and boycott court proceedings over the appointment after they said their calls for the drawing-up of fixed criteria for the nomination of Supreme Court judges were ignored. [The Guardian]

Last September, the nine-member JCP rejected Justice Malik's elevation after four out of its eight members opposed her, citing her lack of seniority. Justice Malik is fourth in seniority on the Lahore High Court, where she has served since 2012.

The nomination now goes to the Parliamentary Committee on Judges – where the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party has more than enough members to affirm her appointment to a 10-year term – for confirmation.

Malik has given some landmark verdicts in her career, last year outlawing the controversial "two-finger test" that was used to determine a woman's level of sexual activity when investigating rape cases. [The New York Times, $]

Pakistan: Opposition parties slam Prime Minister Khan over undisclosed foreign

funding report

(lm) Prime Minister Imran Khan's ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf party has grossly under-reported funds received from foreign nationals and firms, and also concealed its bank accounts, according to a report compiled by a scrutiny committee of Pakistan's Election Commission (ECP).

In 2014, a founding member of the PTI filed a petition with the ECP, alleging the party had illicitly received funds from foreigners. A scrutiny committee formed four years later submitted its report to the ECP in December of last year.

While noting that foreign funding collected abroad from legal sources was neither prohibited nor illegal, the report finds that the PTI failed to disclose funding worth more than $1.7 million – nearly 20 percent of its total funding – to the ECP between 2008 and 2013. The report also notes that the party received more than $2.3 million in funding from the United States, and $2.2 million from Dubai, but the scrutiny committee was not able to obtain access to the party's bank accounts in either country. [The News International] [The Hindu]

Throughout the scrutiny process, the PTI has dragged its feet arguing that the ECP does not have the authority to examine the accounts of any political party, and approached the Islamabad High Court six times to stay the hearing of the petition. In January 2021 then, the party admitted raising campaign funds through foreign accounts, but blamed illegalities on its agents in the United States without specifying who they were [see AiR No. 4, January/2021, 4].

Some observers argue that the fact that the committee struggled to get details of PTI foreign accounts and funds abroad is troubling, given that the party had campaigned on the pledge of clean and transparent governance. [Pakistan Observer]

In light of this, Pakistan's two main opposition parties – the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) – have urged the Supreme Court and the ECP to proceed against the PTI. Moreover, as many as 11 opposition Senators have submitted an adjournment motion seeking discussion on the disclosures of the report. [Dawn]

Pakistan: Decision on extension of army chief General Bajwa's tenure can wait,

Prime Minister Khan says

(lm) The decision on a possible extension of General Qamar Javed Bajwa tenure as Pakistan's Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) – currently set to conclude this November –can wait, according to Prime Minister Imran Khan. [The Hindu]

General Bajwa, a close confidant of the prime minister, was originally to retire at the end of his three-year term in November 2019. But Parliament in January 2020 passed a law proposing to raise the retirement age for the chiefs of all three branches of the Pakistani military, and the COAS, to 64 [see AiR No. 3, January/2020, 3].

By November, 20 lieutenant generals will have retired after completing their service period. Nineteen of them had been promoted to the rank of lieutenant general on different dates after appointment of General Bajwa as the COAS in 2016.

Sri Lanka: Government unveils $1 billion relief amidst deepening financial, humanitarian crisis

(lm) Sri Lanka's government on January 3 unveiled a $1.12 billion relief package, in the latest effort by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's administration to prevent a public backlash over surging prices of fossil fuels and other essential goods in a country that's running out of foreign exchange reserves to pay for imports. [South China Morning Post]

Inflation hit a record high of 11.1 percent last November and escalating prices have caused an estimated 500,000 people to fall below the poverty line since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the equivalent of five years' progress in fighting poverty. In light of this, the parliament in December approved an economic emergency previously declared by President Rajapaksa, giving the military the power to ensure essential items, including rice and sugar, were sold at set government prices [AiR No. 49, December/2021, 1]. [The Guardian]

The situation has been exacerbated by looming debt repayments by both government and private sector that observers put at $7.3 billion this year, starting with a $500 million international sovereign bond repayment maturing January 18. However, as of November, available foreign currency reserves were just $1.6 billion, barely enough for a few weeks of imports.

In an attempt temporarily ease the problems and stave off difficult and most likely unpopular policies, the government last year tapped currency swaps from China and Bangladesh, and loans to purchase petroleum from Oman. However, these loans provide only short-term relief and have to be paid back quickly at high interest rates, adding to Sri Lanka's debt load.

To balance its reliance on Beijing, Colombo negotiated a $1.9 billion four-pillar economic aid package with India last month [see AiR No. 49, December/2021, 1]. While the deal is yet to be finalized, the Sri Lankan government has agreed to officially lease to Indian Oil Corp. part of an oil tank farm near Trincomalee port in the northeast that New Delhi considers strategic in national security terms. [see entry in this edition]

The escalating food prices also stem from domestic crop losses that have emerged after a temporal ban on the imports of chemical fertilizers – widely used in the tea and rice industries – in May of last year [see AiR No. 44, November/2021, 1]. The administration has included a plan to buy crops at higher-than-market rates from farmers who have been protesting for much of last year.

Sri Lanka: People's Tribunal in 2009 murder of journalist postponed until April

(lm) A People's Tribunal set up by three leading press freedom NGOs, has moved a hearing on Sri Lanka to April 2022 in light of lockdown restrictions in the Netherlands.

The first hearing under the newly founded People's Tribunal on the Murder of Journalists took place on November 2 and saw the Lead Prosecutor, renowned international human rights lawyer Almudena Bernabeu, formally delivering the indictment to the panel of judges. The indictment contains charges against the governments of Sri Lanka, Mexico, and Syria for failing to deliver justice for the respective murders of Lasantha Wickrematunge, Miguel Ángel López Velasco, and Nabil Al-Sharbaji.

People's Tribunals are designed to hold states accountable for violations of international law by building public awareness and generating a legitimate evidence record. As such, they are not a criminal court in terms of international law.

The closing addresses will be held on May 3, 2022, to coincide with World Press Freedom Day.

Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in Southeast Asia

Cambodia: Arrests over protests against casino layoffs

(bs/am) The Cambodian police arrested over 20 people protesting against layoffs at the NagaWorld casino, the country's biggest casino. The protesters are demanding that 365 of the thousand former workers, who were allegedly unfairly laid off in April, will be rehired. [Channel New Asia] The strike began on December 18.

Following the 23-day-protest, the workers refused to participate in dispute-resolution talks set up by Cambodia's Labor Ministry, asking in a petition for the immediate release of eight union leaders who were arrested during the protests. The workers refused any engagement in peace talks until their leaders were released. [Radio Free Asia]

The events caught the attention of a group of independent United Nations (UN) Rights experts, who raised concerns after some pregnant women were among those arrested. According to the UN experts the arrests, which were conducted with the use of violence, not only violate fundamental rights such as the right to freedom of association, assembly, and expression but also constitute a breach of international human rights norms.

The experts called on the Cambodian Government to respect and implement the recommendations

accepted in the framework of the 2019 Universal Periodic Review by the UN Human Rights Council, which include an agreement to ensure that "civil society, including human rights defenders, can freely carry out their work without interference or hindrance." [UN News]

Cambodia: Five people detained for social media incitement against authorities

(bs) A Cambodian Provincial Court has charged three online journalists and two villagers for incitement against the authorities on social media in the context of a land dispute.

The five detainees were allegedly inciting villagers to occupy a flooded land zone protected by the state and were charged with "inciting to commit a felony" under Articles 494 and 495 of the Cambodian Criminal Code, according to which they could be convicted to 6 months to 2 years in jail. [Khmer Times]

Indonesia: Thermal coal export ban met with criticism

(gl) The government announced a thermal coal export ban as a means to protect the domestic power supply on January 1.

In line with the government's decision, President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo urged state-owned enterprises and private companies in the field of natural resources to prioritize domestic demand over exports. Non-complying companies will face mining business permit revocations (IUP) and export bans. As of December 6, the government has already revoked more than 2,000 IUPs. [Kompas] [Tempo1] [The Jakarta Post 1]

The government's plan has been met with disapproval from coal-mining firms as well as economists, who anticipate that the coal export ban might cause a spike in global coal prices and affect state revenues. The government had announced to review the ban during a meeting with coal companies on December 5; however, the meeting was postponed. On the same day, the House of Representatives informed the government that the ban could be extended until domestic needs are met. [Tempo 2] [The Jakarta Post2]

Internationally, the ban encountered resistance from the Japanese government. Indonesia exports around three-quarters of its low calorific value coal to Asian countries such as China, India, Japan, and South Korea. [Tempo 3]

Indonesia: House Speakers urges Government to control basic needs' prices

(gl) The House of Representatives´ Speaker joined in urging the government to control skyrocketing prices for basic needs such as cooking oil.

President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo had already asked the government to control basic necessities' prices, which still remained high during the second week of January. The speaker from the DPR stated that relevant ministries and regional governments must swiftly implement Jokowi's instructions. [Antara News]

Indonesia: More actors involved to pass disputed sexual violence bill

(gl) In a move to accelerate the deliberations on a disputed sexual violence eradication bill (RUU TPKS), President Jokowi involved multiple actors including the Women's Empowerment and Child Protection Ministry and the Law and Human Rights Ministry, in the campaign to coordinate with the House of Representatives (DPR). [Kompas 1]

The RUU TPKS draft was submitted to the DPR in 2016 and approved in December 2021, but it has not been passed yet. Tension and speculation are mounting as the RUU TPKS draft failed to be ratified during December's plenary sessions. RUU TPKS is expected to be approved by mid-January. [Kompas 2] [Tempo] [AiR No. 51, December/2021, 3]

Indonesia: Backlash against homeland security ministry to reform police oversight

(gl) The National Resilience Institute is receiving criticism for its proposal to establish a security ministry for overseeing the National Police, which currently reports directly to the President. Critics argue that

such a ministry could politicize law enforcement institutions. [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Corruption Eradication Commission arrests city mayor

(gl) According to last week´s reports, the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) arrested a city's mayor as a corruption suspect and seized US$ 208,000 from his residence during an operation in West Java on December 5. The suspect was arrested under the allegation of taking kickbacks from private companies in land purchase deals. He is also accused of taking bribes from city's officials with regard to official promotions. If convicted under the anti-corruption law, he faces a possible life imprisonment. [The Jakarta Globe1] [Tempo]

Together with the mayor, the police also arrested at least three businessmen and five officials from the local government. [The Jakarta Globe 2]

Indonesia: Terrorist killed during joint military-police operation

(gl) On 4 December, the Madago Raya Task Force, in a joint police-military operation conducted by the Indonesian National Police and the Indonesian Armed Forces, killed one of four remaining wanted combatants of a major Indonesian terrorist group, the East Indonesia Mujahidin (MIT).

The MIT, which pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, has been confined to the Central Sulawesi region in recent years. Notoriously known for beheading its victims, MIT has continued to terrorize villagers in the area with its brutal murders. [The Jakarta Globe]

Laos: Villagers resist land occupation by Chinese-owned banana plantation

(bs) Lao villagers have opposed a plan for 100 hectares land to be occupied by a Chinese banana farm. The villagers in a southern province refused to cede their lands, claiming that along with the land they will lose any source of income to support their families.

The Chinese company is currently in the process to obtain concessions from local authorities to take over the land. The authorities have already urged the locals to hand over parts of their land to the Chinese company for commercial use.

Chinese banana farms have allegedly been some of the major causes of water pollution in the country, preventing local communities from using the water for washing, cooking, and drinking. The plantations have been criticized for exposing the workers to severe health hazards and precarious living conditions. In early November 2021, over 500 workers quit their job in a banana plantation field after the company denied them access to basic necessities and medical treatment. [AiR No. 44, November/2021, 1]

Malaysia: Mahathir withdraws from upcoming election while supporting a new political party

(dw) Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, 96, stated that he may not run in the upcoming general election while ensuring that he would continue to support the Parti Pejuang Tanah Air (Pejuang) party, founded in August 2020 in opposition to the ruling Perikatan Nasional coalition.

The goal of Pejuang is to create a Malay-based political party that could challenge the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) led ruling alliance. The fundamental purpose of the upcoming election is to transform the administration from corrupt to clean. [New Strait Times] [The Malaysian Reserve]

Malaysia: Civil society urges investigation against Anti-Corruption Commission chief

(dw) Malaysian civil society groups are pushing the Anti-Corruption Advisory Board (LPPR) to be more transparent and investigate a case against the chief commissioner of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) on alleged abuses of power. [Malay Mail]

Opposition parties, also called for the establishment of an independent committee to probe the case. A prior LPPR's conclusion appeared to absolve the chief commissioner of misconduct, was met with disappointment by the critics claiming the MACC would be in danger of losing public trust. [Malay Mail]

Calls to investigate go also to the Prime Minister to whom the MACC reports. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia: Democratic alliance defends allegations of immoral behavior

(dw) The Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA) had to defend itself against allegations of immoral behavior after potentially damaging photos were spread online.

Images of young people wearing the youth-focused party's logo while drinking alcohol were shared on social media. Some posts also allege that party leaders may have plundered funds intended for flood relief efforts, albeit without any evidence. [see No. 51, December/2021, 3]

Morally charged accusations are frequently used as a tactic especially by conservative parties such as the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). [Malay Mail]

Malaysia: Trial of former Prime Minister Razak to begin in 2022

(dw) The trial of former Prime Minister Najib Razak over the alleged embezzlement of over RM2 billion ($477 million) in 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), an insolvent Malaysian strategic development company, has been rescheduled.

The trial, which was set to begin on January 6, was delayed until the afternoon due to the illness of a testifying prosecution witness.

On January 26 and 27, the 1MDB trial will continue, with Najib anticipated to testify as a defense witness in his wife's corruption prosecution. She is accused of soliciting and receiving millions of ringgits in bribes. [see No. 8, February/2021, 4] Trial dates have also been set for these cases every month from March through December, except for July. [Malay Mail] [see No. 24, June/2021, 3] [see No. 19, May/2021, 2]

Malaysia: Sabah based party to focus on and ensure indigenous politics

(dw) In Sabah, in northern Borneo, the oppositional Parti Warisan (Heritage Party), a multi-racial political party originated in Sabah, has emphasized that Sabah´s indigenous ethnic minority groups should join hands to avoid to become passive subjects of Peninsula-based administration and to resist federal political control.

It would be “nonsensical” for Sabah-based political parties moreover to create alliances with federal-based political parties without having real influence in terms of policy or decision-making. The question if and how the Heritage Party should aim at its involvement in federal politics has been an important issue in recent year´s policy debates of the party.

Sabah is a culturally and ethnically particularly diverse state which enjoys – like its neighbouring state of Sarawak - a greater level of autonomy than federal states on the Malaysian peninsula. [Borneo Today]

Malaysia: Prime Minister formed Special Parliamentary Session for flood management

(dw) The Prime Minister stated on January 6 that a Special Parliamentary Session will be held to discuss the recent disastrous floods, which displaced thousands of people and killed more than 50 individuals.

According to the prime minister, the payment for aid measures to help flood victims will begin on January 10. This aid will be channeled through the Prime Minister's Department's Implementation Coordination Unit (ICU) before giving to individuals concerned. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia strengthening security in Sabah amid invasion fears

(dw) Malaysia's security forces have been placed on high alert in Sabah over allegations that local leaders from neighboring islands in the southern Philippines planned to invade Sabah, which has close ties to some parts of the Philippines. Until now, however, there seems no consolidated evidence of such an invasion plot whatsoever.

Malaysia's Defense Minister claimed the government was working with its counterparts in the Philippines and Indonesia to verify intelligence regarding the purported action.

In February 2013, a group of 200 armed members of the so-called Royal Sulu Army had infiltrated Sabah however, prompting a month-long confrontation with Malaysian security personnel until they could secure the area. The conflict ended in June, with both sides suffering casualties. According to media sources, ten Malaysian security personnel and six civilians were slain, along with 56 Sulu shooters. [Benar News]

Myanmar: Numerous Clashes between government soldiers and resistance fighters

(nm) Clashes broke out between the Myanmar military and resistance forces in Kayah state, located in Myanmar's east, on January 6.

The episode started when junta soldiers entered a Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF) controlled area and tried to assault Battalion 2 of the KNDF, according to a KNDF officer. [Myanmar Now] KNDF is one of the largest rebel militias that oppose the junta.

Relations between the KNDF and Myanmar´s military are tense, especially in the Kayah state. The latest major attack was the Christmas Eve massacre where the Myanmar military killed 30 people and set their bodies ablaze. It was confirmed that the people killed were civilians seeking refuge. [see AiR No.1, January/2022, 1]

Fighting has also continued across the Chin state), located in Myanmar's west, where the Myanmar military was attacked by the People's Defence Force (PDF) and the Chindland Defence Force (CDF). According to representatives from the PDF and the CDF clashes intensified from January 6.

Insofar, two battles took place in Chin after the CDF launched a two-day attack on a Myanmar military base that housed 60 soldiers, where five junta soldiers were killed and another 10 injured, according to the CDF. [Myanmar Now]

The fighting is located in and around the Sagaing region of Myanmar, where the Myanmar military torched at least a dozen houses on December 28. This was a continuation of the air strikes that claimed

around 20 lives and thousands displaced on December 22. [see AiR No. 1, January/2022, 1]

In the very same region, the Myanmar military raided the area on January 5 setting ablaze at least six houses, including the home of the local chairman of the opposition National League for Democracy party. Nearly 700 residents fled to nearby communities, causing further food shortages and health risks. There were no reported casualties or injuries.

Another 15 houses were set ablaze in another township in the Sagaing region after junta soldiers entered the village. A local reported that once the Myanmar military arrived to their village, residents started fleeing in fear and once they were gone soldiers starting setting their homes on fire. [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Thousands displaced and in need of food and medication in Yaw region

(nm) Meanwhile, thousands of displaced people are living in makeshift camps and are desperate for food and medication in the country´s Yaw region, located in Myanmar's west.

Since September 2021, about 10,000 people have fled along the Gangaw-Kalay road, to escape attacks from the Myanmar military. Of the 10,000 people, over 3,000 people have reportedly sought out shelter as their homes were burned by junta soldiers in recent weeks. Currently, the camp is allegedly only running by donations from local neighborhoods and have not received any support from international organizations. [Myanmar Now]

Minors killed by Myanmar military

(nm) According to relatives of the parents and human rights groups, the Myanmar military has killed almost 90 minors with an additional 190 held hostage by security forces whilst their parents are in the process of being arrested.

The Association Assistance for Political Prisoners (AAPP) said in a statement that the minors have either been killed at home, on their way to receive medical treatment, fleeing junta forces or playing outside. The AAPP added that a total of 255 children, aged nine

moments to 18 years, have been detained since the February Coup in 2021. They confirmed that 62 were released, 191 remain detained and two were sentenced to death. The minister for women, youths, and children affairs for the National Unity Government (NUG), an opposition political party, urged the international community and international organizations to take responsibility and provide justice to victims. [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar junta appoints new Northwestern Regional Head

(nm) A new head of the Northwestern Regional Command was appointed by the Myanmar junta on 6 January. Major General Than Hteik has now officially replaced Brigadier-General Phyo Thant, where Phyo Thant is now appointed as the deputy minister for border affairs.

Phyto Thant was ousted from the position due to heavy losses of junta soldiers against resistance fighters in Chin and Sagaing region under his command. According to the National Unity Government, resistance fighters have killed more than 4,972 junta soldiers since the February coup in 2021. [Myanmar Now]

Myanmar: Most of NLD members arrested since Myanmar coup

(nm) According to the National League for Democracy (NLD), after the Myanmar´s military coup, the major opposition and former governing political party, the junta has reportedly arrested 649 NLD members including former government leader Aung San Suu Kyi and former President Win Myint as well as many MPs. At least 489 are still being detained in prisons throughout the country whilst some others have been released by the junta. An NLD committee member said that many were arrested because they were presumed to be involved in the anti-coup protests.

The NLD has labelled these arrests as “illegal” and “baseless” as they were carried out by an “illegitimate regime”. [Radio Free Asia]

Labor workers in Myanmar face abuse

(nm) Since the February coup in 2021, factory managers seem to increasingly violating workers' rights as late wage payments and forced overtime are becoming the new norm.

According to workers in a garment factory in Yangon, managers decide whether to award overtime pay or not, and that they have the "upper hand" in decisions involving their employees. In an extreme case, a worker in a sweater factor also in Yangon said that they had not received wages owing from 10 months of work as the factor closed down due to COVID-19. Out of the wages that are paid, they do not meet the cost of living, food and accommodation.

The Ministry of Labor denied such reports. [Radio Free Asia]

The Philippines: Senate to elect new president in February

(lb) The Philippines' Senate will elect its new president in February 2022 to prevent a constitutional crisis that may arise by postponing the presidential elections slated for May. A senator said in a statement that the government was hoping to activate a constitutional mechanism which would ensure a continued operation of the government should the nation fail to elect a leader or replace President Duterte and his Vice President, whose terms end on June 30. In such an event, the Senate president elected in February will be constitutionally mandated assume the presidency under Section 7 of the Constitution. [Inquirer News]

The Philippines: Former Senator Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s presidential candidacy under threat

(lb) Presidential aspirant and former senator Ferdinand Marcos Jr. might be requested to withdraw his candidacy in the May presidential election after his lawyer told the Commission on Elections that Marcos Jr. has yet to serve his sentence on tax payment ordered in 1995.

The unpaid taxes and fines could prevent Marcos Jr. from working in public office under Section 253 of the National Internal Revenue Code as the law states that "a government official who violates the tax code would be dismissed from the public service and

perpetually disqualified from holding any public office, to vote and to participate in any election." [Inquirer News]

The Philippines: Commission on Elections releases tentative list for 2022 election

(my) The Commission on Election (Comelec) released a tentative list of eleven presidential aspirants, nine vice-presidential aspirants. For senatorial positions, the number was reduced from 70 to 64.

The number of candidates may change further over time, depending on the evaluation of Certificates of Nomination, Certificates of Candidacy, and Certificates of Nomination and Acceptance. The list is also subject to change based on a resolution from the Commission En Banc.

Ferdinand Marcos. Jr is still facing a petition from martial law victims under his late dictator father's reign. Protestors have submitted several petitions to the Commission on Election to disqualify his candidacy despite his popularity in two survey polls in December. [Philippine Star] [See Air No. 52, December/2021, 4] [See AiR No. 1, January/2022, 1] [Voice of America]

The Comelec also received a Temporary Restraining Order (TRO) from the Supreme Court. The TRO was issued to restrain the commission from disqualifying the participation of three party-list groups in the election. [Philippine Star 2] [Philippine Star 3]

The Philippines: Act banning child marriage signed into law

(my) According to documents released by the presidential office, President Rodrigo Duterte on December 2021 signed into law the Republic Act No. 11596 that bans child marriage and provides for prison terms of up to 12 years for marrying or cohabiting with anyone under 18. The same punishment applies those who arrange or solemnize underage unions. [NDTV] [Philippine Star]

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSDW), the Department of Education, and the Department of the Interior and Local Government will be involved in the implementation of the new law, ranging from setting up programs to address the prevalence of child marriage and provide appropriate

services, to launching culturally-sensitive and age-appropriate sexuality education, to running systematic information and prevention campaigns. [Philippine News Agency]

The Philippines: President Duterte signs act to assist farmers affected by COVID-19

(my) President Rodrigo Duterte signed Republic Act No. 11598, or Cash Assistance for Filipino Farmers Act, that aims to provide an annual direct cash assistance to farmers who were hardly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The funding will come from the excess of annual tariff revenues in the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF), approximately $194 Million. Direct cash will be provided until 2024. The Bureau of Customs will mandate the immediate remit of the funding to the Department of Agriculture. [Philippine News Agency]

The Philippines: Communist Party leader killed in a gunfight with government troops

(my) The senior commander to the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA), Menandro Villanueva, was killed in a gunfight against the government troops. The man, also known as Bok, was one of the founding members of the NPA, and headed several guerrilla's national operations, commands and controlled rebel units. [Benar News] [Philippine Star]

In December 2021, the Department of National Defense (DND) and the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) offered PHP 5.6 Million (approximately US$109 thousand) in cash to those who gave information regarding Bok. [Philippine News Agency 1]

Prior to the case, another NPA squad leader heading the operation in Southern Panay surrendered himself on December 1. [Philippine News Agency 2]

Thailand: Prime Minister endorses screening panel to receive lèse majesté complaints

(bs) Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha has approved the proposal to establish a screening panel that will receive complaints filed on the lèse majesté.

The panel would be formed of seven members and would receive the citizens' complaints against anybody who has allegedly offended the Thai monarchy. [Thai PBS World]

In Thailand, lèse-majesté is the crime of defamation, insult, or threatening the Thai monarch, and it is punishable under Section 112 of the Thai Criminal Code. The provision was at the center of the debate in early November 2021 when the Constitutional Court ruled against a request to reform the law by three pro-democracy leaders. [AiR No. 46, November/2021, 3]

Thailand: No ground to allegations against Prime Minister

(bs) The Secretariat Office of the House of Representatives announced that there are no grounds to affirm that the Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha has paid 5 million baht (nearly $150,000) to guarantee himself a number of votes from the members of the parliament to survive a non-confidence vote on September 2.

The investigations began after a Member of the Parliament submitted the allegations to the House on the same day of the vote. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Election committee requests Constitutional Court to dissolve coalition party

(kc) The Office of the Election Commission submitted an official document on January 7 requesting that the Constitutional Court rules on the dissolution of the Tairaktham Party, a government coalition party, over membership bribery fraud. The party has a seat in the House of Representatives. [Dailynews, in Thai]

The leaders of the Tairaktham Party faced criminal charges after the Election Commission ruled in late 2020 that the party offered a monetary incentive to villagers in Phichit province to apply for the party membership from September 2018 to January 2019. [Thaipost, in Thai]

Thailand: Former ministers form new party to take on rival PPRP

(ay) Four former ministers joined to form a new political party which will be in direct competition with the ruling Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP). The four founders left the PPRP after they were discharged at a party general assembly in June 2020.

The party is currently in the process of registering, while the name of the party, party leader, executive names and related information has been kept confidential.

The party registration is expected to be completed and the party will be ready to launch in late January. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Former Prime Minister Thaksin plans to return to Thailand

(as) Fugitive former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra announced that he is planning to end his self-imposed exile overseas and to return to Thailand during a ClubHouse chat under his alias, Tony Woodsome, on 4 January.

Thaksin fled Thailand in 2008 before the Supreme Court found him guilty of abusing his authority in connection with a land purchase deal and sentenced him in absentia to two years in prison. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Draft law could jeopardize work of NGOs, experts warn

(bs) A draft law on non-profit organizations that the cabinet has approved in principle on January 4, may pose a threat to work of these organizations, according to experts who cite – among others – the requirement for non-profit organizations to disclose their mission statement and their sources of funding. Furthermore, they will be forbidden to undertake, promote, or participate in activities that may threaten or disrupt what is vaguely termed as national security and harmony and the well-being of other people. Any violation will cause suspension of the activities and liability under criminal law. Also, the bill would impose

on non-profit organizations the status of a juristic entity. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Myanmar migrants arrested at the border

(bs) Thai authorities arrested 43 Myanmar nationals after they crossed the border illegally fleeing the fighting in their country. The group entered Thailand after paying job brokers, who promised the migrants a safe job across the border.

Over 200 people have been waiting to cross the border since January 7 fearing an imminent airstrike. 29 people who managed to cross the border were immediately arrested, pending deportation.

In 2021 over 68,000 illegal migrants entered Thailand, most of whom were from Myanmar. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3]

Timor-Leste: Democratic Party proposes two candidates for presidential election

(bs) The Democratic Party of Timor-Leste informed in a press conference that two of its leaders will be running for the presidential elections scheduled for March 2022.

According to the secretary-general, the presentation of two names does not mean the existence of factions or divisions within the party, but instead, it shows high democratic values within the party, which remains unified while accepting differences among its members. [E-Global, in Portuguese]

Vietnam: Provincial leaders ask government to speed up decentralization of power

(bs) Provincial representatives in Vietnam called the government to expedite the process of power decentralization to localities by empowering local authorities in provincial management.

The leaders proposed the government increase decentralization in various sectors including capital construction, land-use documentation, and industrial

park licensing among others. They also agreed to enhanced supervision on the decentralized operations, especially with regards to the use of the resource allocated. [Nhân Dân]

Vietnam: Former Deputy Secretary sentenced to 10 years in jail for corruption

(bs) A former Deputy Secretary of Ho Chi Minh City's party unit, arrested in 2020, received a 10-year jail sentence for "violations in the management and use of state-owned property that led to losses or wastefulness". It resulted in the loss of $29.4 million to the allocated budget for the city.

The former CEOs of the private companies involved in the scandal were sentenced to 16 and 20 years in jail under the charges of "embezzlement" and violations in the management and use of the state-owned property.

The former Deputy Secretary was dismissed from all his public positions in December 2018. [VNExpress]

Vietnam: Couple arrested during livestream for criticizing the state online

(bs) The authorities arrested a Vietnamese couple during a livestream on YouTube criticizing the government for "abusing the rights to freedom and democracy to violate the state's interests."

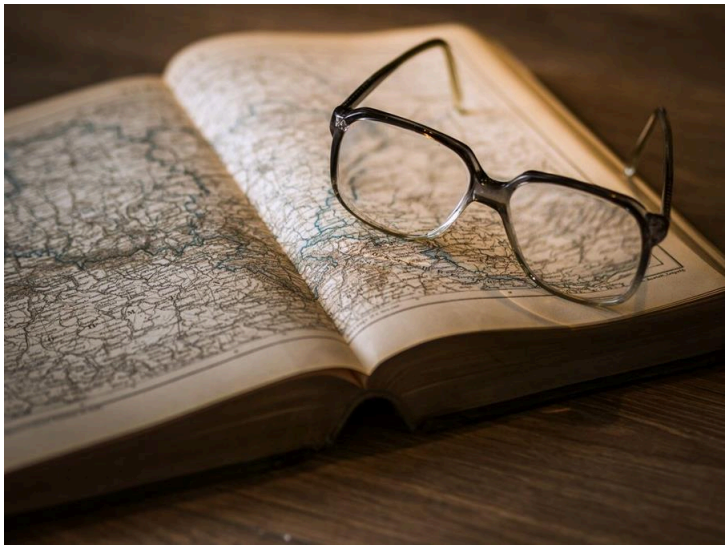
The husband had been running a YouTube channel with 40,000 followers for over a year before the arrest. The man also posted on Facebook about the death of a Vietnamese soldier allegedly caused by his comrades. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam military changes story on soldier death

(am) Last year, a young Vietnamese soldier reportedly died in a fall in his barracks but actually, it is believed that the soldier was beaten to death by his comrades. Nguyen Van Thien is the third soldier reported to have died while performing military service in Vietnam throughout 2021.

Reports claiming Thien had died from a fall were simply the army's "initial assessment" said political commissar for the Gia Lai provincial military command. The Agency of Criminal Investigation has now filed charges against comrades for causing intentional injury. The names of those being charged were not announced and there are no further details on the case, as investigations are ongoing. [Radio Free Asia]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia



China-US relations: Biden reiterates Chinese threat to democracy in January 6 Capitol attack speech

(pm/dql) In his speech marking the first anniversary of the assault of the Capitol on January 6, US President Joe Biden addressed challenges to US democracy posed "[b]oth at home and abroad" by "forces that value brute strength over the sanctity of democracy, fear over hope, personal gain over public good. While condemning his predecessor Donal Trump – without naming him – for setting personal interests and "ego matters" higher than US democracy and its constitution, he warned that China and Russia are "betting America will become more like them and less like us," making America "a place for the autocrat, the dictator, the strongman." [The White House, USA] [SCMP] [CNN]

China-US trade relations: Easing business travels

(pm) The American Chamber of Commerce in China announced that the US-China Fast Track Travel Channel Program was launched with immediate effect on 5 January. The program reduces the time for the issuance of so-called PU-letters – invitations issued by local Chinese authorities for travellers and their dependants –

for American businesspeople and their families to travel to China from up to two months to five to ten days.

The program's launch comes as trade tensions between the two countries remain high, with tit-for-tat sanctions in place and the absence of long-awaited senior-level trade talks after Beijing's commitment to purchase more American products under the phase one trade deal expired on December 31. [SCMP]

Meanwhile, a Chinese national pleaded guilty before a US federal court to conspiracy to commit economic espionage, admitting that he had stolen a trade secret while being employee at Monsanto, an American agrochemical and agricultural biotechnology corporation, and one of its subsidiaries in Missouri. He was indicted on eight charges in 2019. [The Guardian]

China-US space race to intensify: Beijing plans more than 40 space launches this year

(pm) China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation, the main contractor for China's space program, announced that it plans over 40 space launches for 2022, including six manned space missions. It also said that the Tiangong space station will be completed this year.

The launch schedule reflects China's determination to play a leading role in space exploration and an intensifying competition with the US in this field in which Beijing is increasingly cooperate with Russia. [South China Morning Post].

China-Kazakhstan relations: Xi Jinping assures support for embattled president

in escalating protests

(pm/dql) Amid the ongoing deadly protests against the regime of Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in Almaty, Chinese President Xi Jinping has sent a message of support for the Central Asian country against forces that seek to undermine the country stability and against a colour revolution instigated by external forces. Xi also reassured: "Regardless of the risks and challenges encountered, China is Kazakhstan's trusted friend and reliable partner." [CGTN] [SCMP]

Similarly, Foreign Minister Wang Yi confirmed in a phone with his Kazakh counterpart Mukhtar Tileuberdi that China was willing to elevate security cooperation to support Kazakhstan in maintaining stability, calling the protests terrorism and acts of violence. [The State Council, China]

Xi's and Wang's statements come amid arrival of Russian paratroopers in Kazakhstan that are part of a peacekeeping mission by the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) – an alliance between Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – in an attempt to support Tokayev in regaining control of the country. Putin's move further complicates the already tense negotiation atmosphere between Russia and the US over the Ukraine, with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken questioning Kazakhstan's request Russian military aid and warning that "one lesson of recent history is that once Russians are in your house, it's sometimes very difficult to get them to leave." [The Guardian] [AP News] [BBC]

Furthermore, the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) of which Kazakhstan is a member state declared that its readiness to provided assistance to Kazakhstan upon a request from country. [TASS]

Public discontent over surging fuel prices have triggered the protests which have already caused the deaths of more than 160 civilians and members of the security forces and seen the arrest of at least nearly 10,000 people. Facing the worst unrest since the country had gained independence three decades ago, President Tokayev sacked the government and imposed the state of emergency on January 5. Two days later, along with thanks to Russian President Putin for sending in troops, he issued an official shoot-to-kill order to the military in January, reflecting the escalating development of the protests. [Euronews] [Reuters] [DW]

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visits Maldives, Sri Lanka in outreach closely watched by India

(lm) Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi completed two visits to the Maldives and Sri Lanka last week, a trip that was closely watched by India, which considers both islands part of its extended neighborhood.

The Chinese top diplomat's visit to both countries was part of a five-leg trip to littoral nations in the Indian Ocean that also took him to Eritrea, Kenya, and the Comoros in East Africa, in a continuation of the tradition of Chinese foreign ministers starting every new year with a visit to Africa.

The Maldives

In the Maldives, Foreign Minister Wang held talks with his counterpart Abdulla Shahid and paid a courtesy call on President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih. During the visit, the two countries on January 8 signed key bilateral agreements on developing and maintaining infrastructure in the strategically placed archipelago, besides agreeing on a visa-free travel arrangement for Maldivians intending to travel to China. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China] [The Hindu] [The Straits Times]

Wang's visit comes at a time when former Maldives President Abdulla Yameen is leading a concerted "India Out" campaign, which has been simmering since 2018 propagating that New Delhi is seeking a military presence that will compromise the country's sovereignty. [Observer Research Foundation]

India, for its part, has been successful in resetting ties with Maldives under incumbent President Solih, who openly pursues an 'India First' foreign policy, but has also underlined the importance of working with China. Following regime change in Male in 2018, New Delhi committed $ 1.4 billion to development in the island nation, including a $500 million bridge connecting four islands, rivalling a $200 million friendship bridge built by China [see AiR No. 35, August/2021, 5].

Sri Lanka

On January 9 then, Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Sri Lanka's President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who requested a restructuring of Colombo's loans and access to a concessionary credit facility for imports of essential goods, as the island nation struggles in the

throes of its worst economic crisis. The Sri Lankan president also requested assistance to enable Chinese tourists to travel to Sri Lanka within a secure bubble. [Voice of America]

Wang's visit to Colombo comes after relations between the two countries were recently strained over a Chinese organic fertilizer shipment that Sri Lanka had rejected as it was found to be contaminated. [AiR No. 48, November/2021, 5]

The Chinese top diplomat and Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, the president's brother, later visited Colombo's Port City, a $1.4 billion joint venture project between a Chinese state-owned enterprise and the Sri Lankan government. [Associated Press]

China is Sri Lanka's fourth biggest lender, behind international financial markets, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Japan. Central Bank figures show that current Chinese loans account for about 10 percent of Sri Lanka's $35 billion foreign debt, not including loans to state-owned businesses, which are accounted for separately and thought to be substantial. [The Guardian]

China growing foothold in Africa: Wang Yi's visit to Kenya and Eritrea, Marocco BRI deal

(dql/pm) Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced on Thursday, January 6, that China would appoint a special envoy to help facilitate peace in the Horn of Africa, adding that Beijing intends to focus its aid on the continent from infrastructure to trade. Wang made the announcement during his visit to Kenya, which has been involved in diplomatic efforts to stop the war in Ethiopia that erupted late last year between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's federal government. [Reuters]

Wang also revealed a major infrastructure plan for the Horn of Africa under which Kenya's Mombasa-Nairobi Railway would be extended to Uganda, Rwanda, South Sudan, and eventually to the Democratic Republic of Congo. Furthermore, ports on the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean would be developed. [SCMP]

In talks with his Kenyan counterpart Raychelle Awuor Omamo on the same day, both ministers agreed to deepen mutual trust and the political foundation of relations between China and Kenya before witnessing

the signing of agreements of digital economy and investment as well as on Chinese imports of Kenyan agricultural products. [Zawya 1]

During his visit to Eritrea on January 4 and 5, the Chinese Foreign Minister met his counterpart Osman Saleh for bilateral talks. Both sides agreed to "actively conduct practical cooperation, under the framework of the Strategic Partnership and Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, in various sectors of mutual interest." They also affirmed their opposition against using the pretext of democracy and humans to interfere in internal affairs of other countries. [Zawya 2]

In a separate statement following his meeting with President Isaias Afwerki, Wang condemned sanctions imposed on Eritrea by the US and some European countries for over involvement in the Ethiopian conflict. Wang also pledged to provide additional US$15.7 million in financial support for Eritrea which in November joined China's Belt and Road Initiative. [SCMP 1]

Meanwhile, Morocco and China signed on January 5 an agreement which provides for a roadmap for the joint implementation of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in the North African country, aimed at facilitating trade, research and technological cooperation.

Besides Morocco, four other North African countries – Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria – have signed a BRI memorandum of understanding. Morocco, however, is the first to commit to the implementation plan, which contains specific cooperation and projects as well as proposed timetables. [SCMP2]

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi promise to deepen health cooperation in Comoros

(pm) On January 6, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met Comorian President Azali Assoumani and Foreign Minister Dhoihir Dhoulkamal in Moroni, the capital of Comoros to discuss bilateral cooperation. During the talks, Wang pledged to deepen health cooperation between the two countries and assured that China will support Comoros in achieving universal immunization against the pandemic within 2022 and in completely eradicating malaria by 2025. He also re-affirmed support for the "Emerging Comoros Plan 2030", the country's development strategy the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. [Foreign Ministry, China]

Japan and Australia sign Reciprocal Access Agreement

(ec/la) At a virtual summit on Thursday, January 6, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison formally signed the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA). The RAA is intended to allow for seamless cooperation between the Japanese Self-Defense Force and the Australian Defence Force in matters of security and humanitarian aid. The two parties will also establish a joint committee to discuss the details of the RAA's implementation. Leaders from both countries hailed the RAA as a landmark in promoting freedom in the Indo-Pacific area. [SBS News]

Articles of the RAA include accelerated access to visiting forces subject to prior notification: the freedom of access to and movement between those facilities made available to the visiting force: and the exemption of visiting forces and civilian components from visa requirements for entering and leaving the state, though a passport or similar security identification is still required. The RAA does not detail any specific troop deployments or new protocols. [Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement]

This is the second bilateral defense and security pact Japan has signed since the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between with the United States in 1960. Japan launched negotiations in October with the U.K. and France to reach similar defense cooperation pacts. While Beijing was not directly mentioned during the meeting, observers consider the treaty to be an important development in QUAD-alliance countries' (US, India, Australia and Japan) efforts to contain China's military expansion in the Indo-Pacific. The Chinese Foreign Ministry has been swift to criticize the RAA as failing to promote peace, stability, and regional trust. [ABC News] [The Global Times]

Japan and USA agree to base restrictions

(ec) Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has announced that the United States has agreed to impose new restrictions on US military bases. Except for essential activities, US troops will be confined to military facilities for 14 days, as of Monday January 10, with all personnel required to wear masks. The lockdown comes after Japanese Foreign Minister

Yoshimasa Hayashi made a request to US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in a phone call on January 6 for United States Forces Japan (USFJ) to enact a curfew on their bases in Japan, so as to contain a recent surge of COVID19 among US military personnel. Hayashi stated afterwards that Blinken affirmed the importance of ensuring the wellbeing of both US military personnel and Japanese citizens, with USFJ releasing a statement shortly after announcing new mitigation measures. [Japan Today] [The Asahi Shimbun]

Kishida's statement is made even as it appears increasingly likely that the central government will impose a state of quasi-emergency on Okinawa, Yamaguchi and Hiroshima Prefectures from an Omicron surge derived from US bases. Relations between Okinawa Prefecture and the central government have been marred by ongoing disputes over a new airfield at Ginowan, which is overwhelmingly unpopular amongst Okinawans. Kishida was elected Prime Minister by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) after his predecessor, Yoshihide Suga, was compelled to resign amid growing disapproval of his handling of COVID19. [The Mainichi]

For additional information, please consider reading the press statement from the USFJ. [United States Forces Japan]

Japan and USA sign two new defense deals

(ec) Speaking after virtual "two-plus-two" talks with Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi and Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that the two countries will be looking to implement new agreements to expand their defense cooperation, the first of which is the much discussed hosting budget increase for US military bases in Japan. The expansion of US-Japan defense ties is prompted by concerns over the potential for Chinese moves in the South and East China Seas to destabilize the Indo-Pacific area. [Associated Press News] [Kyodo News] [See AiR No. 52, December/2021, 4]

Alongside US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, Blinken and his Japanese counterparts expressed concerns over the destabilizing effects Chinese moves in the Indo-Pacific area could have on the international order, affirming the importance of upholding peace and human rights in the South and East China Seas. The Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and the US

Armed Forces (USAF) have drafted a joint operation plan for a hypothetical response to a Chinese attack on Taiwan. [The Japan Times] [See AiR No. 52, December/2021, 4]

Blinken also stated that the two countries have agreed to improve collaboration on the development of emerging technologies, with special focus given to hypersonic missile counters. The virtual talks occurred less than twenty-four hours after North Korea announced its latest ballistic missile test was a hypersonic missile, whilst China and Russia have both tested their own hypersonic missiles in recent months. Japanese and American officials are presently keeping the nature of the R&D sharing agreement unclear. [Breaking Defense] [Defense World] [See AiR No. 44, November/2021, 1]

Separate from the virtual talks, the US Department of Defense (USDD) has confirmed that Japan has granted the Boeing Corporation a 470 million US dollar contract to upgrade its fleet of Mitsubishi F-15Js into F-15JSI Super Interceptors. The upgrades are part of Japan's Super Interceptor program, so as to keep the jets on par with its fleet of F-35 Lightning II stealth fighters. Upgrades to the Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) have assumed greater importance in the face of Chinese and Russian moves in the region, with the Mitsubishi F-2 scheduled to be replaced by the sixth-generation F-X stealth fighter jet. The F-15J is the JASDF's main interceptor. [Aerotime Hub] [Stripes.com] [See AiR No. 52, December/2021, 4]

Japan: Tokyo promises US to bolster nuclear energy development

(la) Japan's industry minister Koichi Hagiuda announced on Thursday Japan's plans to boost the development of nuclear power technology during energy talks with the US. Hagiuda clarified to U.S. Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm that the Japanese government will stimulate local energy providers to join an international scheme developed by American companies to test fast reactors and small modular reactors. The two countries also agreed to cooperate in other clean energy sectors, including hydrogen, carbon capture and recycling, and fuel ammonia, in line with the partnership that they concluded in April last year to work together to curb caron emissions.

The energy talks were the first of their kind since Hagiuda assumed his role last year amid Japan's recent efforts to ramp up its nuclear power technology. With

these developments, Japan is slowly moving away from its reserved nuclear policy following the 2011 Fukushima disaster, which led to a nationwide halt of nuclear power plants, towards a more open regulations regarding nuclear energy. [Mainichi]

Japan: Government develops railgun technology against hypersonic missile threats

(la) Japan's defense ministry announced plans this week to develop railgun technology aimed to intercept hypersonic missiles from countries such as North Korea, China and Russia. The government has allocated US$56 million to facilitate this research in its fiscal 2022 budget, with which it intends to develop weapon that can fire projectiles at six times the speed of sound.

The Ministry's announcement follows the government's decision in 2020 to suspend the deployment of the US Aegis Ashore missile defense system, for technical difficulties and financial budget reasons. Railguns have some major advantages over missiles, which might also have contributed to Japan's decision to forgo the Aegis Ashore system.

Unlike traditional missiles, railguns do not use chemical propellants but electromagnetism to launch projectiles. Railguns can therefore continuously fire projectiles with a much higher speed that conventional ones, allowing interception of multiple hypersonic threats.

In addition, Japanese railgun technology could aid the government in its endeavor to develop a stronger national defense force, allowing for more independence from the US in ensuring the Japan's national security.

As one of the main challenges of railgun development is finding a power source that can produce the massive amount of energy necessary for the launch of each projectile, observers expect the nascent railgun technology might also form another incentive for the Japanese government to re-open its nuclear energy industry, which has been halted since the 2011 Fukushima disaster. [Asia Times]

North Korea fires two ballistic missiles within a week

(dql) The outlook for improvements in inter-Korean peace talks for the new year remain bleak, after North Korea fired two ballistic missiles in a week.

On January 5, Pyongyang fired a first missile off the country's east coast which Japan's coast guard, which first reported the launch, believed to be a ballistic missile, while Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi later revealed it had flown about 500 kilometres. It came only hours before South Korean President Moon Jae-in attended a groundbreaking ceremony to kick off construction for the Donghae Line railway project linking the eastern coast border town of Jejin to Gangneung in Gangwon. The line is of high symbolic value for inter-Korean relations as the 110.9 kilometers stretch will fill the missing part to allow the railway run uninterruptedly across the eastern coast of the Korean Peninsula. During his speech, Moon urged Pyongyang to "make more sincere efforts toward dialogue," referring to the missile test.

The second followed on Tuesday, January 11, and came just a day after the US, France, the Irish Republic, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Albania condemned the first test in a joint statement. [Aljazeera] [BBC] [Korea Joong Ang Daily]

South Korea, Iran discuss frozen assets in Vienna

(aml) South Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun and his Iranian counterpart Ali Bagheri Kani have met in Vienna, Austria to discuss the $7 billion in funds that are currently frozen in two South Korean banks, due to US sanctions.

The meeting took place on the side lines of negotiations in Vienna to restore the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) that former US President Donald Trump withdrew from in 2018. Although South Korea isn't directly involved, the negotiations have a direct impact on the assets that can only be released with the approval of the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control. Both sides agreed to push working-level consultations and to release the assets as soon as possible. [The Korea Herald] [The Korea Times]

South Korea, Saudi Arabia agree to boost ties for low carbon economy

(aml) South Korea's Industry Minister Moon Sung-wook and Saudi Arabia's Energy Minister Abdulaziz bin Salman have agreed to strengthen their countries' cooperation in nuclear power and other fields to prepare for a transition to a low carbon economy.

During his three-day stay in Saudi Arabia, Moon proposed to not only boost the countries' ties in oil and the traditional energy sector, but also in nuclear power, renewable energy, and hydrogen. Furthermore, he expressed South Korea's interest in participation in a major nuclear power plant project in Saudi Arabia.

In a following bilateral energy policy dialogue, they also involved major energy companies of the two countries, including Korea Electric Power Corp. and Saudi Aramco, to discuss ways to improve collaboration between the public and private entities for a smooth transition to a lower-carbon economy. [The Korea Herald]

Gulf Foreign Ministers' visit to China this week

(dql) Foreign Ministers from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain along with the Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Nayef bin Falah al-Hajrah have arrived on Monday, January 10, in China for a five-day visit.

The focus of the talks during this visit is expected to be on deepening energy ties between China and the Gulf states as well as on a potential free-trade agreement between China and the GCC. [Aljazeera]

The visit comes on the heels of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi diplomatic visits to Eritrea, Kenya and Comoros in Africa and to the Maldives and Sri Lanka in South Asia in the past week (see reports above). It also comes amid a political crisis in Kazakhstan where Beijing is fostering deep economic ties (see report above).

Furthermore, Wang is going to host the Turkish and the Iranian Foreign Minister on Wednesday and Friday respectively, reflecting Beijing's efforts to play a role in the Middle East. [Reuters]

Already on Monday, Wang and his Saudi Arabian counterpart Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud discussed ways to connect China's Belt and Road Initiative with Saudi Arabia's plans of economic diversification and reportedly agreed on a "broad consensus on bilateral

relations, practical cooperation and multilateral coordination." [Xinhua] [SCMP]

During his talks with Bahrain's Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani on Tuesday, Wang affirmed that China was committed to deepening bilateral cooperation in various fields, including 5G communications, e-commerce, digital economy, and big data, as well as infrastructure and photovoltaic projects. Both ministers also discussed cooperation between China and the GCC, in addition to Iranian nuclear issue and the situation in the Middle East. [CGTN]

Taiwan to set up US$1 billion credit fund to support business cooperation with Lithuania

(dql) Taiwan on Tuesday, January 11, revealed that a US$1 billion credit fund will soon be launched to encourage Taiwan-Lithuania business cooperation and deepen bilateral economic ties. The announcement is an attempt to fend off Chinese diplomatic and trade pressure on the Baltic state over the opening of a representative office bearing the name "Taiwanese Representative in Lithuania." [Reuters]

This announcement comes days after Taiwan's Foreign Ministry said that the Taiwan it will set up a separate US$ 200 million fund to invest in Lithuania's high-tech sector. [BBC]

Both announcements followed on the heels of a statement of Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda who admitted that the naming of the representative office as "Taiwanese" office was a mistake, adding that he, who as President oversees foreign policy according to the constitution, was not consulted in the matter of the naming of the office. [Euronews]

In response to the Vilnius' decision to allow the establishment of the representative office last year, China successively withdrew its ambassador, expelled the Lithuanian ambassador in Beijing, downgraded relations with Lithuania and finally place trade restrictions on Lithuanian products [see AiR No. 47, November/2021, 4, AiR No. 51, December/2021, 3].

In a related development, Taiwan Tobacco and Liquor Corp, a state-owned manufacturer and distributor of cigarettes and alcohol, has reportedly purchased more than 20,000 bottles of Lithuanian rum that China is

said to block the shipments from entering the country. [Aljazeera]

Pakistan's National Security Advisor to visit Afghanistan this month to ease tensions over border fencing

(lm) A high-level Pakistani delegation headed by National Security Advisor Moeed Yusuf will be visiting neighboring Afghanistan later this month to ease tensions stemming from the installation of a security fence on the porous border separating the two countries. The decision to send the top official to Kabul was taken during a high-level meeting of Afghanistan Inter-Ministerial Coordination Cell on January 6. [Dawn]

In 2017, Pakistan begun constructing a fence along the Afghan border – known as the Durand Line – to reduce cross-border militancy and smuggling. It says about 94 percent of the construction work has been completed, despite protestations from Kabul, which has always contested that the barrier would divide families and friends of Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, the Pashtun.

On December 19, Taliban members seized barbed wire put up by Pakistani troops in Afghanistan's eastern province of Nangarhar, and warned them not to do more fencing. Later that month, a similar incident took place in Nimroz province. Taliban officials played down the significance of the first clash, but the second incident produced a stronger reaction. [AiR No. 1, January/2022, 1]

Pakistan has a lot at stake in the dispute. Tensions with the Afghan Taliban could complicate Islamabad's efforts to rein in the Pakistani Taliban, known by their acronym TTP, who have been waging deadly terrorist attacks against security forces as well as civilians in Pakistan for many years to overthrow the government in Islamabad and rule with its own brand of Islamic sharia law. Taliban-mediated talks led to a one-month ceasefire in November of last year, but the TTP refused to extend it; Pakistan must now hope for fresh talks. [AiR No. 50, December/2021, 2]

The alternative — asking the Taliban to expel the TTP from Afghanistan or preventing them from carrying out attacks in Pakistan — is unlikely. The terrorist group is a former battlefield allies of the Afghan Taliban, and any punitive move could exacerbate internal divides. This leaves the option of Pakistan targeting TTP bases in Afghanistan, something it has

done in the past and may have repeated in recent days. Such a military move would not sit well with the Taliban. [Associated Press] [Foreign Policy, $]

India, Sri Lanka finalize deal to jointly redevelop strategic Trincomalee oil terminal

(sr/rs/lm) India and Sri Lanka on January 6 signed a fresh agreement to jointly redevelop a strategic oil terminal, superseding a contentious deal signed 19 years ago, as Colombo moves to secure a $500 million fuel credit line from New Delhi. [Associated Press]

The Sri Lankan subsidiary of India's oil major Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Lanka IOC, state-owned Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) and the government of Sri Lanka signed three lease agreements on modernizing the oil terminal located on Sri Lanka's eastern coast near strategically important Trincomalee port.

Earlier, the Sri Lankan cabinet had approved the proposal to allocate 24 oil tanks to CPC and 14 tanks to Lanka IOC, while the remaining 61 oil tanks would be developed by Trinco Petroleum Terminal Pvt. Ltd, a joint venture of the CPC and LIOC. In effect, 85 out of the 99 tanks will be under the control of the CPC directly or indirectly. And the LIOC will manage only 14 tanks. [The Economic Times]

The development plan is being discussed since both sides agreed in a crucial accord to jointly develop Trincomalee Harbour in 1987. Since 2003, both countries have been linked in an economic partnership, as Lanka IOC was given leasing rights to the 99 tanks at the facility for a period of 35 years. However, oil sector trade unions in Sri Lankan have been pressuring for the return of the tanks to the state under the control of the CPC [see AiR No. 41, October/2021, 2]. [The Diplomat]

Sri Lanka is also separately negotiating a $500 million credit line from India's Exim Bank which is near completion. The credit line will enable Colombo to buy refined petrol and diesel from Indian suppliers, at a time when the island nation is facing dwindling foreign exchange reserves and has $$7.3 billion billion worth of debt repayments in 2022. [Reuters] [see entry in this edition].

In September of last year, India's Adani group signed a $700 million deal to develop a container terminal in

Colombo with a Sri Lankan company and the state-owned Sri Lankan Ports Authority. The agreement was recognized as the largest foreign investment project in the island nation's area of port development [see AiR No. 40, October/2021, 1]. China also operates a container terminal at same port in a joint venture with Sri Lanka's Ports Authority.

Bangladesh, Turkey sign new security, counterterrorism deal

(lm) Bangladesh and Turkey have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on security cooperation, counterterrorism and tackling drug trafficking, thereby taking a longstanding but low-key partnership to new heights. [The Business Standard]

The deal was inked during Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu's Dhaka visit on January 8, the latest in a series of high-level meetings between representatives of both countries.

Bangladesh's Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen last December completed a three-day visit to Turkey [see AiR No. 51, December/2021, 3]. That visit came half a year after an eight-day visit to Turkey by Bangladesh's Chief of Army Staff (CAS), General SM Shafiuddin Ahmed, which saw top military officials from both sides discussing possible areas of defense cooperation [see AiR No. 35, August/2021, 5].

Turkey's Asia Anew Initiative, launched in 2019, aims to diversify its diplomatic relations with Asian countries, putting greater weight on cooperation and coordination through institutional mechanisms. This was clearly echoed in recent remarks by Ankara's ambassador to Dhaka, who said in November that Ankara seeks to be a "solution partner" to Bangladesh in military cooperation [see AiR No. 48, November/2021, 5].

At present, China is Bangladesh's largest supplier of military hardware, accounting for more than 70 percent of Dhaka's total arms purchases between 2016 and 2020. But in the first four months of 2021, Bangladesh imported $60 million worth of arms from Turkey, as it seeks to diversify its suppliers of defense equipment to meet its goals set out under its military modernization program, the Armed Forces Goal 2030. [The Diplomat]

In November Bangladesh and France signed a Letter of Intent on defense cooperation during a five-day official

visit to Paris by Bangladesh Prime Minister Hasina. [AiR No. 46, November/2021, 3]

Pakistan's Prime Minister Khan expected to visit China early next month, as CPEC hits buffers

(lm) Against the larger backdrop of a Chinese slowdown in foreign direct investment (FDI) and a stall in projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Prime Minister Khan is expected to visit Beijing in early February. [The Hindu]

The trip – Khan's fourth to Beijing after his last visit in October 2019 [see AiR No. 42, October/2019, 3] – assumes added significance, considering that China has not hosted foreign leaders since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in January 2020. [Gulf News]

It also comes at a time when direct investment from China to Pakistan is in decline. About half of the money pledged by Beijing under CPEC – the Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) flagship project – has already flowed in with investments and intergovernmental lending, pushing Pakistan's economic growth above 5 percent in 2017 and 2018. But Chinese FDI in the quarter that ended last September was just $76.9 million, compared with $154.9 million in the same quarter in 2020. [Profit by Pakistan Today]

At least two more developments are adding to that: To start, the main road leading to the Chinese-operated Gwadar Port has been blocked since November 15 by thousands of locals in a sit-down protest. Led by a moderate Islamist politician, they are demanding basic amenities, including water and power, as well as an end to the illegal fishing by Chinese trawlers, and the relaxation of restrictions on trade with neighboring Iran. [AiR No. 49, December/2021, 1] [European Council on Foreign Relations]

Safety of Chinese personnel has been another concern for Beijing. In July of last year, Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi travelled to China for talks with his counterpart Wang Yi for their third Strategic Dialogue, which took place days after a potential terrorist attack killed 13 people, including nine Chinese nationals, near the Dasu hydropower project [see AiR No. 30, July/2021, 4].

Against this backdrop, Prime Minister Imran Khan on January 3 inaugurated the Pakistan-China Business Investment Forum, which seeks to counter a decline in

FDI and exports from Beijing. He also ordered the removal of 37 regulations to ensure one-window operation for foreign investors and directed officials to personally brief him on progress on CPEC projects every 15 days. [South Asia Monitor]

Meanwhile, China's consul general to Pakistan has said that the Chinese companies have provided over 100,000 direct jobs to Pakistani workers in the first phase of CPEC and Pakistanis would benefit with millions of more jobs in the second phase. [Pakistan Today]

Ahead of India-China military talks, United States says Beijing trying to intimidate neighbours

(lm) One day before the 14th round of military discussions between India and China to push on with the stalled process of disengagement and de-escalation in eastern Ladakh, the United States on January 11 said it was concerned by Beijing's alleged "attempt to intimidate its neighbours". [The Hindu] [The Indian Express]

A meeting between army commanders of both countries held in October last year ended in a stalemate, with each side blaming the other for the breakdown [see AiR No. 41, October/2021, 2]. After earlier talks in July, troops from both sides had stepped back from Patrolling Point 17A – Gogra Post – going back to their traditional bases and creating a temporary no-patrolling zone [see AiR No. 32, August/2021, 2]. The other areas yet to be resolved are Patrolling Point 15 at Hot Springs, the Depsang Plains and Demchok, all of which did not feature in the piecemeal disengagement process.

Meanwhile, China has defended the construction on Pangong Tso, a glacial lake at 4,242 meters, saying the bridge "falls within its sovereignty" as it was located in an area under "illegal" occupation for six decades [see AiR No. 1, January/2022, 1]. [The Hindu]

India dismisses Pakistan's offer to host SAARC summit

(rs/lm) After Pakistan's foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi reiterated his country's offer to host the long-pending summit of the eight-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

(SAARC), India on January 6 said that "there is still no consensus that would permit the holding of the summit". [The Indian Express]

The 19th SAARC summit – bringing together the leaders of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – was supposed to be held in Islamabad in November 2016. But the gathering was called off in the wake of a terror attack in the Indian union territory Jammu and Kashmir that killed 18 soldiers and injured over 20. At the time, New Delhi had blamed Islamabad for the attack.

Against this backdrop, the Pakistani top diplomat earlier this month said Islamabad was ready to host the summit, adding that New Delhi – which he accused of making the grouping dysfunctional by refusing to come to Pakistan – could join virtually. [AiR No. 1, January/2022, 1]

Nepal's Prime Minister Deuba's India visit cancelled amid rising COVID cases

(ns) A four-day India visit by Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba has been cancelled as New Delhi battles a spike in COVID-19 infections fuelled by the Omicron variant of the coronavirus. The trip to India was to facilitate the conclusion of several memorandums of understandings between the two sides. [The Kathmandu Post]

Prime Minister Deuba was supposed to attend the Vibrant Gujarat event, a biennial investors' summit held by the government of Indian state Gujarat. The event, which was slated to take place on January 10, had postponed after the state reported more than 3,000 new infections on January 5. [The Indian Express]

As a way to further upkeep relations between the countries, their foreign ministers Narayan Khadka of Nepal and S Jaishankar of India held a conversation over the phone on January 6 in regard to the countries' future cooperation and to discuss the planned reconstruction projects related to the earthquake caused damages in further detail. [The Print]

Additionally, the wife of Prime Minister Deuba visited New Delhi for personal reasons on January 2 and met with the Foreign Affairs Department chief of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. [Online Khabar]

Bangladesh seeks to maintain neutral foreign relations in 2022, foreign minister says

(ap) Bangladesh's Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen has stated that, as the country moves into the new year, it will maintain a policy of neutrality in foreign affairs, in line with its principle of "friendship to all and malice towards none".

In a thinly veiled swipe at the United States, the Bangladeshi top diplomat said Dhaka would try to address any "dissatisfaction" that countries have towards Bangladesh, adding that the state will engage Bangladeshi diaspora, think tanks and universities to improve public diplomacy and fight misinformation. [The Independent]

The Lowy Institute, a Sydney-based think-tank, named Bangladesh as one of four countries that showed improvement in its strategic power in the Indo-Pacific region in 2021, through its development of diplomatic and cultural influence, and its economic and defense networks.

Dhaka's holistic foreign policy includes balanced engagement with major powers, including the US, China, and India, and also with middle and minor powers, including, for example, $200 million loans to Sri Lanka and The Maldives last year. [The Diplomat]

India, Pakistan hold year's first commander meeting along disputed Kashmir border

(rs) India and Pakistan on January 5 held this year's first sector commander level meeting along the military control line dividing the Indian and Pakistani controlled parts of Jammu and Kashmir. [The Indian Express]

During the meeting, India's Border Security Force lodged a "strong protest" with its Pakistani counterpart, the Pakistan Rangers, over alleged infiltration attempts by "anti-national elements" and smuggling of arms, ammunition and narcotics from across the border.

In February of last year, the two countries in a rare joint statement announced that they had agreed to observe a ceasefire along the Line of Control and all other sectors. Attentive observers believed the deal to be the result of months-long backchannel talks

between the National Security Advisors of the two sides. [AiR No. 9, March/2021, 1]

Separately, the BSF on January 3 seized a bag containing three AK47 rifles along with five magazines and 14 rounds, four pistols along with seven magazines and seven rounds, besides five packets of heroin at Ramgarh along the India-Pakistan border in Jammu and Kashmir's Samba district. A Pakistani intruder was also shot dead in the adjoining Arnia area the same day. [Hindustan Times]

Bangladeshi parliamentary committee recommends lobbyist after United States' police sanctions

(ap/lm) Against the larger backdrop of strained ties with the United States over recent human rights-related sanctions on an elite paramilitary force, a committee of Bangladesh's parliament has recommended the government to appoint a lobbyist in Washington to counter negative information about Dhaka. [The Daily Star]

The US Treasury Department last December announced sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), citing "serious human rights abuses." It also sanctioned the current director of the security force and five former senior RAB officials, including a travel ban on Benazir Ahmed, now Bangladesh's top police chief. [AiR No. 50, December/2021, 2].

The new sanctions marked the first time Washington ever sanctioned Dhaka, which it has described as a key partner, and followed the US' decision to exclude Bangladesh from US President Joe Biden's Summit For Democracy, an international dialogue for global democratic revival held last month [see AiR No. 48, November/2021, 5].

Shortly after the sanctions were announced, Bangladesh's Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen summoned the US envoy to Bangladesh to protest the decision. Later the same month, the top diplomat also with his American counterpart Antony Blinken, underlining the RAB's role in curbing terrorism, drug trade and human trafficking. He followed up with a letter to the US official, requesting again a review of the sanctions. [bdnews24.com]

Crucially, Foreign Minister Momen also sought to imply hypocrisy on the part of Washington and to challenge the Biden administration's moral authority to pass

judgment on other countries by comparing extrajudicial executions in Bangladesh with the US' domestic human rights record and alleged war crimes in the Middle East. [Foreign Policy]

All these developments come ahead of a trip by the Bangladesh foreign minister to Washington, expected to take place in February. [The Daily Star]

Six Indo-Pacific nations take part in US-led anti-submarine exercise

(rs) The navies of India, Australia, Japan, Canada, South Korea are participating in the annual anti-submarine warfare exercise 'Sea Dragon 22' in Guam in the Western Pacific. [The Indian Express]

India, Japan, Australia and the US also form the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), an informal grouping widely viewed as a counter to China's growing military and economic power in the Indo-Pacific. Earlier in August, the navies of the four countries conducted the Exercise Malabar off the coast of Guam [see AiR No. 35, August/2021, 5] [The Print]

India invites Bangladesh to Joint Consultative meeting

(ap/lm) While exchanging New Year's greetings, Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has invited his Bangladeshi counterpart AK Abdul Momen to a Joint Consultative Commission (JCC) meeting, to be held in New Delhi shortly. [The Daily Star 1]

The sixth meeting of the was held on in September 2020. Although Dhaka was scheduled to host the meeting, due to the COVID-19 situation the meeting was held on virtual platform.

Last year saw a considerable deepening of India-Bangladesh relations, as it marked the golden jubilee of India's recognition of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation in 1971. Last month, Indian President Ram Nath Kovind visited Dhaka to celebrate Bangladesh's Independence Day [see AiR No. 50, December/2021, 2]. That visit followed several high-level diplomatic meetings, including Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Dhaka in March, and the defence minister's visit to Bangladesh's High Commission in New Delhi in November [see AiR No. 48, November/2021, 5].

Moreover, an agreement to allow cargo ships to travel from Indian states Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal to Assam through waterways in Bangladesh is expected to improve trade between India and Bangladesh by the middle of this year. [The Economic Times] [The Daily Star 2]

However, some issues of contention remain between the two nations, particularly over cross-river resources, including the Teesta River. Bangladesh, as a downstream country, seeks more water from the Teesta, but India has failed to finalize agreements over the Teesta River, as well as six other cross-border rivers. [AiR No. 12, March/2021, 4]

Chinese companies invest $250 million in Bangladesh expressway project

(ap) Bangladesh has signed a public-private partnership contract with two Chinese companies to develop an expressway in the capital Dhaka into a four-lane expressway. Under the deal, the Chinese consortium will build and maintain the expressway for the next twenty-five years, with an investment of almost $250 million. [Global Construction Review]

Alexander Ayertey Odonkor at CGTN, a Beijing-based news service, opines that the infrastructural development projects that China supports in Bangladesh are expected to bridge the South Asian country's infrastructural gap and improve inclusive development. China has invested $9.75 billion in Bangladeshi transportation projects from 2009 to 2019 alone. [CGTN]

Bangladesh makes formal request for free trade pact with Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union

(ap/lm) Bangladesh has formally proposed to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) for duty-free export of various Bangladeshi products, as the country prepares for its graduation from a Least Developed Country to a developing country in 2026. [The Financial Express]

The EAEU is a Russian-led economic union of post-soviet states that also comprises Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan. Cuba, Moldova and Uzbekistan have been granted observer status.

The FTA request follows a memorandum of cooperation signed between Bangladesh and the EAEU in 2019, aimed at improving bilateral trade. Later, a working group was established to enhance economic cooperation, which met last November. In the meeting, Bangladesh expressed interest in an FTA, and the EAEU asked Bangladesh to send a formal proposal.

At present, Bangladesh has over $1.5 billion annual bilateral trade with member countries of the EAEU, but trade is limited by the lack of duty-free facilities for Bangladeshi goods in Eurasian markets.

Bangladesh requests duty-free import into German markets through Generalized Scheme of Preferences

(ap) Speaking with the German ambassador in Dhaka, Bangladeshi commerce minister Tipu Munshi sought Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP) support from Berlin, as the country gears up for its graduation from a Least Developed Country to a developing country in 2026. [Fibre2Fashion]

The European Union (EU)'s GSP removes import duties from products entering the EU market from vulnerable developing countries, to help alleviate poverty, increase employment, and ensure labor rights. In recent years, Brussel has stepped up its engagement with three GSP-beneficiary countries – Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Myanmar – due to the gravity of alleged shortcomings in respecting core human rights and labor rights standards.

Munshi also urged Germany to improve trade and business between the two countries, calling on German entrepreneurs to invest in a hundred economic zones in Bangladeshi, and requesting Germany to increase access for Bangladeshi goods in its market, and offer fair prices for readymade garments from Bangladesh.

South Korea resumes receiving Bangladesh expatriate workers

(ap) Over ninety Bangladeshi workers left for South Korea, following Seoul's decision to resume receiving foreign workers in November 2021. South Korea had suspended accepting foreign workers in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the resumption,

two hundred Bangladeshi workers have travelled to Korea, with more than twenty-thousand Bangladeshis already working there. [The Business Standard]

Bangladesh: Bay of Bengal has up to 100 trillion cubic feet of methane-containing gas hydrates

(sk/ap) The Foreign Ministry of Bangladesh reported that the Bay of Bengal has from 17 to 103 trillion cubic feet of gas hydrate deposits, ice-like formations of gas and water which hold methane. Such massive gas hydrates will aid in meeting future energy needs as a source of environmentally acceptable fuel. However, it is yet uncertain how much gas can be recovered from the reserve.

The reserve was discovered by the Maritime Affairs Unit of the foreign ministry, which was formed in 2018 to analyze data acquired from previous surveys in the Bay of Bengal to evaluate gas hydrate reserves in Bangladesh's seas. [The Business Standard]

Nepal accepts loan assistance from Japan

(ns) Japan will grant a $87 million 'policy loan' for the Nepalese government to put towards economic development. The decision to accept the financial support was reached during a meeting of Nepal's cabinet on January 5. [Nepal Press]

Cambodian Prime Minister's visit to Myanmar

(bp) Cambodia, chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has warned that Myanmar has "all the ingredients for civil war" just days ahead of a visit by Cambodian Prime Minister (PM) Hun Sen. Meanwhile, Myanmar informed Hun Sen of the extension of the five-month ceasefire to the end of 2022. [Khmer Times 1]

Since the Myanmar coup in February 2021, over 1,400 people have allegedly been killed by authorities and the country has faced severe economic, health, and humanitarian issues.

The Cambodian Prime Minister wishes to establish political trust amongst the ASEAN parties concerned, in the hope of restoring peace and stability in Myanmar. Efforts will progress through the Five-point consensus agreed by the ASEAN leaders in April 2021, which includes an immediate end to the violence, dialogue between all parties, aid access, the appointment of a special envoy from the bloc, and a visit by an ASEAN delegation. [Jakarta Post]

Hun Sen's visit to Myanmar on Saturday January 7 – the first visit of a head of government since the military takeover last February – has triggered both national and international disapproval, especially among human rights actors. Over 1,000 people participated in protests against the diplomatic visit and three bombs have been set off near the Cambodian Embassy in the past week. Amnesty International's Deputy Regional Director for Research said in a statement that Hun Sen should prioritize human rights action, believing that the visit "may do more harm than good." [Amnesty International][Radio Free Asia]

While Japan expressed its support to Hun Sen, nearly 200 Cambodia-and-Myanmar-based civil society groups condemned the Prime Minister in a joint statement for showing support to the Myanmar junta and asked him to reconsider the trip. [Radio Free Asia 2][Khmer Times 2]

The military junta barred Cambodia's PM from meeting with detained pro-democracy leaders, including former leader Aung San Suu Kyi. [Radio Free Asia 3]

ASEAN and the United Nations General Assembly have backed the Five-point consensus, and stated that the ASEAN chair should ensure that engagement with Myanmar involves acting in the best interest of all the parties involved and not exclusively engaging with the junta. [Benar News]

Overfishing and climate change poised to cause armed conflicts in the South China Sea

(bp) The South China Sea Probing Initiative (SCSPI), a Chinese think tank, warned that climate change and overfishing in the South China Sea could cause tensions and armed conflict. The organization specifically mentioned the activity of Vietnamese fishermen as undermining regional trust and threatening peaceful maritime cooperation.

South China Sea fisheries are estimated to generate $100 billion a year, supporting around 3.7 million people, and a collapse of fishery stocks in the South China Sea might create tensions in the maritime community.

With up to 800,000 vessels, China's fishing fleet is by far the largest in the world and Chinese fishermen, having exhausted domestic grounds, are known to have traveled to distant waters like the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa or the Galapagos Islands off Ecuador for their catches. [Radio Free Asia]

Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam discuss security and drug crime repression

(bp) Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam have agreed to further strengthen cooperation to combat drug crimes and maintain social security in the region. The countries met in the context of a ministerial meeting on cooperation in preventing crime, which takes place every two years.

The participants committed to strengthening multilateral cooperation in regional and international forums and to enhancing cooperation in combating transnational crime. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: Vietnamese, Thai workers victims of fake job advertisement by human traffickers

(bs) A group of Vietnamese human traffickers advertised well-paid jobs at casinos or for online games through social media, asking the applicants to pay for travel and hiring fees. The group would then force the victims to engage in illegal prostitution to repay their debts. Vietnamese authorities have rescued over 200 Vietnamese nationals over the past year. [Khmer Times 1]

Similarly, over 1000 Thai workers were lured into fictitious jobs in Cambodia and crossed the border illegally. The Thai authorities in cooperation with Cambodian police rescued 500 victims and are working on the repatriation of the others. The workers found harsh working conditions and were often forced to work for online gambling companies. [Khmer Times 2]

China, Cambodia to promote bilateral free trade agreement

(am) China and Cambodia will promote and facilitate the implementation of a free trade agreement between the two countries, which entered into force on January 1.

Their free trade agreement is not only expected to grant zero-tariff treatment to more than 90 percent of imports from both China and Cambodia but also is expected to strengthen cooperation in various areas such as trade in services, investment, the Belt and Road Initiative, and e-commerce according to China's Ministry of Commerce. [Khmer Times]

Laos, Vietnam sign agreements and discuss bilateral relations

(bs) The Lao Prime Minister Phankham Viphavanh visited Vietnam from January 8-10 to enhance bilateral ties and strengthen political and economic cooperation. During the visit he held talks with Vietnamese counterpart Prime Minister Pham Minh Chính.

The ministers, while ensuring mutual support in socio-security stability, agreed to strengthen economic cooperation, especially in the fields of transportation, e-commerce, and digital transformation. They also committed to increasing their cooperation in clean agriculture, education, culture, sport and tourism by signing nine cooperation agreements. Vietnam and Laos have also drafted a plan for a Memorandum of Understanding on the 2016-2025 transport cooperation strategy.

The countries also agreed to support Cambodia in carrying out its Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) chairmanship in 2022 and the implementation of the ASEAN five-point consensus to efficiently handle violence in Myanmar and provide humanitarian assistance to the country. [The Star]

Moreover, Vietnam renewed its support to Lao maritime economic development by allowing Laos, the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia, to use Vietnamese seaports. [Hanoi Times]

On the same occasion, both prime ministers co-chaired the 44th session of the Vietnam – Laos Intergovernmental Committee on Bilateral

Cooperation and launched the Vietnam-Laos, Laos - Vietnam Friendship and Solidarity Year 2022. The parties shared their successes in bilateral political and diplomatic cooperation and the signing of 25 agreements during past visits. They also reiterated their commitments in strengthening defense-security links and cooperation in the fight against transnational crimes.

To date, Vietnam counts 209 investment projects in Laos, for registered capital of over 5 billion USD, making Vietnam the third biggest investor in Laos after China and Thailand. [Vietnam Plus]

Indonesian Air Force Chief of Staff visits Singapore

(nm) The Indonesian Air Force Chief of Staff Air Chief Marshal (ACM) Fadjar Prasetyo visited Singapore from January 2 to January 4. The Ministry of Defence (Mindef) said the visit reassured the close defense relationship between Singapore and Indonesia.

The topics of their discussion included the efforts to enhance cooperation in areas of mutual interest. The Chief of Staff also inspected and boarded the new Singapore Air Force H225M helicopters, which will replace the previous models, known as the Super Pumas. [see AiR No. 51, December/2021, 3]

Mindef also noted that the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) and the Indonesian Air Force celebrated 40 years of defense relations in 2021. [Straits Times]

Vietnam, India celebrate 50 years of diplomatic partnership

(bs) Vietnamese and Indian representatives met to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam-India diplomatic relationship. The diplomats reiterated the countries' commitment to implement the 2021-2023 Joint Action Plan to enhance their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. They also signed a $500 million credit agreement in defense and agreed to increase investments in the framework of a two-way trade to reach the $15 billion target.

Furthermore, the two representatives highlighted necessary security cooperation in the maritime field, especially with regards to the South China Sea dispute with China. [East Mojo] [The Star]

During the meetings, the parties also discussed enhancing cooperation in the following industries; information technology, innovation, energy, digital transformation, health care, pharmaceuticals, tourism, green economy, climate change response, human resource training, culture, tourism, and sustainable development. [Vietnam Plus]

Announcements

Upcoming Online Events

12 January 2022 @ 9.00 a.m. (GMT-5), Hoover Institution, USA

Collapse and Consequences in Afghanistan: A Conversation with Hamdullah Mohib

This episode of Battlegrounds will feature H.R. McMaster and Ambassador Hamdullah Mohib who will examine the roots of Afghanistan's collapse, the repercussions, and alternatives for resolving the issue.

If you wish you attend this event, register at [Hoover Institution]

12 January 2022 @ 12:00-1:00 p.m. (GMT-8), World Affairs, USA

Where in the World are the Vaccines?

Despite the ambitious intention to deliver vaccines to developing countries through COVAX, the program had to postpone its 2021 goals due to funding delays and vaccine suppliers' favoring wealthier nations. In this webinar, Seth Berkley, head of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, who has worked behind this project, will come to share his views towards COVAX and the distribution and procurement of vaccines. Challenges from the world's vaccination in 2021 and solutions to vaccine issues and, ultimately, this prolonged pandemic will also be addressed in the session.

For more details, see [World Affaris].

12 January 2022 @1:00-2:15 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Sandford University, USA

The Russian Military Threat to Ukraine: How Serious?

The Russian military's stationing of forces near Ukraine's border has heightened tensions between the two countries. NATO capitals were likewise concerned about the invasion's prospect. This webinar will look at the Russia-Ukraine crisis and how it might develop.

More information is available at [FSI].

12 January 2022 @ 12:00-1:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Hudson Institute, US

China's Coercive Missile Strategy and the US Response

In light of the People's Republic of China's rapid advancement in conventional and nuclear military weapons technology, and its recent startling hypersonic weapon, it is crucial for the US to prepare for face this threat. This webinar will concentrate China's aggressive missile strategy and explore what should be included in the upcoming National Defense Strategy.

More information is available at [Hudson Institute].

12 January 2022 @ 9:00-10:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Center of Global Development, USA

How Will the IMF Support Emerging Markets and Developing Countries in 2022?

The COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on the global economy, especially in emerging markets and developing countries. During this challenging time, the International Monetary Fund (INF) appears to be one of the key actors that can help alleviate the economic crisis in low-income nations. This online forum will feature Masood Ahmed and Kristalina Georgieva, IMF's managing director, who will discuss the IMF's priorities for supporting LMICs in the coming year.

If you wish you attend this event, register at [CGDEV].

12 January 2022 @ 9:00-10:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Towards Durable Solutions: Addressing Humanitarian Challenges in Bangladesh and Myanmar

This online seminar will discuss Myanmar's and Bangladesh's primary humanitarian concerns, as well as potential moves toward long-term solutions for displacement and humanitarian assistance issues.

Find more about the webinar at [CSIS].

12 January 2022 @ 10:00-11:30 a.m. (GMT-5), United States Institute of Peace, USA

Is Governance the Taliban's Achilles Heel?

This online event will feature a discussion with experts who will assess the Taliban's governance following its resurgence to power, examine current approaches to governance in Afghanistan, and make recommendations to the US and international community on how to deliver humanitarian aid to the Afghan people despite Taliban threats of violence.

If you wish you attend this event, register at [USIP].

12 January 2022 @ 10:00-11:15 a.m. (GMT+8), ISEAS, Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

Has Indonesia Resumed Leadership Role in Southeast Asia under Jokowi?

Domestic issues were the main priority of the current presidency of Joko Widodo (Jokowi) throughout his first term in office. During his second tenure, though, he got more involved in foreign policy. This webinar will compare Jokowi's foreign policy activities with those of Yudhoyono, the so-called "Foreign Policy President," and analyze the possibility of Indonesia reclaiming its regional leadership role.

Further information about the event is provided at [ISEAS].

13 January 2022 @11:30-1:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Sandford University, USA

Identity-based Propaganda: Discrimination, Division and Democracy

This online session will focus on the significance of identity-based propaganda in the contemporary world, as well as its implications for democracy and civic life.

Further information about the event is provided at [FSI].

13 January 2022 @ 3:30-4:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Wilson Center, USA

Walking the Walk After the New U.S.-China Climate Declaration

Given the ongoing tensions between the US and China over trade, human rights, and cyber security, the environment has been one of the few topics on which the two superpowers have communicated for nearly 40 years. This webinar will focus on the new agreement declared at the Glasgow Climate COP and the future direction of this cooperation.

More information is available at [Wilson Center].

13 January 2022 @ 9:00-10:15 p.m. (GMT-5), Brookings Office of Communications, USA

US-Jordan Relations: Jordan's Vision for the Future

This webinar will feature Ayman Safadi, deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs and expatriates of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, who will discuss Jordan's present regional view and diplomatic policy strategy to the Middle East.

Visit [BROOKINGS] to find more details of the event.

13 January 2022 @1:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Sandford University, USA

Political Entrepreneurs: The Rise of Challenger Parties in Europe

The rise of opposition parties is resulting in a gradual shift in political power dynamics in Europe, as well as a more unpredictable electorate. Professor Sara Hobolt will present findings from her latest research that look at the reasons behind challenger parties' success and recommend solutions for mainstream parties to oppose these politically disruptive parties in this webinar.

Further information is accessible via [FSI].

13 January 2022 @ 12:00-1:00 p.m. (GMT+1), European Council on Foreign Relations, Germany

Delivering the European Green Deal: creating a climate of co-operation after COP26

In the light of the implementation of the European Green Deal, this online event will feature a conversation between three experts who will discuss this Europe's new priority and the potential multilateral cooperation with the region.

More information is available at [ECFR.EU].

13 January 2022 @4:00-5:00 p.m. (GMT+1), Carnegie Europe, Belgium

From Words to Action: Can the Summit for Democracy Deliver?

During this webinar, experts will debrief the Democracy Summit held on December 9–10, 2021, and assess whether the summit's goals of revitalizing democracy and pushing democratic reform will be up to the task of confronting democracy's challenges in practice.

If you want to know more about the event, visit [Carnegie Europe].

13 January 2022 @ 10:00-11:00 a.m. (GMT+8), ISEAS, Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

Land Conflicts in Suburban Areas in Vietnam: Causes and Effects

This online session will concentrate on land conflicts in Vietnam's suburbs, looking into the root causes and consequences of such tensions after the adoption of the 2003 and 2013 land laws. Recommendations for land transparency and land conflict mitigation will be provided after the analysis.

Visit [ISEAS] to find more details of the event

14 January 2022 @ 3:30-5:00 p.m. (GMT+8), East Asia Institute, National University of Singapore, Singapore

Killing Chickens, Scaring Monkeys: The Demonstration Effects of China's Economic Coercion and Their Limits

This webinar will analyze the People's Republic of China's use of coercion to deter actors from questioning and challenging the country's interests and policies, as well as the limitations and drawbacks of such a strategy, using existing economic statecraft and penalties as examples.

More information is available at [EAI].

14 January 2022 @ 11.00 a.m.-12.00 p.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

Designing an Outbound Investment Screening Mechanism

This online forum will feature a panel of experts who will discuss the U.S.'s plan to implement an outbound investment screening mechanism and debate whether this initiative will benefit the nation or rather increase competitors' technological capacity.

More information is available at [Atlantic Council].

18 January 2022 @12:00-1:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Sandford University, USA

Free Speech on Public Platforms

This webinar will feature a conversation between Professor Jamal Greene of Columbia Law School and Nate Persily, Co-Director of the Cyber Policy Center. The speakers will debunk the popular belief that social media companies' ability to govern is solely owing to their status as private agency, and will discuss the legal aspects of efficiently regulating the platform.

For more event details, visit [FSI].

18 January 2022 @1:00-2:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Sandford University, USA

Hate Crimes, Terrorism, and The Framing of White Supremacist Violence

In this webinar, Professor Shirin Sinnar will discuss the historical foundations and current implications of labelling racist political violence "hate crimes" or "terrorism" and argue that the present effort to recast white supremacist violence as terrorism is fraught with dangers, and that neither framing is compatible with racial justice goals.

Further information is accessible via [FSI].

18 January 2022 @ 8:00-10:20 p.m. (GMT-5), Brookings Office of Communications, USA

Japan in 2022

Japan's domestic and foreign policy agenda in 2022 is packed with significant and challenging objectives. In this webinar, experts and officials will take a look at the

future direction of Japan's domestic and foreign affairs in 2022.

If you wish you attend this event, register at [Brookings].

18 January 2022 @ 10:00-11:30 a.m. (GMT-5), United States Institute of Peace, USA

Defending Pluralism, Encouraging Tolerance and Building Democracy in Pakistan

This webinar will introduce a recent book of seven essays, "Pakistan Here and Now: Insights into Society, Culture, Identity, and Diaspora," that aims to analyze the interaction between external rhetoric and local narratives of pluralism in order to spark a conversation in Pakistan about countering violent extremism.

For more details, see [USIP].

18 January 2022 @ 3:00-4:00 p.m. (GMT-5), United States Institute of Peace, USA

Looking for the Good War

This online event will feature a conversation with Elizabeth D. Samet, author of Looking for the Good War: American Amnesia and the Violent Pursuit of Happiness. The book examines postwar attitudes, their implications for current domestic and international policy in the United States, and how the nation responds to distinct assumptions about national identity and purpose established or validated by World War II in various ways.

If you wish you attend this event, register at [USIP].

Recent Book Releases

Jeevan R. Sharma, ***Political Economy of Social Change and Development in Nepal***, Bloomsbury Academic India, 232 pages, published on November 30, 2021, reviewed in [Asian Review of Books].

Omri Boehm, ***Haifa Republic: A Democratic Future for Israel***, New York Review Books, 200 pages, published on August 17, 2021. For a review see [Haaretz].

Stephen Marche, ***The Next Civil War: Dispatches from the American Future***, Avid Reader Press/Simon & Schuster, 256 pages, published on January 4, 2022, with a review in [The Atlantic].

Edward Paice, ***Youthquake: Why African Demography Should Matter to the World***, Apollo, 491 pages, published on December 9, 2021. A review is available at [The New Statesman].

Calls for Papers

The **Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE)** invites paper proposals for the International Symposium on Technology and Society 2022 (ISTAS22), to be held on November 10-12, 2022, in Hong Kong. Conference theme is "***Digital and Societal Transformations*".** Closing date for submissions is January 31, 2022. For more information, visit [ISTAS22].

Genealogy, an open access journal published by the Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI), welcome manuscripts for a special issue on the theme ***"Intergenerational Solidarity at the Beginning of the 21st Century"***. Deadline for submissions is August 31, 2022. More information is available at [MDPI].

The **Institute for Human Studies (HIS)** at George Mason University is offering the ***Grant for Free Speech and Open Inquiry*** for projects aimed at enhancing free speech and civil discourse in academia. Awards will range in size from US$5,000 to US$25,000. Closing date for applications for fall 2022 grants is March 1, 2022. If you are interested, visit [HIS] for further details.

Jobs and Positions

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is hiring a ***Climate Change Project Coordinator*** to based in Amman, Jordan. Closing date for applications is January 23, 2022. Visit [UNDP] for more information.

RTI International is seeking a ***Director – Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning*** to be based in Kampala, Uganda. This Position is contingent upon award and funding. Learn more about the job offer at [RTI].

The **European Commission (EC)** is offering the position of ***Head of Representation*** in the Czech

Republic. Deadline for applications is February 7, 2022. If you are interested, find more details at [EC].

Pennsylvania State University welcomes applications for the position of ***Director of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (H&SS)***. Review of applications has begun in December and will continue until the position is filled. For more information, see [PSU].

Team:

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