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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.

Wishing you an informative read, I extend special greetings to everyone who celebrates Zimbabwe's Independence Day and England's Day of St. Geroge in this week.

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: ILO forced labor conventions to be ratified

(dql) China is expected to ratify two International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions on forced labor, namely the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 and the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957, following a meeting last week of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, China's top legislature.

Beijing's move is seen as an attempt to reach out to the European Union (EU) amid stalled negotiations on the ratification of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) that was agreed on in principle between EU leaders and China in December 2020 after eight years of negotiations [see AiR No. 1, January/2021, 1]. During the talks in December, Beijing greed to pursue the ratification of the two conventions which had been stumbling blocks in the talks up to the agreement.

However, negotiations on the ratification of the agreement by the European Parliaments have stalled throughout the past year until today amid tit-for-tat sanctions over accusations against China of human rights violations in Xinjiang [see AiR No. 12, March/2021, 4, AiR No. 13, March/2021, 5].

The EU-China summit on April 1 that was dominated by the war in Ukraine and ended without a joint statement, EU representatives continued to point to political differences between both sides that stand in the way of advancing EU-China ties, including the CAI. [South China Morning Post 1] [South China Morning Post 2] [See also AiR No. 14, April/2022, 1]

China: Reporting human trafficking to become mandatory

(dql) China's lawmakers are set to review draft revisions on the country's Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women submitted to Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, China's top legislature, for a second reading.

The proposed revisions suggest establish a "mandatory reporting and screening mechanism" to swiftly detect and deal with crimes against women, including the trafficking of women. The police are to notified by marriage registration agencies and hotels as well as by local governments and women's associations on suspicion of women being trafficked or abducted. Those failing to comply with the mandatory duty of reporting will be punished.

The reform efforts come amid strong public demands for strengthening the protection of women against abuse and discrimination after woman was found chained by her neck in a shack in a village in the eastern Jiangsu province in January. An investigation found out that she had been trafficked and sold for marriage [see AiR No. 9, March/2022, 1]. The first draft published in December received over 423,000 comments and suggestions for improvement, submitted to the Ministry of Public Security by more than 85,000 people. [China.org.cn] [South China Morning Post]

China: Beijing-backed candidate on track to win Hong Kong Chief Executive post

(dql) John Lee, former no 2 official of Hong Kong, confirmed on April 13 the official registration of his candidacy in the election for the post of the city's Chief Executive after he had secured 786 nominations to enter the race.

Backed by Beijing, Lee is expected to succeed Carrie Lam as the Executive Chief who is elected by a committee of 1,500 members, with almost all of them being Beijing loyalists. The election is scheduled for May 8.

A former police officer, Lee became the city's Secretary for Security in 2017 to play a leading role during the anti-government protests in 2019, before he was promoted to the second highest position last year, a move widely seen as reflecting Beijing's intention to focus on security to tighten its grip on the city.

Lee declared on April 9 to run for the top job in the former British colony and vowed to open a new chapter of "result-oriented" leadership in the city. [AP News] [See also AiR No. 15, April/2022, 2]

China: Most advance fighter jets sent to East and South China Seas for patrols

(dql) China has sent its most advanced J-20 stealth fighters to the East and South China Seas for regular patrols. It is the first time that theses jets are operating over such a wide area.

In a related statement, Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group, the developer, confirmed that the planes, also known as Mighty Dragons, were now powered by indigenous engines – a reference to a long-standing problem that has hindered its performance.

China's army has not disclosed the number of J-20s to enter service since they were introduced in 2017, but it is widely estimated to be more than 150 jets. [South China Morning Post]

Japan: Population drops by record 644,000 in 2021

(cm) In 2021, Japan's population marked its biggest fall on the record, dropping by 644,000 to about 125.5 million, reflecting a rapidly aging society and the decrease in foreign residents following entry restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, deaths exceeded births by 609,000, while people moving out of the country surpassed those moving in by 35,000, causing a decline in population for the 11th consecutive year. This decline had been slowed in the last few years by an increase in foreign workers living in Japan under a relaxed visa system, but the labor shortage worsened during the pandemic as people were discouraged from moving to the country by tighter border controls and a rise in remote working. [The Mainichi]

Japan: Government continues oil wholesalers subsidy program and secures rare gases procurement

(cm) On April 14 the Japanese government announced that the subsidy program for oil wholesalers is set to be continued in May with a further rise of the payment (currently JPY 25 per liter) to offset the increase in fuel prices which followed the cut in Russian oil exports. The government is considering funding the program by using JPY 2 trillion out of the JPY 5.5 trillion reserve fund in the 2022 fiscal budget. [Kyodo News 1]

On the same day, the Industry Ministry stated that it plans to ensure the procurement of rare gases necessary in the chip production by boosting domestic production capacity and increasing cooperation with other countries, in order to secure supply chains by 2025 given the disruption in supplies from major exporter Ukraine and the global shortage in recent years. On April 15 the ministry announced that cooperation with the private sector includes investment in upstream projects for liquefied natural gas, providing 'risk money' for existing projects. [CNA] [Kyodo News 2]

Japan: Air-Self Defense Force scrambled second-highest record of jets in FY 2021

(cm) Japan's Defense Ministry stated on April 15 that during the fiscal year 2021 its Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) scrambled its fighter jets against foreign aircraft approaching the country's airspace a total of 1,004 times, up from 725 in the previous year, marking the second-highest total recorded since 1958, when Japan started releasing comparable data. The highest number was recorded in fiscal 2016 with 1,168 jets, when China had intensified activity in protest to Japan's purchase of three of the disputed Senakaku (Diaoyu

according to China) Islands from private citizens in 2012.

The ASDF scrambled its aircraft 722 times in response to Chinese approaches, up 264 from 2020, while 266 scrambles responded to Russia movements in the area, up eight from the previous year, of which two violated Japanese airspace in September and March near Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost main island.

The increase shows the aggravation of Japan's security environment, as concerns over Beijing's expanding intelligence sophistication and Russia's activities continue to grow. [The Diplomat]

Japan: LDP proposes enemy base strike capability to counter missile threats

(cm) A national security panel of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has proposed acquiring an enemy base strike capability in order to better counter missile and other security threats in the region, at a time when China and North Korea are increasing their military activities. The proposal is a politically sensitive topic in Japan, as the constitution is still foreseeing a defense-oriented policy of the country.

The enemy base strike capability to be introduced would both target missile bases and disable command and control systems, keeping the use of force for self-defense purposes to a minimum. The panel will consider rewording "enemy strike capability" in a way that would fit more in the defensive nature of Japan's counterattacks, but criticism arises as the change could possibly expand the targets for which the capability could be used.

The security panel also proposed a review of the current three principles that strictly discipline the conditions for arm exports in the transfer of defense equipment and technology, in view of the ongoing war and humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. [Kyodo News]

In view of growing instability and threat to international security, the panel, furthermore proposed to raise the country's spending on defense to at least 2 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) by around five years, in line with defense spending goals of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The current fiscal 2022 budget covers JPY 5.4 trillion in defense spending, which accounts for nearly 1 percent of the country's GDP. [The Japan Times]

Japan: SDF to conduct foreigner-only rescues

(cm) On April 13 a law allowing Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to engage in rescue missions solely for foreign nationals was enacted, removing the previous restriction imposed on the SDF operations blocking the rescue of non-Japanese who are not accompanying Japanese citizens. The revised law also enables SDF transport plans to be used in a variety of missions other than being prioritized for evacuation, and, to be undertaken not only from places deemed as safe, as the law has previously stated.

The bill passed by the House of Councillors comes after Japan has failed to evacuate many in its embassy in Afghanistan when the Taliban took charge of the country last August: the SDF had been dispatched to evacuate around 500 people including local employees of the Japanese Embassy, but due to the aforesaid legal restrictions only a dozen of them were rescued. [Kyodo News]

North Korea tested a new short-range missile

(mpk) On April 16, North Korea has reportedly carried out a new test of tactical guided weapons, marking 13th round of weapons tests in this year.

The South Korean military confirmed that there were two projectiles launched from the North's east coast towards the sea, flying around 110 kilometers with a peak of 25 kilometers. Since their speed was less than March 4, the projectiles are believed to be short-range missiles. [Reuters]

This latest weapon test comes after the North's launch of intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) last month which ended a self-imposed moratorium on ICBM testing and which prompted concerns among US and South Korean officials that Pyongyang could resume nuclear testing soon [see AiR No. 13, March/2022,5].

South Korea: Continued backlash against ruling party's push for prosecution reform

(mpk) Following the Supreme Prosecutors' Office [see AiR No. 15, April/2022, 2], president-elect Yoon Suk-yeol's transition team also criticized the ruling Democratic Party's planned prosecution reform whose

center piece is to deprive the prosecution of its investigative power. Senior members of the transition team, who are in charge of managing the hand over of the government's administration to Yoon who will assume power in May, argued that taking away the investigative power from the prosecution violates the intention of the constitution.

The backdrop is this criticism is DP's aggressive push for the reform bill following its defeat in the presidential election last month, seen by observers as an attempt to strip the prosecution of investigative powers before Yoon will be sworn in on May 10. The push is also perceived as linked to expectations that the prosecution will conduct a probe into allegations involving the party's presidential candidate Lee Jae-myung as well as President Moon Jae-in and his close aides. Yoon, who had served as Prosecutor General, promised during his election campaign that he would grant more authority and power to the prosecution. [The Korea Herald 1]

Meanwhile, around 150 lower-level prosecutors from across the country will organize a special meeting on April 19 to protest against the bill, with Prosecutor General Kim Oh-soo already announcing a "de facto all-out war" against the DP and using all available means in the legislative process, including proposing a presidential veto and constitutional complaints to block the bill. [Yonhap News Agency] [The Korea Herald 2]

Even within the DP there are voices suggesting slowing down the reform as the DPK is lacking the required majority of votes in parliaments as a junior coalition partner, the Justice Party (JP), also voiced concerns over the timing of the bill. [The Korea Times]

South Korea: Nominations for ministers of new cabinet completed

(dql) President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol has completed the nominations for ministers in his incoming cabinet, consisting of 18 ministers and the prime minister.

The nominees are scheduled to undergo parliamentary confirmation hearings at the end of this month for their official appointments, along with the presidential inauguration in May. [The Korea Herald]

Yoon's selection has been met with criticism even from within his own party, the People Power Party (PPP),

accusing him of nominating people close to him to prominent ministerial positions, such as Han Dong-hoon, one of his closest prosecutor colleagues being nominated as the Justice Minister. The Democratic Party (DP) has already described Han as the "second-in-command of the Yoon Suk-yeol administration" and has announced plans to focus its efforts on blocking Han in the confirmation hearings. [The Korea Times] [Hankyoreh] [The Dong-A Ilba]

South Korea: Main opposition and minor opposition parties merge

(mpk) Ahead of the local election in South Korea, the main opposition People Power Party (PPP) and the minor opposition People's Party (PP) have merged. The merger came after an agreement bewteen President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol and Ahn Cheol-soo, leader of the PP, on April 18.

Both agreed that PPP will remain as the name of the new party. A joint task force will be formed to formulate a new platform and to suggest candidates for the June 1 local elections.

The PP's currently three lawmakers will raise PPP's number of seats to 133 in the 300-member National Assembly. [Yonhap News Agency]

Pathing the way for this merger, Ahn withdrew his candidacy during the presidential race to advocate Yoon's campaign [see AiR No. 10, March/2022,2].

Taiwan: Date of national referendum on lowering voting age set

(dql) Taiwan's Central Election Commission (CEC) has announced November 26, 2022, as the date for a national referendum on a proposed constitutional amendment to lower the voting age in Taiwan from 20 to 18.

The announcement comes weeks after Taiwan's parliament on March 25 approved with overwhelming majority the revision. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Revisions to intellectual property laws passed by parliament

(dql) Taiwan's legislature has approved government-initiated amendments to the country's intellectual property laws on April 15 as part of the efforts to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) trade pact.

The amendments involve the Copyright Act, Trademark Act and Patent Act and seek establish a new legal framework for intellectual property rights to meet the standards set out in the CPTPP free trade agreement and secure Taiwan's accession to the trade bloc in the upcoming negotiations with the CPTPP members. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan submitted its application for membership the CPTPP last September [see AiR No. 39, September/2021, 4].

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

Bangladesh: Opposition party attempts to form coalition

(hg) The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the second biggest opposition party and the governing Awami League´s (AL) arch enemy, demands a neutral government to secure the next national elections while it is trying to forge a broad coalition under the banner of a 'national government' to be formed after the next election late 2023. [Prothom Alo]

Given the actual balance of power in the country and taken alone the fact that the BNP holds currently only less than ten seats in the country´s 350 seat national Assembly which is dominated by the AL´s more than 300 seats, the chances of the proposal to form a neutral government seem bleak. Besides, in the highly divided Bangladeshi polity, there is hardly any institution that would all involved parties would consider to be even remotely neutral. This notwithstanding, the BNP´s announcement to forge a broad coalition indicates that the party could actually contest the election which is not genuinely expectable in a political culture in which elections boycotts of the respective opposition are always an option.

Bangladesh: Suspect of the murder of a journalist shot dead in RAB law enforcement operation

(hg) Officers of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), an inter-service elite police force, have killed a man in what they reported as a gunfight between RAB officers and armed gang members.

Reportedly, the man was main suspect in the case of the murder of a journalist last week. He is said to have been hit by gunshot in the left side of his chest, stomach, and arms. His father, who received his body the following day, told The Daily Star that “If my son committed a crime, the law and court were there to deal with it. The justice system could have punished him.”

The encounter was the first of its kind after the United States government had imposed sanctions on RAB and some senior officers over allegations of human rights accusations such as extrajudicial killings. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Village residents block traffic over another death in custody

(hg) After torture and death in custody are reportedly continuing in the country´s law enforcement system with many cases believed to remain underreported and not scrutinized [The Daily Observer] village residents have now blocked a highway for an hour to protest the most recent case of a 26-year old man who died in police custody hours after having been arrested by police. According to witnesses, the man had an argument with a police

officer at a fair before he was arrested on gambling charges. The five detaining police officers allegedly badly beat him for refusing to enter the police van until the man fell unconscious. Then the police officers allegedly took him into the police van and left, admitting him to a hospital less than two hours later, where he died. According to the Daily Star, the man was told to not have any reputation of gambling. The family of the deceased is said to refrain from putting charges against the police over fears of reprisals. The police officer in charge of the operation leading to the death of the villager is said to have been transferred. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Present, future, and past of digital security in discussion

(hg) The chief of the national police, the Inspector-General of Police (IGP), commented on occasion of a ceremony to celebrate his two-year tenure, the country´s Digital Security Act (DSA) should be carefully enforced as "vested interests at home and abroad [are] trying to create different kinds of pressure on the country", "to embarrass and destabilize" it. [The Business Standard]

The DSA criminalizes a wide range of cyber related offenses and is criticized by human rights groups and journalists for its effect on the freedom of speech. It also forms a major subject of concern by some Western governments, international human rights defenders and the UN. Since some time, the Government of Bangladesh indicates its willingness to curb misuses of the Act´s implementation.

According to [The Business Standard], the Dhaka Metropolitan Police seems to also discourage police stations and crime departments in accepting DSA related charges. At least in some cases, citizens claiming violations of the DSA are, however, advised to file cases under other provisions of criminal law instead.

At the same time, the drafts of two other pieces of legislation regulating the digital sphere - the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) Regulation for Digital, Social Media and OTT Platforms, 2021, and the Personal Data Protection Act, 2022 – are seen by some critics as encroaching on the freedom of speech and unduly increasing government control over the internet. [The Daily Star 1] [The New Age]

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court ordered a hearing at July 24 in an appeal petition filed by prominent photographer Shahidul Alam against a High Court verdict of December 14 last year. The High Court had rejected Shahidul´s petition in a case in which he was imprisoned based on Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act, 2006, a provision that was abolished by the 2018 introduction of the abovementioned DSA. [The Daily Star 2]

India: Hijab ban in school in Karnataka; house demolitions as 'administrative punishment' in Madhya Pradesh

(hg) While Hindu hardliners demand to expand the Karnataka state´s ban of Muslim hijabs in school after a High Court upheld the ban in the South Western state, a Muslim organization asked the Supreme Court to intervene in property demolitions of mainly Muslims in the central state of Madhya Pradesh.

The calls to introduce similar hijab bans in other federal states were notably supported by politicians of the governing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Prime minister Modi. [The Straits Times]

Meanwhile, Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind, a prominent Muslim organization, filed a plea in India's Supreme Court to stop the punitive demolition of property of mainly Muslim having been accused of religious violence by the authorities of the central state of Madhya Pradesh.

Last week, the authorities in at least two states have reportedly demolished dozens of homes and shops, almost all belonging to Muslims, who were accused of violence during clashes in context of the Hindu Ram Navi festival.

In Madhya Pradesh, Hindu devotees armed with swords, sticks and pistols marched through mainly Muslim neighborhoods provoking and threatening Muslims and, in some cases, attacked their homes and shops. At some places, Muslims seem to have attacked Hindus as well, - provoked or unprovoked is disputed.

In the wake of the erupting inter-communal violence two persons were killed, some houses burned. The following day, authorities inMadhya Pradesh and Gujarat seem to have used bulldozers to demolish nearly 50 properties on state property of which almost all seem to have belonged to Muslims.

As there seems to be no law that would permit such punitive demolitions, the practice is not only counter to

fundamental principles of justice but would also to be illegal. [Aljazeera]

India: Armed Forces to study Ukraine war

(rk) With their notable dependence on Russian arms – among them tanks, artillery, rockets, guns and ammunition, the Russian Su-30 MKI that is forming the backbone of Indian Air Force and the yet to be delivered S-400 missile defence system - the Indian Armed forces seem to carefully study the war Russia is waging in Ukraine.

Along lessons regarding the strategy and tactics of both sides are likely the value of tanks and large battle ships vis-à-vis smaller weapons such as drones or anti-tank missiles but also control-and-command issues, matters of troop morale, and the importance to dominate the non-military battlefields. [Hindustan Times] [The Print]

India: Four terrorists killed; 'village defense committees' to be reinforced in Kashmir

(rk/hg) In Indian Kashmir, security forces killed four terrorists in an encounter in South Kashmir's Shopian district where the terrorists attacked outside labourers. [NDTV] [Greater Kashmir]

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is still set to visit the valley in late April, possibly planning to lift the contentious Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in some of the region´s areas. [AiR No. 15, April/2022, 2]

AFSPA grants the armed forces special powers to maintain public order in "disturbed areas". These powers include an officer´s right to apply lethal force after due warning against anyone who is acting against law and order. At the same time, officers act with legal immunity under the Act.

Meanwhile, India is about to reboot its local Village Defense Committees (VDCs) to fight "anti-India militancy". Implemented in 1995, the VDCs were set as armed volunteers, mostly Hindus, to fight the Islamic militancy in Jammu and Kashmir. With members growing from initially 5,000 to over 27,000 members. After heavy protest over a series of killings committed by VDC members a few years
ago, the modest monthly allowances of VDC members

were withheld and the structure seemed to falter. Early March this year, however, India's Home Ministry announced to revive the VDC program with an increased monthly salary and more training.

With its reputation of unwarranted killings and an alleged impunity of its members 221 cases have been filed against various VDC members for alleged involvement in murders, rapes, rioting and other crimes. Of these, 23 VDC members have been charged with murder and seven with rape but only six cases altogether led to convictions so far.

At current, the army is holding monthly training workshop for VDCs along the Line of Control with Pakistan, in which VDCs are trained in the handling of weapons and drone warfare. [DW]

India: New army chief to take over

(hg) On April 30, Lt Gen Manoj Pande will take over the office of Chief of the Army Staff from incumbent army chief General Manoj Mukund Naravane. General Pande, currently the senior-most officer after Naravane, will be the first general from the Corps of Engineers to hold the position and serve for over two years. He became the senior-most officer after Naravane after a few top officers retired over the past three months.

Previously, he served as the General Officer-Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Command, before that he has commanded the Andaman and Nicobar Command. [Hindustan Times] [Livemint]

India: Electricity crisis looms amid rising demand

(rk) India may see an electricity crisis for the second year in a row due to coal shortages. The country´s power plant´s coal inventories are currently running lower than during the last nine year’s pre-summer. Exacerbating the crisis, electricity demand is set to rise at the fastest rate in the last 38 years as business activities get pace with almost all the Covid-precautionary measures being lifted. At the same time, high temperatures are also breaking records with peak-summer heat still a month away. Moreover, due the Russia-Ukraine war coal prices have been inflated.

With around 75% of India´s power generation coming from coal, state-owned Coal India Limited has reduced

supply to industrial consumers to prioritise power plants. As a consequence, manufacturing units are facing power cuts leading them to reduce production.

A shortage of trains to support coal supply throughout the country further exacerbates the situation. While 453 trains a day are required by power plants to maintain supply of a had only 379 per day available over the first week of April. [Reuters]

Nepal: Overseas citizens asked to send home cash

(dql) Indicative of the dire economic situation in Nepal, Nepalese Finance Minister Janardan Sharma has stated in an interview that the government is asking citizens living overseas to deposit funds in domestic banks, in a bid to ensure enough liquidity in the financial system and to preserve foreign exchange reserves. [Reuters]

The statement comes as fears of an economic crisis grow, with the central bank painting a grim picture of Nepal's economy, pointing to rising inflation, a ballooning balance of payment (BoP) deficit, decreasing inflows of remittances, rising imports and declining foreign exchange reserves in its latest statistics released last week. [The Kathmandu Post]

Pakistan: Ousted PM pushes for political comeback

(ha) In the wake of rallies in nearly all big and small cities across the country in support of Imran Khan [The News] immediately after his ouster as Prime Minister on April 9 in a no-confidence motion [see AiR No. 15, April/2022, 2], Khan appears ready to launch and lead his political comeback.

In a rally in the northwest city of Peshawar on April 13 he warned: "I was not dangerous when I was part of the government but I will be more dangerous now." He added that the "nation is at a decisive point and we have to decide whether we want slavery or freedom from it," and announced to stage public rallies until new elections are held. Khan also reiterated his accusation that his legislative opponents colluded with the U.S. in order to topple his government and that Washington opposed him because of his independent foreign policy favoring China and Russia. [Washington Post][Dawn 1]

On April 16, Khan addressed another charged-up rally in Karachi and once again accused his opponents of conspiring with U.S. to topple his government. He questioned why the judiciary did not take suo-motu notice to investigate the cable containing the alleged threats against his government. He urged his supporters to avoid engaging in politics of confrontation and only to protest peacefully against the "imported government". [Dawn 2]

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has claimed that he is able to confirm that Khan stole gifts – received from another state or country – from the Toshakhana (National Treasury) to sell them abroad. Sharif made this claim in response to a journalist's question pertaining to a petition that seeks the details of the Toshakhana items that had been filed in the Islamabad High Court. Commenting on the petition, then Prime Minister Khan had stated that the details could not be disclosed according to the country's Official Secrets Act, 1923.[The News][Express Tribune]

Pakistan: New Lower House speaker elected, new cabinet sworn in

(ha/dql) The new ruling alliance of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), after successfully ousting former Prime Minister Khan, on April 16 elected un-opposed Raja Pervaiz Ashraf as new speaker of the country's Lower House. Ashraf, a former prime minister, belongs to the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), currently the third largest party in the Lower House. The election was carried out in absence of Khan's party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI; "Pakistan Movement for Justice"). Its Lower House members resigned to resign en masse to protest Khan's ouster. [Reuters] [See also AiR No. 15, April/2022, 2]

In latest development, Pakistan's new 37-member cabinet under Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif was sworn in on April 19. The Cabinets' thirty-one federal ministers, three ministers of state and three advisors come from eight allied political parties. [Dawn]

Pakistan: New Chief Minister of provincial assembly elected

(ha) On April 16, the provincial assembly of Punjab elected Hamza Shahbaz, son of newly elected Prime

Minister Shehbaz Sharif, as the Chief Minister of Pakistan's most populous and most industrialized province. The election was overshadowed by a scuffle during the parliamentary session. Law enforcement agencies were called to control the situation and secure completion of the election process.

Hamza secured 197 votes, including 24 from defectors of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI; "Pakistan Movement for Justice"), the party of ousted Prime Minister Imran Khan. [Dawn]

PTI Governor of Punjab Omar Sarfraz Cheema, however, refused to administer oath to Hamza, citing doubts about the credibility of the election. In response, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif removed Cheema as governor of the province.

In a latest development, President Dr Arif Alvi, who belongs to PTI, instructed Cheema to defy Sharif's move and continue to hold office until he decides on Cheema's removal summary of the Prime Minister. [The News 1] [The News 2]

Pakistan: New government's internal differences on fuel subsidies

(fq) Pakistan's new government of PML-N is facing its first internal test over fuel and power subsidies that were decided in February by the former Imran Khan administration.

Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif on April 15 against rolling back those subsidies citing possible public backlash against the new government only a few days in office over rising prices as Pakistan is currently facing a severe economic crisis with high inflation of 12.7%.

The Finance Ministry, however, warned that sustaining the subsidies will stretch the budget by estimated USD 2.06 billion and add to the fiscal deficit that Pakistan cannot afford at the moment. Current subsidies have also, according to the Ministry, endangered the IMF's rescue program, a USD 6 billion IMF bailout package that has yet to clear its seventh review. The clearance would release more than USD 900 million and unlock other funding. The seventh review started in early March, but no agreement had been reached before the collapse of Khan's government. [Reuters]

Pakistan: Investigation agency arrests eight accused of maligning state institutions online

(ha/fq) The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) arrested at least eight people for allegedly running a smear campaign against the country's army on social media in different cities and violating the country's Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (PECA).

The arrests were made during a crackdown on social media activists launched on instructions of new Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. Following the ouster of Imran Khan as prime minister through no-confidence motion, a vilification drive against the army chief and judiciary was launched on social networking sites. Since last Sunday, the top trending hash tags on Twitter with more than 4.3 million tweets were those targeting the state institutions and the new government. [Dawn]

In response to the FIA's crackdown, Punjab Governor Omer Sarfaraz Cheema, hailing from the party of former Prime Minister Khan, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI, "Pakistan Movement for Justice"), condemned the arrests as "harassment" of PTI's social media team and other political rivals by the FIA. PTI filed the petition in the court against the alleged harassment and arrests. On Thursday, the Islamabad High Court directed the director-general of FIA to ensure that social media workers and activists are not illegally harassed by the officers of investigation agency. [The News]

Amnesty International, too, voiced condemnation of the arrests and urged the authorities to stop using the "draconian Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (PECA)"in order to "crush peaceful dissent and intimidate supporters of political opposition." [Amnesty International] [Gulf News]

In 2016, Pakistan enacted the PECA to provide for a legal framework against crimes committed online. The act was especially aimed to target online pornography. However, the former PTI government amended the PECA act through a special presidential ordinance to make online "defamation" of state institutions and authorities including the Army and Judiciary a criminal offense punishable with harsh penalties.

Pakistan: Court orders Election Commission to complete hearing of foreign funding case

(ha) Pakistan's Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) announced on April 15 its decision to hear the foreign funding case of the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) on a daily basis, following an order of the Islamabad High Court (IHC) a day earlier to complete case against PTI within the 30 days.

Depending since 2014, the case was filed by PTI founding member Akbar S Babar who claimed financial irregularities in the party's funding from Pakistan and abroad. In January, the ECP's scrutiny committee, formed in 2018, submitted its report on the case after 95 hearings. The report accused PTI leaders of "violations of funding laws" as millions of US dollars were collected without declaring any source and details about foreigners. [Dawn][Geo] [The News]

Pakistan: Court sentences six men to death for lynching Sri Lankan over 'blasphemy'

(dql) On April 18, a Pakistan court handed down death sentences to six men to death and jail terms ranging from two years to life to dozens more. The court found them guilty of mob slaying a Sri Lankan factory manager in eastern Pakistan in December who was accused of blasphemy.

The victim allegedly desecrated posters bearing the name of Prophet Muhammad. The man was beaten by hundreds of people and his body burnt. [BBC] [See also AiR No. 49, December/2021, 1]

Pakistan: Eight military personnel killed in attacks

(ha/fq) According to security sources, eight soldiers were killed in two terrorist attacks in the area North Waziristan near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border on April 14. In one incident, terrorists ambushed a vehicle of security forces in Datakhel tehsil of North Waziristan resulting in deaths of seven soldiers. In the second incident, a soldier was killed in a clash between security forces and terrorists in area of Isham.

The country is experiencing rise in militant attacks across the Western and North-Western regions since last December when the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) ended a ceasefire with the government of Pakistan[see AiR No. 50, December/2021, 2]. Known also as the Pakistani Taliban, the TTP is a Pashtun

Islamist armed student group that serves as an umbrella organization of various student militant groups based along the Afghan–Pakistani border. Resistance against the Pakistani state is among the group's stated. objectives.

According to the Inter-Services Public Relations, the media and PR wing of the Pakistan Armed Forces, the latest incidents raise the number of officers and soldiers killed to 105 in this year. The corresponding number of killed militants stands at 128 while 270 have been arrested. [Dawn]

Sri Lanka: First killing in anti-government protests

(dql) Sri Lankan police have killed one person and injuring a dozen more, after fired live ammunition in an attempt to disperse protesters on April 19.

It was the first killing in the anti-government protests that have been ongoing since weeks. Sri Lankans are taking to the streets to demand the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa who they accused of being responsible for the unprecedented economic crisis the country is currently going through. [Reuters]

In response to the mounting pressure against him, Rajapaksa on April 18 appointed additional 17 new members to his cabinet. Earlier this month, he appointed four Ministers after the entire cabinet of 21 members resigned [see AiR No. 14, April/2022, 1]. The current 21-member cabinet has no family member belonging to it after two of his brothers and a nephew were not reappointed. His elder brother Mahinda Rajapaksa, however, continues to be prime minister. [The Straits Times]

Meanwhile, a Sri Lankan delegation, led by newly appointed Finance Minister Ali Sabry, has arrived in April 18 in Washington to hold talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and to seek to secure up to USD 4 billion from the IMF (and other lenders) to pay for imports of fuel, food and medicines. [Aljazeera]

Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights

and National Security in Southeast Asia

Brunei: Civil servants charged with corruption

(bs) On April 11, the Magistrate's Court in Brunei charged two civil servants with corruption for allegedly receiving and giving a luxury car as part of a bribery activity in July 2014. The Chief Magistrate did not record their pleas and released the defendants on bail. The case will be resumed on April 25. [The Star]

Cambodia: Election Committee calls on political parties and media outlets for law compliance

(pw) Ahead of the upcoming commune elections scheduled for June 5 the National Election Committee (NEC) urged all participating political parties to rigorously follow the law when providing interviews to the media. The NEC also required the media and civil society to observe the relevant guidelines in their interviews with political parties to ensure compliance with the law on commune elections. He also urged the media to give the registered political parties equal interview time and remain unbiased in their reporting. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Ruling party warned opposition party over exiled opposition leader connections

(pw) Sam Rainsy, the exiled former opposition leader of the now-dissolved Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) stated he would come back to Cambodia should the Candlelight Party (CP) win in the upcoming commune elections as he anticipates. The Candlelight Party has allegedly emerged from the old CNRP organization and is now a force in Cambodian politics.

On April 17, the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) claimed that Rainsy's remarks reveal his CP affiliation, however, Rainsy declared that he has no ties to the CP anymore. Previously, several charges have been filed against him, including those of treason and incitement for allegedly being involved in an attempt to depose Prime Minister Hun Sen's government in 2018–2019.

The Interior Ministry has stated that evidence of connections between Rainsy and the CP is being gathered to determine whether Law on Political Parties has been breached by having a criminally convicted person as party leader. [Khmer Times] [AiR No. 15, April/2022, 2]

Cambodia: Authorities barred over 100 opposition members from upcoming elections

(pw) Cambodian authorities barred over 100 candidates from the opposition Candlelight Party (CP) from participating in the upcoming general elections. CP is a rebranding Sam Rainsy Party which merged with the Human Rights Party to form the now-dissolved Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP).

Police have allegedly increased arrests of opposition members on arbitrary charges ahead of the general elections. On April 14, a commune council candidate of the opposition CP and his son were arrested by the police on the charges of illegal fishing. Addressing the arrest, a rights group accused the government of intentionally impeding opposition members in an attempt to increase the chances of an election victory for the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP). The local authorities did not respond to requests for comment.

In this vein, a mob attacked a CP youth leader on April 9, while unidentified people threw rocks at another CP activist on April 11. Meanwhile, a CP candidate was killed while riding a motorcycle. According to his wife, he was previously intimidated and attacked.

On the following day, on April 12, a Cambodian court refused a bail request made by an activist of the

former opposition CNRP. The presiding judge noted the necessity to make sure that the activist remained in detention until future hearings. She was charged with "plotting and incitement to commit a felony or cause social unrest" for ostensibly being involved in CNRP founder Sam Rainsy's alleged conspiracy to oust Prime Minister Hun Sen's government in 2018–2019. [Khmer Times] [Radio Free Asia] [AiR No. 15, April/2022, 2]

Moreover, in early April, several names of CP commune candidates were allegedly taken out from the candidate lists in three provinces by the National Election Committee (NEC). [AiR No. 14, April/2022, 1]

Cambodia: Detained opposition activists forbidden to meet family members during the Khmer New Year

(pw) Three activists of the former opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) remained detained during the Khmer New Year between April 14–16 over previously-filed treason charges. Two of the three activists were forbidden to meet family members.

According to the wife of one of the activists who visited him in prison, the man has developed a skin disease and was malnourished due to the reported hazardous and over-crowded conditions of the detention center. The Supreme Court is scheduled to hear her husband's appeal on April 27.

Since the ban of the CNRP by the Supreme Court for allegedly being involved in a conspiracy to depose Prime Minister Hun Sen's government in 2017, government efforts targeting activists connected to the CNRP have continued, with arrests and pretrial detention in overpopulated prisons under rough conditions on arbitrary charges. Currently, 60 CNRP activists are being detained, some of which are serving five-year sentences.

The lack of bail in Cambodia has resulted in activists remaining under pretrial detention for many years. A rights group stated that this caused the prison population to be unnecessarily high. [Radio Free Asia]

Indonesia: Parliament passed Sexual Violence Bill

(bs) On April 12, the Indonesian Parliament passed a bill on sexual violence that introduced an effective legal framework in protection of sexual abuse victims. The bill was pending a final decision for six years due to opposition of several Muslim conservative groups, which have a key say in Indonesia being the world's biggest Muslim majority country.

The law includes punishment of up to 12 years in jail for "crimes of physical sexual abuse, both in marriage and outside, 15 years for sexual exploitation, nine years for forced marriage, which includes child marriage, and four years for circulating non-consensual sexual content." Moreover, the alleged abusers would be sentenced to pay restitution. [CNN]

Critics, however, objected that the new law does not cover rape or forced abortion despite both crimes already being included in the Indonesia's Criminal Code. [Aljazeera]

In March, an independent state body for the enforcement of women's rights appealed to Indonesia's Supreme Court requesting to dismiss a bid to repeal new national regulations on consent in sexual violence cases. Meanwhile, Indonesian President Joko Widodo urged the government to speed up the approval of the new legislation on sexual violence, which original draft proposal was submitted to the parliament in 2012 [AiR No. 13, March/2022, 5]

Indonesia: Government to speed up bills on Papua's separation into provinces

(bs) The Indonesian House of Representatives is urging all parties to speed up the deliberation on a set of bills to separate the Papua region into several provinces. The call came amidst criticisms and objections from human rights groups and local citizens claiming that the government has been proceeding without the active participation of indigenous people.

In early April, lawmakers unanimously endorsed three bills that, if passed at the House, would establish the provinces of South Papua, Central Papua, and Papua Central Highlands. [The Jakarta Post]

The region has been witnessing ongoing attacks, killings, and protests for decades due to the difference in culture between the Indigenous Papuans and Indonesian people. On March 16, two people died and several were injured in a protest against the government's plan to divide the Indonesian region of Papua into new autonomous provinces. While some

groups agree with the plan believing that it would ensure indigenous Papuans better access to social services, they still oppose the creation of autonomous provinces.

During the same period, Amnesty International Indonesia urged the authorities to involve indigenous Papuans in the negotiations. The rights group also requested the government to conduct thorough investigations on the alleged human rights abuses against the Papuan community.

Papua was incorporated into Indonesia in 1969. Since then, indigenous Papuans have been involved in conflicts with the authorities, which have attempted to repress the tension through extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, restrictions on movement, and freedom of expression. That led to several condemnations from the international community. Recently, the United Nations (UN) in a statement condemned the "shocking abuses" against indigenous people in Papua urging the deployment of humanitarian aid to the region. According to UN reports, the escalation of violence in Papua since 2018 has caused the internal displacement of around 60,000 people. [AiR No. 12, March/2022, 4]

Laos: Two more hydropower dams to be built amid locals', NGO concerns

(pw) Chinese investors and engineering firms are preparing to begin construction of two Hydropower dams on the Mekong River in northern Laos. Pak Beng and Pak Lay dams are part of Laos's plans to develop its economy by selling approximately 20,000 megawatts of electricity to neighboring countries by 2030.

However, dam projects in Laos have faced objections from local villagers and NGOs concerning their impact on the environment and locals. Each dam construction project would result in the relocation of villagers in the surrounding areas from their lands on the banks of the Mekong that they relied on for agriculture, fishing, and raising livestock. It is anticipated that 6,700 people will be displaced by the Pak Beng Dam, while the Pak Lay Dam will result in 4,800 displaced persons and 3,500 hectares of lost farmland. Additionally, the villagers shared concerns over receiving late or insufficient compensation if any at all. Other Lao citizens affected by previous dam projects have experienced similar problems with payments.

The controversies over Lao hydroelectric dam projects on the Mekong are not new. For instance, following Thailand's decision to buy electricity from these two dams in November 2021, environmentalists and rights activists highlighted those hydroelectric dams would have severe ecological and human impacts. They also criticized the decision of both Thailand and Laos to support the Chinese-built dams in Laos that made the country become "The Battery of Southeast Asia" contributing to the environmental degradation in the Mekong River. Still, the dam went into commercial operation in October 2019. [AiR No. 11, March/2022, 3] [Radio Free Asia]

Currently, Laos has 88 dams and ten mines and is planning to build another 246 dams. The effects of dams on the environment have become increasingly alarming since 2018 when a dam collapsed in the South of Laos killing 71 people and displacing 14,400 villagers. [AiR No. 8, February/2022, 4]

Malaysia: Political update in light of upcoming general elections

(bs/dvr) Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob endorsed the decision of the United Malays National Organization's (UMNO) supreme council to not extend the government's Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH) on bilateral cooperation.

The MOU was signed in September 2021 with the objective of strengthening the country's political stability. The expiration date was intentionally set to coincide with the dissolution of the parliament, which is expected not earlier than July 31. [Channel News Asia 1]

Meanwhile, the UMNO's supreme council, in another decision, picked Ismail Sabri Yaakob as the party's prime minister candidate for the upcoming 15th general election. The Prime Minister entered his office with a simple majority in parliament on August 21, 2021, after former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin resigned. [Channel News Asia 2]

On another note, Amanah, the opposition National Trust Party, has joined the call by the Democratic Action Party, one of the four components of the Pakatan Harapan coalition, against the PH working with Bersatu, the Malaysian United Indigenous Party, and the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) in the upcoming general election. [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia: Graphic artist arrested for royal defamation

(bs/dvr) Malaysian authorities arrested a popular graphic artist and activist, Fahmi Reza, for allegedly “mocking” the Malay Royalty with a satirical painting depicting Mojo Jojo, a character in a cartoon from 1990 called The Powerpuff Girls, in a Malay traditional royal clothing.

The activity is an offense under Section 233(a) of the 1998 Communications and Multimedia Act. The law punishes those who produce and transmit anything that is “obscene, indecent, false, menacing or offensive in character with intent to annoy, abuse, threaten or harass another person.”

The representation allegedly alluded to the unrest in Malaysia’s political environment, especially referring to the party-hopping practice in parliament and the ongoing disagreements that, since 2018, forced the country to elect three prime ministers within two years. [South China Morning Post]

Malaysia: Foreign firms withdraw from Malaysia oil market on forced labor accusations

(bs) Following the United States (US) accusation on the alleged use of forced labor in Malaysia palm oil plantations, the Italian sweet-production firm Ferrero has announced its decision to stop sourcing palm oil from Malay Sime Darby Plantation (SIPL.KL).

The US released the decision to ban imports of palm oil from Malaysia’s Sime Darby in 2020 after allegations of the presence of "forced labor indicators."

Meanwhile, SIPL.KL reported that the company has been improving its human rights standards and is committed to maintain the lead in the sector.

The palm oil industry in Southeast Asia has been facing widespread criticism over alleged deforestation in the region and exploitation of migrant workers. Among other countries involved are Indonesia, India, and Bangladesh which together account for about 80 percent of the palm oil labor force in Malaysia. [Reuters]

Myanmar: New Year celebrations boycotted while 1600 prisoners released

(cmsk/ny) Myanmar celebrations for the traditional new year, Thingyan, on April 13-16, were boycotted by opponents of the military government, leading to low public participation.

The anti-military General Strike Committee of Nationalities had asked people not to join celebrations while Yangon's anti-military United Alliances announced that bombings would be carried out during the celebration and urged people to stay away from events guarded by security. After armed opposition forces warned citizens that security forces in Yangon could become targets of their attacks during the festivities, much of the public decided to not participate in the celebrations.

The junta reportedly encouraged the public to celebrate, however business-sponsored stage events were conspicuous in their absence.

Despite the junta's endorsement of the celebrations, locals witnessed groups of police and soldiers blocking the access to key locations in areas designated for New Year events, such as the Mayor's office. According to local sources, at least one delivery man was killed and eight were arrested amidst heightened security in Yangon. In Myanmar's two largest cities, Yangon and Mandalay nearly 100 people were arrested prior to the start of new year's celebrations.

Moreover, according to media reports, the Myanmar regime announced the release of 1,619 prisoners, including 42 foreigners, from jail to mark the Buddhist New Year. The announcement did not mention Sean Turnell, an Australian citizen and former advisor to the civilian government's former leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who was arrested for allegedly breaching the country's Secrets Act.

Myanmar grants annual amnesty to thousands of prisoners on the occasion of the country's traditional new year. In 2021, 23,000 prisoners were freed. According to activist organization Association of Political Prisoners (AAPP), the military has arrested at least 13,282 people and killed 1,756 opponents since the 2021 coup that ousted the civilian government. [FirstPost] [Reuters 1] [Channel News Asia] [Associated Press] [Reuters 2] [Mizzima] [Radio Free Asia 1] [Radio Free Asia 2]

Myanmar: Defected military captain testifies on Rohingya atrocities

(cmsk) A former high official of the Myanmar military administration who vacated his position in December 2021, and who is now a member of anti-junta forces, has reported to have witnessed atrocities carried out by the junta against the Rohingya Muslim ethnic minority between 2015 and 2021 in the Rakhine State.

He disclosed seeing a "trail of dead bodies left behind" after junta raids, strip searches of Rohingya women, the rape of a Rohingya woman by a junta soldier, and the drowning of a boy in a well. He also claimed that in 2016 and 2017, government authorities ordered clearance operations against the minority group and provided special instructions to the troops to ensure that no traces of killings and torching of homes were left behind. Lands were then allegedly wiped out and acid was poured over dead bodies to prevent identification.

The Rohingya ethnic group has not been officially recognized in Myanmar and has been seeking refuge in neighboring states. In 2017, the military attacks against the ethnic minority's members escalated and the Myanmar was brought before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on genocide allegations for persecuting the Rohingya community. [AiR No. 9 March/2022] [Myanmar Now] [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Anti-regime leader tortured and decapitated by junta forces

(cmsk) An anti-junta leader of the People's Defense Forces, the armed wing of the shadow National Unity Government (NUG), was reportedly tortured and decapitated by the Myanmar military after an opposition group he was leading killed a junta official on April 2. Sources claim he was beaten and questioned before his decapitation while after his death, body was mutilated and buried. [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: 26 writers and intellectuals arrested in 2021, America-based index found

(cmsk) According to rights organization PEN America's "Freedom to Write Index," Myanmar detained the highest number of writers and public intellectuals

during 2021, with at least 26 writers held. This number only represents a fraction of the total number of people arrested in Myanmar, which currently stands at 10,183 according to Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

Currently, Myanmar detains the third-highest number globally of writers and public intellectuals at 26, behind only Saudi Arabia with 29 and China with 85. However, most of the detainees in those two countries were arrested before 2021. [The Guardian]

Myanmar: Widespread destruction continues amidst fighting with military troops

(cmsk/ny) Satellite images show that several villages were torched in central Myanmar. The images were shot by Planet Labs (a US earth-imaging company) and National Space and Aeronautics Administration (NASA).

Since the beginning of 2022, over 100 villages have been burned by the Myanmar military in an attempt to repress supporters of the opposition and their families according to media reports linked to the activist group "Data For Myanmar." The United Nations Special Envoy has called it a "campaign of terror" that targets junta-opposers. According to the Envoy, local witnesses reported that the military had increased both ground attacks and air strikes in Sagaing Region since January.

The State Administration Council, Myanmar's institutionalized military junta comprising senior officers and civilians, overthrew the civilian government on February 1, 2021. Since then, the military regime has carried out crackdowns against any opposition member, activist, or supporter, killing more than 1,700 people and arresting over 10,000. The continuous attacks have also forced locals to flee their villages leaving more than 837,000 people remaining internally displaced. [AiR No. 13, March/2022, 5] [Reuters]

Multiple local media also reported large scale destruction in central Myanmar. In the first week of April alone, the military junta reportedly destroyed hundreds of homes in eight townships across the central regions of Magway, Mandalay and Sagaing. At least ten villages were allegedly destroyed in Magway region by land attacks and aerial bombing. Moreover, a junta convoy attacked and torched five homes in Kin village, Mandalay region. Twenty Kin residents were reportedly taken for interrogation and the remains of

two were found in immolated homes. In another village in the same region, 106 out of 430 households were allegedly burnt by the military killing one man. Five civilians in three other villages were also killed while a source from the shadow government's armed wing, People's Defense Force (PDF), reported that 20 junta soldiers were also killed in the clashes.

Meanwhile, In Sagaing region, 67 homes were torched amidst the launch of heavy artillery shells by the Myanmar military leaving two people injured. The near entirety of a 1000-household and a 600-household village were also allegedly torched. Between the February 2021 coup and April 1 this year, 8,000 civilian homes were reportedly destroyed by the junta. [Myanmar Now 1] [Myanmar Now 2]

Furthermore, between March 30 and April 10, clashes also occurred between the Myanmar military and resistance defense forces grouped with the Kachin Independence Army in Sagaing Region. Clashes allegedly broke out after the junta attacked a village where resistance fighters were sheltering, following which the military also launched aerial attacks in the area. According to a local defense force member, 13 people, including both civilians and resistance members were killed. The military also suffered casualties while eight soldiers, including a major and lieutenant, were allegedly captured by resistance groups. [Myanmar Now 3]

12 other junta soldiers were killed during clashes in Kayin/Karen State, in southeast Myanmar, according to the Karen National Union, a local political organization. A junta company commander was also reportedly captured amidst the fighting. Armed clashes also broke out between 45 junta troops and the combined Cobra Column of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and anti-junta People's Defense Force (PDF) fighters. The town's mayor claimed the junta dropped fifteen bombs from two fighter jets, damaged 30 houses, and burnt five homes while residents of five villages reportedly fled. The KNLA Cobra Column suspects the military might even have used chemical bombs. [Radio Free Asia]

Moreover, In Demoso Township of Kayin/Karen State, at least seven resistance fighters were reportedly killed during attacks when the Karenni Army and Karenni People's Defense Force (KPDF) launched an ambush against a national military group. The junta followed the attack with the dropping of several bombs. [Myanmar Now 4]

The commercial capital Yangon was also attacked. Anti-junta troops allegedly attacked a pro-junta garment

factory. Also, another group of anti-junta fighters were filmed while setting on fire a car outside a military and police outpost killing a police officer.

Concurrently, in the Rakhine State, western Myanmar, the Arakan Army's (AA) commander issued a warning to the armed group's troops to prepare to fight harder against the military junta. The warnings come after the junta increased military operations, arrests of administrators, and intimidation of civilians in attempts to establish control over the AA stronghold of Rakhine State.

Brief clashes also occurred between the AA and the junta in northern Rakhine's Mrauk-U District, according to the Arakan National Party. A villager claims fighting broke out when the AA and a village administrator asked junta troops occupying a former makeshift hospital to vacate so as to avoid potential confrontation with young people celebrating new year in the area. [Myanmar Now 5] [Myanmar Now 6]

The Philippines: President Duterte to endorse presidential candidates, vetoed bill on SIM-card and social media users

(bs/dvr) President Rodrigo Duterte declared that he might tactically endorse a presidential candidate to prevent the Communist Party of the Philippines from gaining political power, local sources reported. [Manila Times]

Meanwhile, President Duterte has vetoed a bill on social media users which would require them to register with personal information including legal identities and phone numbers. The bill was approved in early 2022 to tackle online abuse and misinformation in light of the upcoming presidential elections scheduled for May 9.

Critics speculate that the veto is part of a strategy to maintain social media platforms as key players in the presidential race. Duterte's victory in 2016, in fact, was partly believed to be achieved thanks to an effective social media campaign. [Reuters] [Inquirer]

The Philippines: Overseas election began amid irregularities

(bs/dvr) The Commission on Elections (Comelec) was urged to immediately tackle the issue of multiple cases

of irregularities in the overseas voting process. The Comelec had initially dismissed reports on alleged pre-shaded ballots in Australia. However, it revisited its statement and announced that the commission was planning to begin an investigation of the alleged irregularities.

In Sweden, Filipino voters reported having received two different ballots from the Philippines embassy, which acknowledged “that there may have been an element of human error on its part.” [Rappler 1]

Meanwhile, in other European states and in the United States, several voters claimed to have not yet received the ballots despite the overseas voting term beginning on April 10. [Rappler 2]

Singapore: Prime Minister named his potential successor

(bs) Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced Finance Minister Lawrence Wong, from the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), as his successor as the city-state's leader allegedly facilitating Wong’s way to becoming future Prime Minister.

The move came in light of the next General Election scheduled in 2025. IT also came with no surprise as the PAP has led the country since 1965, when Singapore gained its independence. [Reuters]

Thailand: Government to deliberate on new bills

(bs) The Thai government is planning to deliberate on at least nine pieces of legislation, including new bills and several amendments to organic laws, during its 120-day session.

Among the laws to be discussed are the Budget Bill, amendments to two organic laws, bills on the elections of Members of the Parliament, the civil partnerships bill for same-sex couples, national police bill, and a bill on the judicial process. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Democrat Party deputy leader faces criminal allegations

(aph/bs) Following the resignations from the Democratic Party (DP) of its deputy leader Prinn Panitchpakdi to handle sexual harassment allegations, the party's leader has released formal apologies for the scandal involving Mr. Prinn and claimed that the DP would not protect its former deputy leader or interfere with the justice system. The party has also established a committee in charge of gathering information on the case and to cooperate in the rehabilitation of the alleged victims.

Mr. Prinn then surrendered himself voluntarily to the police station but was immediately released because the authorities had no arrest warrant against him. Nonetheless, Prinn denies all charges. On April 17, following a police request to detain Mr. Prinn, the Bangkok South Criminal Court granted him bail for criminal charges in three cases, two for indecent assault and the one for rape. Bail was granted under the condition that he would require the court's permission to travel abroad. [Bangkok Post 1]

It is reported that at least 8 women filed criminal allegations on sexual harassment and rape against Mr. Prinn. [Bangkok Post 2] [Thai PBS World] [Bangkok Post 3]

Seksakol Atthawong, an assistant to the Prime Minister's Office minister, has also announced his resignation after being accused of having a personal stake in the government's lottery ticket quota. He denied all charges. The case was immediately brought before the House committee on corruption and misconduct prevention and suppression which admitted a petition to begin an investigation into the MP's alleged violations.

According to the allegations, coming from an audio clip leak, Mr. Seksakol allegedly said that he used THB 15 million baht (USD 445,000) that he took from another person, who then appeared to be involved in lottery quotas, to finance an election campaign. [Bangkok Post 4] [Bangkok Post 5]

Thailand: Authorities arrest minors anticipating participation in protest

(kc) Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (TLHR) reported that dozens of officers captured a 13-year-old activist and two of her friends on April 15. On the same day, the authorities released the teenagers without any charges after filing a report. [TLHR, in Thai]

TLHR stated the youths might have been arrested because officials worried that they might join demonstrations promoted by pro-democracy group "Draconis Revolution" on social media.

Friends Talk, an independent reporter, said that two out of three youths were arrested; later that night, they filed a lawsuit against officers involved in their detentions on four issues, namely officer's misconduct, unlawful deprivation of liberty, child abduction, and aggravated assault. [Friends Talk, in Thai]

Thailand: Peace talks with southern separatist groups will move on despite Ramadan bombings

(bs) The Thai government confirmed that the ongoing peace talks with separatist rebels in the south of the country will continue regardless of the explosion of two bombs in Thailand's Muslim-majority area during the month of Ramadan. The attacks killed a citizen and injured three police and were carried out by a militant group of the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO). The PULO was excluded from the peace talks meeting when Bangkok and the Malaysia Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) agreed on stopping violence during the Muslim holy month, which will end on May 14.

Clashes between the Thai authorities and southern separatist militias have killed over 7,300 people since 2004. The area is characterized by a Malay-Muslim majority that mostly follows Malay traditions. [Bangkok Post]

Vietnam: Police arrest deputy foreign minister on bribery case

(kc) Vietnamese authorities arrested To Anh Dung, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs on bribery accusations. The police believed that he had allegedly received bribes from Vietnamese citizens overseas who wanted to return to Vietnam on repatriation flights during the Covid-19 outbreak.

The arrest was reportedly part of a widespread investigation on high officials' involvement in bribery cases. The police also arrested officials from the ministry of foreign affairs, ministry of health, and ministry of public security for their alleged involvement. [Reuters]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

China holds military drills as delegation of US legislators visits Taiwan

(jw) To display the support of western countries for Taiwan, a bipartisan delegation of six US legislators, among them well- known China critics such as US Senator Lindsey Graham and US Senator and chair of the Foreign Relations Committee Robert Menendez, arrived in Taipei on April 14. Menendez belongs to a group of US lawmakers advocating for the renaming of Taipei's de facto embassy in the US to "Taiwan Representative Office", a move that was previously made by Lithuania and had prompted a harsh political and economic response by China. [see AiR No. 32, August/2021, 2]

The visit comes as China gradually ramps up its rhetoric on Taiwan clearly not ruling out an attack on the island that it claims as its own territory. Chinese aircraft also enter the Taiwanese air defense zone almost every day. Western countries respond by backing Taiwan more openly, with the US increasing its arms sales and diplomatic visits even though the US and Taiwan do not now have formal diplomatic relations. The US delegation joins a Swedish delegation on the island that is also present to show support, especially after concerns that a scenario like the Russian invasion of Ukraine might happen between China and Taiwan.

Remarks made by the US delegation are clearly dismissive of China's attitude towards Taiwan, as Menendez called Taiwan a "country of global significance" in a meeting with Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen despite Beijing's claim that Taiwan is a breakaway province. Graham also reiterated western support of Taiwan by stating that "to abandon Taiwan would be to abandon democracy and freedom."

Furthermore, another member of the delegation, US Senator Robert Portman, expressed his support for a free trade agreement (FTA) between Taiwan and the United States, arguing that FTA would both "deepen bilateral economic ties in ways that would be good for both countries economically" and "act as a deterrence to any malign activity that China might be considering." The 2022 Trade Policy Agenda and 2021 Annual Report published by the US Trade Representative's office in March already indicated the US will pursue more engagement with Taiwan to address outstanding concerns regarding trade but did not mention an FTA.

China has always reacted strongly to all diplomatic interactions between Taiwan and western countries. In the previous week, speculations about a planned visit of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi were met with threats from Chinese officials before being dispersed because Pelosi tested positive for COVID-19 [see AiR No. 15, April/2022, 2].

Similar threats were reiterated before the April 14 visit of the US delegation, with the Eastern Theater Command of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) saying that "those who play with fire will burn themselves." The PLA has also held military drills with frigates and military aircraft in the East China Sea around Taiwan as a response "to the recent frequent release of wrong signals by the United States on the Taiwan issue." According to the Chinese foreign ministry, China will "continue to take strong measures to resolutely safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity." [Al Jazeera] [CNBC] [Focus Taiwan] [Associated Press] [Reuters]

China remains under pressure to take stance against Russia, refrains from undermining sanctions

(jw) China's role in the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine remains a subject of criticism, especially from the US. According to US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, China should use its "special relationship with Russia" to exert influence and bring about peace. She added that Beijing "cannot expect the global

community to respect its appeals to the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity in the future if it does not respect these principles now." [Reuters 1]

Yellen's remarks hint at western concerns that economic sanctions might not only be condemned but also actively undermined by China. Western countries try to avert this scenario by continuously stressing possible punishment on China should China deepen its economic cooperation with Russia in a way that western countries deem inappropriate. However, this is currently not the case according to Yellen, who does not support sanctions on China because of its present economic relations with Russia. [Associated Press] [CNBC]

In response to Yellen's remarks and similar remarks made before, Chinese officials insisted that China's stance towards Russia wouldl not be influenced by western "threats". According to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM), China is ready to take "necessary measures" to protect the economic interests of Chinese entities. Still, the MOFCOM stated that "sanctions imposed by relevant countries on Russia have caused disruptions to normal trade between China and Russia." [Global Times]

Trade between Russia and China grew only by about twelve percent in March, after growing by more than 25 percent in February and more than 35 percent in 2021. The slowing growth of trade volume indicates Chinese wariness of violating western sanctions on Russia, as some Chinese companies are told to prioritize compliance and risk control over profit [see AiR No. 15, April/2022, 2]. However, trade between Russia and China in March still grew faster than the overall Chinese trade that has increased by less than eight percent. [Reuters 2]

Despite China's hesitancy to add new means of cooperating with and providing economic support for Russia, the long-standing agreements between Russia and China are being pursued further. A case in point is the first China-Russia railway bridge that connects the countries across the Heilong River – known as the Amur in Russia. It was first proposed in 2007 and set to be completed by August. Both sides keep the project on track despite the unstable international climate to ensure that up to 21 million tons of goods, mostly Russian natural resources such as coal, iron ore, or timber, can pass the bridge annually possibly increasing the volume of Chinese-Russian trade even further. [South China Morning Post]

Australia, US ramp up efforts to prevent security cooperation between China and Solomon Islands

(jw) Discussions on a security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands do not come to a halt as Australia tries to retain its foothold in the region amid growing Chinese influence. After leaked documents revealed that the Solomon Islands might allow Chinese police and military personnel to be stationed on the island and that such a request has already been made by China [see AiR No. 15, April/2022, 2], Australia continues its attempts to dissuade the Solomon Islands from signing such an agreement. Together with other regional players and the US, Australia voiced its concerns that a security deal between China and the Solomon Islands could destabilize regional security [see AiR No. 14, April/2022, 1].

After a meeting between Australian Minister for International Development and the Pacific Zed Seselja and Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands Manasseh Sogavare, Seselja reported that he called on the Solomon Islands to withdraw from the agreement, and announced that Australia would provide Solomon Islands with USD 119 million in financial aid this year.

Seselja's visit to the Solomon Islands is notable as it comes during the "caretaker" mode, a period before federal elections where ministers traditionally refrain from engaging with other governments diplomatically. However, support for a diplomatic mission to the Solomon Islands was bipartisan in Australia. Australia is the main development partner of the Solomon Islands and will continue to cooperate on matters of security even if the Solomon Islands signed an agreement with China, according to Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne. [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2]

The US also made efforts to retain their influence in the Solomon Islands which are further away from the North American continent but close to Guam with its large US military presence there. As part of these efforts, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman discussed reopening a US embassy in the capital Honiara with the Solomon Islands Foreign Minister Jeremiah Manele. [Associated Press]

Furthermore, US military general David Berger reiterated US concerns and suggested that the deal between China and the Solomon Islands might be "too good to be true." He asserted that security guarantees and Chinese financial aid seem to be advantageous in the short term but can prove to be a mistake in the

long term, as support from China comes with strings attached. US senator and chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee Robert Menendez mirrored this statement during a visit of a bipartisan group of US senators to Australia and expressed his fear that China aims to become the "owner and minder" of the Solomon Islands. [Sky News Australia] [The Guardian]

In response, the Chinese foreign ministry repeated its attempts to dispel concerns, stating that a security cooperation between China and Solomon Islands would not be targeted at other countries, but could be complementary to cooperation agreements that the Solomon Islands have with other countries. [Global Times]

China confirms delivery of arms to Serbia

(jw) After six military airplanes landing in Serbia prompted speculations of an arms deal between China and Serbia [see AiR No. 15, April/2022, 2], the Chinese foreign ministry confirmed a delivery of "regular military supplies" is part of an annual cooperation plan and "has nothing to do with the current situation." The foreign ministry did not comment on speculations that the delivery contained HQ-22 surface-to-air missiles which was part of a previous agreement signed by Serbia and China. [Associated Press]

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic defended arms deals with China as "legitimate, completely regular and transparent" in response to concerns voiced among others by the Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic and the Prime Minister of Kosovo, that is not recognized by Serbia, Albin Kurti. Vucic rejected claims that an upgraded Serbian military might target Serbian's neighboring countries that broke away from Serbia less than two decades ago. [South China Morning Post]

However, the Serbian strategy of pursuing closer ties and cooperation with Russia and China does not only cause distress among Montenegro and Kosovo but also alienates the country from the EU and the US [see AiR No. 15, April/2022, 2]

US threatens twelve additional Chinese companies with delisting

(jw) The US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) added twelve Chinese companies, including Chinese

leading internet company Sohu, to a register of Chinese companies that could be delisted on the US stock due to these comnpanies' refusal of disclosing information for audits. Companies that the US SEC enters into its registry need to disclose all information within three years demanded under US regulations if they want to be able to continue selling shares on the US stock market. [Pandaily]

The April 12 announcement from the SEC came as a surprise to some Chinese analysts, as there seemed to be a thaw in the audit dispute between China and the US recently. Chinese authorities announced that they would scrap some regulations that prevented Chinese companies from disclosing information to foreign entities [see AiR No. 14, April/2022, 1]. [Global Times]

Chinese mining companies operating in Guinea under pressure to pay more royalties

(jw) After removing Guinean President Alpha Condé in September 2021, the military rulers of Guinea have ramped up pressure on foreign mining companies active in the West African country that is rich in bauxite and iron ore. This has repercussions, especially for Chinese companies as China imports about half of its bauxite, which is processed to retain aluminum, from Guinea. Chinese mining companies also suffer from reduced access to Guinea's iron ore reserves after operations in Simandou, the largest iron ore deposit, were halted. This is crucial for China, that wants to be more independent of Australian iron ore as Australia-China relations deteriorate, and prices are increasing because of sanctions on Russia amid the Ukraine war.

According to the leader of Guinean military junta Mamady Doumbouya, the revenues from mining are "below expectations" and thus insufficient to continue the "game of fools that perpetuates great inequality." Thus, mining companies are urged to present concrete proposals on how to construct necessary facilities for the processing of bauxite within Guinean borders by May. Otherwise, they will face "penalties" according to Doumbouya.

This move is meant to stop the trend of exporting more and more bauxite instead of building aluminum refineries in Guinea, which is hard due to technical limitations and capital costs in Guinea that are higher than in China. However, analysts are doubtful that threats and punishments against foreign companies will accelerate investment projects that were progressing very slowly before.

Guinea is one of multiple African countries becoming more assertive in efforts to profit more from natural resources mined by international companies. This increases the pressure on Chinese mining companies such as China Molybdenum which temporarily lost control of a Congolese mine after a legal dispute with the Congolese government that was settled at the beginning of April [see AiR No. 14, April/2022, 1]. [South China Morning Post]

New Zealand Supreme Court allows extradition to China in landmark ruling

(jw) New Zealand's Supreme Court decided on April 13 that Kyung Yup Kim, who has been prosecuted on murder charges by Chinese authorities, can be extradited to China. This ruling is noteworthy as it opposes the practices of most democracies that do not allow for extraditions to China due to concerns that defendants would not get a free trial or might even face torture. However, three of five ruling judges deemed such concerns regarding Kim's "potential treatment" invalid, thus prompting the landmark ruling in the case that has been disputed in New Zealand's courts for over a decade.

Even though the ruling marks a legal victory and a diplomatic success for China, the extradition is still in question as Kim's lawyers announced that they would proceed to complain before the U.N. Human Rights Committee. Kim's declining health was also cited as an argument against extradition and could help him in the process of appeals. [Associated Press] [New Zealand Herald]

China, Saudi Arabia vow to deepen cooperation

(jw) In an April 15 phone call between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud (MBS) both sides vowed to deepen cooperation regarding economic, scientific and diplomatic matters. Xi expressed his support of Saudi Arabia's role in the region, also in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia leads a coalition fighting against the Houthi who are alleged to be backed by Iran. Furthermore, Xi and the Crown Prince discussed cooperation on infrastructure, trying to synergize the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative within Saudi Arabia's development framework, the Vision 2030.

The Crown Prince, for his part, supports the Chinese stance on critical political issues such as the situation in Xinjiang and affirmed his opposition against meddling in Chinese internal affairs. [Arab News] [Xinhua]

Cross-strait relations: Taiwanese pro-democracy activist jailed in China returns to Taiwan

(jw) Taiwanese pro-democracy activist Lee Ming-che, who was arrested in 2017 as the first nonprofit worker after Chinese regulations on non-governmental organizations were tightened, returned to Taiwan on April 15 after five years in prison.

Lee was prosecuted by Chinese authorities on grounds of subverting state power. His work entailed holding online lectures on Taiwanese democratization and managing a fund for the families of Chinese political prisoners. Lee's arrest came at a time of deteriorating cross-strait relations after the Taiwanese in 2016 elected Tsai Ing-wen as president, who represents a much more critical attitude towards China than her predecessor Ma Ying-jeou. [Associated Press]

Japan and US reaffirm alliance amidst global tensions

(cm) On April 16 Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and a United States delegation visiting Japan reaffirmed both countries' commitment to further cooperation and the importance of maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific, at a time of increasing tensions in both the regional and global setting. During the meeting, Kishida also sought the U.S.' support in the longstanding issue of Japanese nationals who were abducted by North Korea decades ago, who Japan has been trying to bring all back ever since.

The U.S. delegation visit followed a meeting with President Tsai Ing-wen in Taiwan, which Japan does not recognize but maintains friendly relations with. Any official exchanges between Taiwan and foreign governments are opposed by China, as it claims the territory as part of the country since the separation after the 1949 civil war. Although Japan's constitution bans the use of forces in international disputes, its role in a potential U.S. intervention in the cross-strait conflict could still be relevant as it would host the

country's military in its territory under the alliance. [ABC News]

China urges Japan to confront comfort women issue

(cm) During the United Nations Security Council's debate on "Conflict-Related Sexual Violence" on April 13 China's deputy ambassador to the UN, Dai Bing urged Japan to own up to the forced drafting of comfort women by the Japanese army during World War II, to "reflect on its history of aggressions" and to "bring justice to victims and survivors".

The issue brought up by Dai covers hundreds of thousands of women and girls not only from China, but also the Korean Peninsula and other regions within Southeast Asia, who were forcibly taken by Japanese soldiers. The term 'comfort women' was coined to refer to Korean women who were abducted and forced to work as wartime sex slaves by the army. Dai stated that so far Japan has only attempted to downplay and conceal this part of history, which was also manipulated in textbooks approved by the Japanese government.

The Chinese envoy urged the international community to act as a whole in the erasure of sexual violence in conflicts by adhering to unified standards, contextually preventing conflict itself as the breeding context for such violence. [Anadolu Agency]

Japan and US hold naval drills in Japan Sea near Korean Peninsula

(cm) Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force and the United States' 7th fleet stated on April 13 that they had conducted a joint navy exercise in the Sea of Japan the previous day, led by the USS Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group. The drill was held in waters between Japan and the Korean Peninsula amid growing concerns over North Korea's recent missile launches and speculation about a possible nuclear testing.

It was the first time the U.S. aircraft carrier held a drill with Japan in the area since 2017. The five-year hiatus was an attempt to avoid North Korea's provocation.

Furthermore, Japan, the U.S. and other allies around the South China Sea fear an escalation of the cross-strait tension between China and Taiwan amid the

Ukraine war, also considering China's growing assertiveness in the regional seas. [Daily Mail]

At the same time, worries in the area are increasing following the firing of cruise missiles by Russian submarines during exercises in the Sea of Japan on April 14, at a time of strained relations between Russia and Japan, who has joined Western allies among other nations in condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in response to which Russia withdrew from negotiations for a peace treaty between the two countries. [FMT] [See also AiR No. 12, March/2022, 4]

Japan and Italy step up cooperation amid Ukraine war

(cm) On April 12 the Japanese Foreign Minister Nobuo Kishi met his Italian counterpart Lorenzo Guerini in Tokyo to discuss Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which they condemned as a violation of international law, and to agree to boost security ties between the two countries. The ministers vowed to withstand any unilateral attempt to alter the status quo by force in their own geographical area, namely the Mediterranean and especially the Indo-Pacific region, also discussing a possible expansion of joint military exercises and development of defense technology.

The meeting was also an opportunity to review the relationship between the respective Armed Forces, particularly referring to the signing of the Technical Arrangement between the Italian and Japanese Air Forces, which provides advanced training for Japanese pilots in Italy at the International Flight Training School (IFTS).

Guerini expressed interest in possible Italian contribution to Japan's F-X next generation fighter jet, which would be the Japan's first domestically developed fighter jet in 40 years. Furthermore, in 2017, Italy and Japan signed a deal on the transfer of defense equipment and technology, which became effective two years later. [Yahoo News] [Ministero della Difesa, in Italian]

Japan passes bill raising duties on imports from Russia

(cm) On April 14 Japan's Lower House approved draft amendments to the customs legislation following the removal of Russia's most favoured nation status. The

measure implies an increase in duties on imports from Russia, to be introduced by the end of March 2023, and stricter controls over currency regulation.

Experts estimate that the new measures could increase Japan's tax revenues by USD 29.7 million a year.

Nonetheless, tariffs on import of liquefied natural gas and coal will not be raised, the tariffs being zero before the sanction was imposed on Russia. [Devdiscourse]

Japan extends residency status term for people from Myanmar

(cm) On April 15, the Immigration Services Agency of Japan agreed to give Myanmar residents an extension of their residency permit, following last year's military coup which destabilized their homeland. After the coup in February 2021 Japan introduced an emergency measure to allow people from Myanmar to switch their residency status to "designated activities" in order to stay and work for six months more, with an option of six-months renewals. Now the term of the "designated activities" residency status will be doubled.

By March this year, about 4,600 people from Myanmar have received such a status, while 32 people were recognized as refugees last year. Although Japan is known to not be a refugee-friendly country, with only around 1 percent yearly of asylum seekers accepted, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced on Sunday 17 that the government is currently considering redefining the refugee category in order to welcome more people fleeing conflicts.

The move was prompted by the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, but Kishida underlined that there will be no discrimination against other countries. [Kyodo News] [Japan Today]

Diplomatic trips of Japan's Prime Minister and Foreign Minister in planning

(cm/bs) On April 12 Japanese government sources announced that Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi's and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's visits to multiple countries in Central and Southeast Asia are in planning.

Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi is set to visit Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan from late April, possibly

meeting the foreign ministers of other countries in the region, including Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan by the end of June. During this tour Japan aims to discuss China's growing clout in the area, where China is investing in large-scale infrastructure through the Belt and Road initiative, and Japan's intention of strengthening economic relations with the countries concerned.

Last week, on April 16, Japan's Hayashi held online talks with ministers and officials of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, during which the countries pledged to closely communicate over their responses to Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine. Hayashi is also considering a stop in Mongolia to meet his counterpart and seek collaboration in the settlement of the longstanding issue of North Korea's abductions of Japanese nationals. [The Japan Times] [Kyodo News 1]

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is planning to pay a visit to Southeast Asian countries in late April to discuss cooperation in countering the growing influence of China in the region, specifically to "underscore cooperation toward realizing the vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific amid China's rise."

While Japan is not a claimant in the South China Sea, the country's representatives have filed a diplomatic note to the United Nations rejecting China's baseline claims and condemning China's alleged behavior of limiting the freedom of navigation and overflight in the area.

Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam are already in the Prime Minister's list of countries to visit as they are respectively this year's chairs of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) and of G20, and Japan's partner in sharing interest in the South China Sea maritime security.

In Thailand, the prime minister will meet his counterpart Prayut Chan-o-cha, a visit that coincides with the 135th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. [Kyodo News 2]

Prime Minister Kishida is also believed to follow with a visit to Europe and a meeting with ministers of defense and foreign affairs from India. Moreover, he is expected to meet the other leaders of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, including the United States, Australia and India in May. [Radio Free Asia]

South Korea: Joint military drills with the US

(mpk) Seoul announced that before the major springtime joint training, preliminary military drills have started with the US on April 12. The four-day crisis management staff training (CMST), led by South Korea, is designed to prepare and respond to possible pre-war crisis scenarios. [The Korea Herald 1]

Furthermore, a US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN-72), has operated around Tsushima Island which is located between South Korea and Japan. The carrier stayed five days in the East Sea. The group of Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike mainly carries out bilateral operations with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force in the Sea of Japan. [The Korea Herald 2]

In March, the USS Abraham Lincoln was involved in in a show of force towards North Korea, as the US military conducted a carrier-based air demonstration in the Yellow Sea, involving 4th and 5th generation aircraft, including F-35C stealth fighter from the USS Abraham Lincoln, along with regionally-based U.S. Air Force aircrafts [see AiR No. 12, March/2022,4].

North Korea develops technology to aims to evade US missile defense systems, the US congressional report says

(mpk) According to a report of the US Congressional Research Service, North Korea's recent missile tests are indicative of efforts to develop capabilities to evade US missile defense systems deployed in the region. The report stressed that the North Korean submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) may carry out attacks from the sea escaping the land-based Terminal High Altitude Area Defense's (THAAD) radar field.

Currently, there is one US THAAD unit in South Korea, but President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol's administration is willing to deploy more THAAD units towards continued North Korean missile threats.

The report also warned that North Korea's tested intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), the Hwasong-15 and the Hwasong-17, are "difficult to defeat in flight" due to their "mobility, potency, precision and [...] characteristics." [The Korea Herald 1] [Report of the Congressional Research Service]

Meanwhile, a US military intelligence report has accused North Korea of using its space program to cover testing and advancing ballistic missile capabilities, referring to the firing of what Pyongyang described as space launch vehicles on February 27 and March 5 aimed at developing a new reconnaissance satellite. The US has viewed them as tests for a new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) system.

The report also stressed that aerospace industries have been targeted by multiple North Korean hacker groups. [Report of Defense Intelligence Agency] [The Korea Herald 2] [See also AiR No. 9, March/2022,1 and AiR No 10, March/2022,2]

FBI detects two cyberattack groups stealing cryptocurrencies for North Korea

(mpk) According to an investigation of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), two cyber actors, Lazarus Group and APT38, have stolen USD 620 million in cryptocurrency for North Korea by hacking a computer network. The network was being used by a video game named Axie Infinity in which players can earn cryptocurrency. The procreator company, Sky Mavis, announced that the network was hacked by unidentified hackers on March 29.

The US Treasury Department, meanwhile, announced that it has imposed sanctions on the Lazarus Group, a hacker swath believed to work for North Korea.

Chainalysis which follows digital currency transactions claims that Lazarus Group has stolen USD 1.75 billion worth of cryptocurrency during recent years which are used to fund, among others, North Korea's ballistic missile tests. [CNN]

South Korea: Trade minister asks for British support for membership in CPTTP

(mpk) South Korea announced on April 15 its decision to apply for membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

A day earlier, South Korean Trade Minister Yeo Han-koo met with British Ambassador to South Korea, Colin Crooks to request Britain's support for the application. Furthermore, while there are continued talks to carry out negotiations on upgrading the bilateral free trade agreement (FTA), both sides also agreed on the need

for more strong bilateral cooperation to ensure stable supply chains. With the FTA that came into effect in January 2021, the trade volume between the two countries increased by 32.6 percent and reached USD 11.8 billion. [Yonhap News Agency 1] [Yonhap News Agency 2]

In a latest development, Malaysia affirmed its support South Korea's application to the CPTPP, during a virtual meeting on April 18 between Yeo and Malaysian International Trade and Industry Minister Mohamed Azmin Ali. [Yonhap News Agency 3]

South Korea, Kazakhstan to expand their business cooperation

(mpk) Kazakhstan's Ambassador to Korea, Bakyt Dyussenbayev, announced that a special working group has been established to expand investments and cooperation with Korean businesses. The group will advocate large investment projects, tax exemptions, issuance of in-kind grants, and solutions to infrastructure problems.

With the visit of Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in August 2021, bilateral relations between the two countries have raised to the level of strategic partnership. Furthermore, in 2021, trade between the two nations stood at USD 3.2 billion, and total Korean investments in Kazakhstan reached USD 6.7 billion. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea will carry out anti-dumping tariffs to Chinese printing plates

(mpk) On April 14, South Korea's Korea Trade Commission, the country's trade watchdog, decided to slap anti-dumping tariffs of 3.6 to 7.61 percent on double-layered offset printing plates from China. The Commission cited the reason was the plates' damage to South Korea's own industry.

The move follows a complaint filed in March last year by a South Korean printing plate firm. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea will supply Philippines Navy with combat management system

(mpk) The Philippine Navy will obtain a combat management system (CMS) from the defense and ICT unit of South Korean conglomerate Hanwha Group after both sides signed a contract valued at USD 33 million on April 18. Two 3,100-ton patrol combat corvettes will be equipped with this system which integrates all equipment, like various sensors, weapons and communications systems, into one single system to increase the efficiency of operations to counter threats during combat. [Yonhap News Agency]

Swedish lawmakers, Czech foreign minister reaffirm support for Taiwan during visit in Taipei

(dql) A Swedish parliamentary delegation, led by Boriana Åberg, head of the Swedish-Taiwanese Parliamentarian Association, visited last week Taiwan. During a meeting with Premier Su Tseng-chang, she stressed that the visit serves signal Europe's support Taiwan's efforts to defend its freedom and democracy against China.

Focus of the talks during the five-day visit was strengthening deterrence against China, while ways to deepen bilateral trade and cooperation in other areas, including combating disinformation were also discussed. [Focus Taiwan]

In a separate statement, Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavsky Czech Republic said in an interview that his country is aware that"Taiwan is bullied by China" and is ready to support Taiwan "as much as possible", referring to research and innovation in semiconductors as a possible area of future cooperation. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan-Palau joint maritime patrol

(dql) Taiwan's the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration 2,000-ton cutter Tainan, an armed patrol vessel was part of a Palauan patrol flotilla during last week's two-day 2022 Our Ocean Conference (OOC), jointly hosted by the Palau's President Surangel Whipps Jr and US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry and attended by 500 delegates from more than 80 nations. Palau is one of 14 states with which Taiwan has diplomatic relations.

Unlike earlier conferences, at which Taiwan's delegation took part as an NGO, this year's conference listed the Taiwanese delegation was listed as among the participating "Countries/Authorities" under the name "Taiwan" instead of "Republic of China (Taiwan)".

Initiated by the U.S. Department of State, the conference is committed to drawing international attention to the serious threats to world's ocean and to supporting marine conservation and sustainable development. [Focus Taiwan] [RNZ]

Bangladesh visit of US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom

(hg) The United States Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, Rashad Hussain, arrived in Dhaka last Sunday for a four-day visit to meet officials and civil society, including leaders of the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCOP).

Ambassador Hussain told the religious minority leaders, the United States would be aware of human rights violations and trying to stand by the minorities who are persecuted around the world. [Prothom Alo] US religious freedom ambassador Hussain due in Dhaka Sunday

Bangladesh-Russian trade growing

(hg) Amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Bangladesh is increasingly exporting goods to Russia according to data of the country´s Export Promotion Bureau. Payments seems to be often made through Turkey, China, and Singapore. [The Business Standard]

US, India call on Pakistan to do more to combat terrorism

(sg) Following the US and India Ministerial Dialogue in Washington, officials from the two countries released a joint statement urging Pakistan to prevent terror groups from gaining a foothold in the country.

US secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Defence secretary Lloyd Austin led the Fourth Annual U.S.-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue with their Indian counterparts.

The bilateral meeting focused on developing the Quad- the grouping formed by the United States, Japan, Australia, and India to counter Chinese influence and the current crisis in Ukraine and other cooperative projects.

Shortly after the summit, the two nations issued a statement stating Pakistan should take "immediate, sustained, and irreversible action to ensure that no territory under its control is used for terrorist attacks" [US Department of State]. Additionally, the announcement further criticises Islamabad for using "terrorist proxy and cross border terrorism" militant groups. Crucially, Pakistan shares the warning with neighbouring Afghanistan, which the US called on "to abide by UNSC Resolution 2593 (2021), which demands that Afghan territory must never again be used to threaten or attack any country or to shelter or train terrorists, or to plan or finance terrorist attacks."

In response, the Pakistani government accused India of using the summit as a platform to "cover up its state terrorism" and violence against civilians in the disputed Indian region of Jammu and Kashmir. Furthermore, the foreign ministry of Pakistan voiced outrage towards the US, expressing that the statement betrays the counter-terrorism focus of both countries. [Radio Pakistan][Dawn]

The announcement sparked another row in US-Pakistan relations which had deteriorated in the past months as the recently ousted Pakistan PM, Imran Khan, repeatedly accused the US of pushing for regime change in his country [Bangkok Post]. However, new interim PM Shehbaz Sharif has pledged to improve ties with the West. US secretary Blinken congratulated Sharif on his nomination and declared "a strong, prosperous, and democratic Pakistan as essential" to the interest of both nations. [The National News]

India to secure more coordinated risk response in South Asia

(sg) At the first secretary-level meeting of the Inter-Ministerial Coordination Group (IMCG), Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla articulated his aim for a "Neighbourhood First" policy. The conference expanded on concepts to improve cross-border trade, infrastructure and connectivity.

The IMCG is a grouping of states surrounding India, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. India set up the mechanism to direct "a whole-of-government

approach to promote better connectivity, stronger interlinkages and greater people-to-people connect with our neighbours." [South Asia Monitor 1] The conference involved secretaries of about ten ministries and senior officials from the Cabinet Secretariat and National Security Council Secretariat. [The Hindu]

The meeting comes amid economic and political upheaval in Sri Lanka and Pakistan, recent anti-India sentiment in the Maldives and Chinese power-play in the Indo-Pacific. The meeting set priorities for the construction of border infrastructure to boost trade with Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives, encouraging greater rail connectivity with Bangladesh and sending humanitarian assistance to conflict-ridden Myanmar and Afghanistan. [The Indian Express] [The Economic Times]

In future, the group, with the inclusion of several ministries such as finance and commerce, could lead to faster decision-making during economic crises, and cross-border emergencies, according to officials. [South Asia Monitor 2]

India, Vietnam discuss Ukraine and South China Sea

(sg) On April 15. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a telephone conversation with Vietnamese Communist Party secretary-general Nguyen Phu Trong. The conversation came on the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

As part of the meeting, the two discussed the success of their India-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which was established in 2016 and aimed to strengthen bilateral economic and diplomatic ties. In addition, Modi called Vietnam an "important pillar of India's Act East Policy", according to the Times of India.

Part of the meeting also focused on the South China Sea. Both emphasised importance of preserving peace and stability and upholding the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas. China considers sovereignty over the Sea, conflicting with the interest of other nations along the Sea, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei. [NDTV] In addition to furthering diplomatic understanding, the leaders agreed to strengthen defence partnerships. In light of the ongoing situation in Ukraine, both leaders shared their wish for a swift end to the conflict. [Vietnam Plus] Both India and Vietnam have previously refrained from condemning Russia for its actions in Ukraine.

Additionally, Modi expressed hope for greater access to the Vietnamese market for pharma and agricultural products. [The Tribune] India and Vietnam have sizeable bilateral trade amounting to almost 14 billion USD last year. Significant Indian investments in Vietnam have focused on agricultural processing, chemicals, and IT in the past. [Indian Embassy in Hanoi]

India's growing commodity exports to Russia

(hg) Facilitated by Russian Sberbank, India seems to increase its exports of commodities such as tea, rice, fruits, coffee, marine products and textiles on a rupee-rouble basis and mostly using a route via Georgian ports. [The Economic Times]

India, Bhutan and Bangladesh discuss waterways connectivity

(sg) India discussed better connectivity and increased trade by exploiting potential waterways at its "Waterways Conclave" with Bhutan and Bangladesh hosted on April 11-12 in India's North-eastern state of Assam.

The participatory nations discussed how to use waterways such as the Brahmaputra river to improve economic ties in the region. Indian union minister of ports, shipping and waterways Sarbanada Sonowal called channels such as the Brahmaputra one of the most significant opportunities for young entrepreneurs. Within a 2,000 km radius, India has all big cities with a combined population of 800 million. [ANI News]

At the summit, the Bhutanese minister of economic affairs, Lyonpo Loknath Sharma, called on stakeholders to increase connectivity between his landlocked nation and India, saying common waterways could provide a significant opportunity to enhance the connection between the two countries. Indian union minister Sonowal meanwhile stated that the exploitation of rivers could "bring a new era of development for the neighbouring country", as reported by media outlet NDTV. [NDTV]

Bangladesh state minister for shipping, Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury, who attended the meeting online, spoke of the potential for river connectivity.

"There are 700 rivers in Bangladesh, out of which 54 are in the Indo-Bangladesh border", noting that 8,480km of Bangladesh waterways could transport goods and services to regions in neighbouring Bhutan, India, Nepal. [The Business Standard]

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson to visit India

(sg) UK PM Boris Johnson will travel to India for a two-day visit on April 21-22. He will visit Ahmedabad in Gujarat province and New Delhi. The trip will mark the first time Johnson visits India. The long-delayed trip comes a year late due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The trip to Delhi has been high on the PM's agenda; the UK has identified India as a critical partner in foreign relations in the 2021 Integrated Review. [The Hindu] Ahead of the trip, Johnson stated, "As we face threats to our peace and prosperity from autocratic states, it is vital that democracies and friends stick together." [Reuters]

However, contrary to Johnson's harmonious rhetoric, the UK and western allies have repeatedly blasted India for its continued relations with Russia. New Delhi has refused to condemn Russia for the ongoing crisis in Ukraine and decided to purchase more Oil at a discount from the country. India imports most of its weapons from Russia, and the two countries are large trade partners. [see AiR No. 14, April/2022, 1]

Besides Ukraine, Johnson stated the purpose of his visit as a "matter to the people of both our nations - from job creation and economic growth to energy security and defence." [BBC] Johnson will meet Indian PM Narendra Modi in New Delhi. The talks will likely touch on the 2030 Roadmap, the UK's plan to shift focus on the Indo-Pacific, aiming to double bilateral trade by 2030. The Prime Minister's office has stated that the PM's visit will hopefully encourage progress for a free trade agreement "to boost trade by up to £28 billion annually by 2035 and increase incomes across the UK by up to £3 billion." [UK Government] British officials are set to travel to India at the end of this month to negotiate the third round of the trade agreement. [Hindustan Times]

Earlier this month, UK foreign secretary Liz Truss travelled to New Delhi to meet her Indian counterpart S Jaishankar. That meeting set a precedent for this week's high-level summit. Truss had underlined the need for "like-minded nations" to cooperate more

closely on defence, trade, and energy and food security. [see AiR No. 14, April/2022, 1]

Afghan Taliban accuses Pakistan's military of airstrike in Eastern Afghan provinces

(ha) Afghan government officials have accused Pakistan's military of having carried out airstrikes in eastern Afghanistan on April 16 that have killed at least 45 people.

The airstrike accusation also adds to Kabul's existing anger over a fence Islamabad is building along the countries' 1,600 mile border, known as the Durand line. [NewYork Times]

Border tensions between both the neighboring countries have exacerbated since the Taliban seized power last year in Afghanistan, with Islamabad claiming that militants use Afghan soil to conduct attacks in Pakistan.

Pakistan's military has made no official comment on the attacks. However, on April 17, Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged the Afghan government to take "stern actions" against militants targeting Pakistani security forces from across the border. [Associated Press] Earlier in the week, Pakistan's military spokesperson stated that more than 100 officers and soldiers have been killed in attacks carried out in the Western border area of the country.

US-ASEAN special summit to be held on May 12-13

(pw) United States (US) President Joe Biden and leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will attend the US–ASEAN Special Summit in Washington DC on May 12-13, the White House announced.

The meeting aims both at reiterating the US engagement in the ASEAN framework and at focusing on setting the path for the ASEAN–US relationship and improving their strategic partnership. The parties also planned to discuss enhancing cooperation in various areas including climate change, development, economic engagement, education, health, and maritime collaboration.

Initially, the summit was scheduled for March 28–29, but disagreements among ASEAN members on the meeting dates caused it to be postponed. It will be the second US–ASEAN special summit since 2016. It remains to be seen whether Myanmar's military government under Senior General Min Aung Hlaing will join this summit due to US allegations that Myanmar's military is committing genocide against the Rohingya Muslim minority.

Amid the US–China strategic competition, Southeast Asia is vital to counter China in the US's view. Previously, on March 29, a meeting between Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and US President Biden revealed their intention to keep Southeast Asia "open and free." [Channel News Asia] [Radio Free Asia] [The Phnom Penh Post]

Myanmar nationals repatriated from Thailand

(cmsk) The Thai government claimed that 145 Myanmar nationals returned from Thailand to Myanmar under the voluntary repatriation program. Myanmar nationals were detained by Thai authorities for entering Thailand illegally to find jobs, according to the Thai government.

This follows earlier Associated Press reports of Myanmar refugees at the Thai border being told to return to their country by Thai authorities. Around 17,000 Myanmar refugees have sought safety in Thailand since the military takeover. Another 2,000 are currently living on the Thai side of the border while 90,000 refugees reached Thailand long before the coup. Thailand is not a signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention. [Bangkok Post] [Associated Press]

Cambodian, Vietnamese Prime Ministers to strengthen bilateral cooperation

(pw) In a diplomatic phone call, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen and Pham Minh Chinh, his Vietnamese counterpart, reiterated the necessity to maintain efforts to build political trust, intensify cooperation on socio-economic recovery post-Covid-19, and work together on creating a peaceful and safe Cambodia-Vietnam borders. They also stated that in spite of the Covid-19 Pandemic, the Cambodia-Vietnam relations and cooperation continued to improve positively. [The Phnom Penh Post]

India, Malaysia vow to deepen ties

(lb) India and Malaysia reviewed their bilateral relations at the 5th Foreign Office Consultations at Putrajaya, Malaysia. Malaysia's Ministry of External Affairs said in a statement that the meeting concluded with hopes to deepen the two countries' ties and further cooperation in a range of areas within the framework of the Enhanced Strategic Partnership of 2015.

The parties also praised their bilateral economic relations and committed to strengthen cooperation in reactivating the bilateral mechanisms in several sectors. They will present their achievements in the next Joint Commission Meeting. [Business Standard]

16 Malaysians rescued from slavery in Cambodia

(lb) Cambodian authorities rescued 16 Malaysian citizens victims of forced labor and human trafficking from the town of Sihanoukville. They were allegedly coerced in an online scam job, and they were reportedly locked up and forced to work 14 hours a day.

Initially the Malaysian ambassador to Cambodia had written a letter to the national police chief hoping for the release of 50 Malaysians who were being held against their will and being forced into illegal activities. The 16 Malaysians were rescued and are being sent home, but the police chief says there are more trapped after human traffickers tricked victims into travelling with false promises. [UCA News]

Indonesia, India to enhance maritime cooperation

(lb) India and Indonesia held the 7th India-Indonesia Foreign Office Consultations (FOC) in Jakarta on April 14. The countries' bilateral relationship was reviewed with a focus on political exchanges, defense and security cooperation, trade and economic matters. Both countries have emphasized the need to strengthen the India-Indonesia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with greater maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. [ANI]

Lao, Vietnamese Prime Ministers agree to enhance bilateral cooperation

(pw) On the occasion of the Lao New Year, on April 14–16, the Lao Prime Minister and his Vietnamese counterpart emphasized the importance of expansive Laos–Vietnam cooperation and discussed the impact of previous meetings between the two countries.

They also have agreed that both countries should deepen their economic cooperation, hold exchange visits, and conduct combined efforts to successfully implement their collaboration schemes in areas such as socio-economic development.

Previously, Laos and Vietnam agreed to a memorandum of understanding to construct a railroad between Vientiane, Laos's capital, and the Vung Ang Port in Vietnam.

The trade value between both countries was USD 243.2 million in the previous two months, marking a 15.39 percent increase from 2021. Vietnamese investments in Laos have amounted to USD 5.3 billion, making Vietnam the third-largest country, in terms of investment in Laos, after China and Thailand. [Vientiane Times]

Malaysia condemns burning of Holy Quran in Sweden

(lb) Malaysia's Foreign Ministry issued a statement on April 17, criticizing the leader of the far-right group Stram Kurs for burning a copy of the Holy Quran on April 14 in a public space in Linkoping, Sweden. The Ministry condemned the provocative action that "has gone beyond moral limits and norms of the right to freedom of speech and expression." [Malay Mail]

Malaysia, Indonesia speak on violence in Palestine

(lb) Malaysia Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob spoke of attacks made by Israeli Occupation Forces on Palestinian civilians and worshipers on April 15 at the Al Aqsa Mosque noting the assaults are against the fundamental rights, lives, livelihoods, and dignity of Palestinians.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia has unwavering support for the Palestinians and their cause to achieve freedom from the Israeli illegal occupation, further saying Malaysia is set to work with members of the international community to help Palestinians get peace and justice, and to bring positive change in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. [The Star]

The Indonesian Foreign Ministry also commented on the violence against Palestinians saying the violence cannot be justified and must be stopped. In his Twitter post, he also noted that the attack happened at a mosque, a place of worship, during the holy month of Ramadan. [ANTARA NEWS]

Indonesia consulting with G20 members over Russia's participation in economic summit

(Ib) After members of the G20 have disagreed on Russia's participation in the global finance chiefs summit scheduled for April 20, Indonesia has officially announced the Russian Finance Minister and Central Bank Governor will attend the meeting. The decision came despite the call from a group of Western countries to boycott the summit if Russia will be a participant.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Indonesian President Joko Widodo has been also pressured by the international community to ban Russian representatives from the G20 summit on November 15-16. [South China Morning Post] [Global Voices]

Announcements

Upcoming Online Events

20 April 2022 @10:00-11:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Stanford University, USA

Cyber Diplomacy and the Role of the Private Sector

Any decision regarding international cyberspace regulations has a significant impact on the non-state sector. At the same time, they contribute to the development and promotion of norms, as well as their perception and execution. In this webinar, Anna-Maria Osula of TalTech will present her research findings on private enterprise efforts to define and uphold cyber standards.

Further information is accessible via [FSI].

20 April 2022 @5:00-6:15 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Stanford University, USA

Local Political Incentives and Air Pollution Regulation in China

Air pollution is a quiet and unseen killer that is more fatal than violence, disease, and smoking combined. Additionally, prolonged exposure to dirty air can raise the risk of contracting COVID-19. Although scientific approaches for reducing air pollution exist, little progress has been made in applying them. In this webinar, Professor Shen will present her latest book, The Political Regulation Wave: A Case of How Local Incentives Shape Air Quality in China. She contends that local leaders impose varying degrees of regulation throughout time in response to the desires of their political superiors. However, the efficiency of their regulation efforts is contingent upon the degree of uncertainty associated with the management of a particular pollutant.

For more details of the event, see [FSI].

20 April 2022 @ 9:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

Are Ukraine's audacious strikes a prelude to phase two of the war?

As Ukraine's bold moves continue to make headline worldwide, experts will discuss what Ukraine's actions reveal about the war's next phase.

More information is available at [Atlantic Council].

20 April 2022 @ 2:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

Future Foreign Policy: How can the United States lead on global health?

This webinar will feature a conversation between Rep. Jake Auchincloss (MA-4) and The Washington Post's Dan Diamond, who will address how the United States can tackle COVID-19 more efficiently and take a leadership role in global public health security.

Further information is accessible via [Atlantic Council].

20 April 2022 @ 6:00-7:00 p.m. (GMT+10), Australian Institute of International Affairs- ACT, Australia

Marcos, Again? An Advance Look at the Presidential Election in the Philippines

The Philippines' impending 9 May 2022 elections will choose the nation's leader for the next six years, until 2028. While Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos, Jr., the only son of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, is the top candidate, Vice President Leni Robredo, has appeared as the primary adversary. This online session will discuss significant electoral dynamics that have occurred to date.

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

20 April 2022 @ 11:00-12:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Brookings Office of Communications, USA

Restoring trust in government through improved customer experience

Many Americans are frustrated by even the most basic encounters with the government. Restoring trust in government services requires enhancing the user

experience. This talk will touch upon how to improve government customer experiences. Experts will review state and local attempts to initiate more user-centered services.

For more details of the event, see [BROOKINGS].

21 April 2022 @ 10:00-11:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Brookings Office of Communications, USA

How close is the US to universal broadband?

In this webinar, a panel of experts will explore how the US government can overcome barriers to expanding internet availability to all inhabitants of the nation.

Follow [BROOKINGS] to learn more about the event.

21 April 2022 @ 5:30-6:30 p.m. (GMT+10), Australian Institute of International Affairs- Victoria, Australia

France and the Blue Pacific

Australia and France's strategic cooperation has been weakened by the AUKUS announcement in September 2021. The strategic relationship with Australia has been reduced to bilateral ties following a "re-evaluation". France, despite this, is expanding its presence in the Pacific Islands. This webinar will explore what lies ahead in the future of France-Australia strategic cooperation.

Find more about the webinar at [AIIAVIC].

21 April 2022 @ 8:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

The outlook for Colombia's economy: A conversation with Finance Minister José Manuel Restrepo

This virtual conference will feature a conversation with Colombia's Minister of Finance and Credit, José Manuel Restrepo, who will highlight Colombia's economic outlook, economic expansion targets, financial development, and managing supply chain disruptions and financial flows in the midst of the Ukraine crisis.

Visit [Atlantic Council] to find more event details.

21 April 2022 @9:00 a.m.-6:30 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Stanford University, USA

Challenges to Democracy in the Digital Information Realm

This one-day in-person conference will be held under the theme "Challenges to Democracy in the Digital Information Realm." Divided into three main panels, the events will focus on three key topics, namely: the trust problem, designing for democratic discourse, and the threat of digital authoritarianism.

If you interested in the answers to these questions, register at [FSI].

21 April 2022 @ 5:30-7:00 p.m. (GMT-8), World Affairs, USA

#EARTHDAY: Women Making Climate Action Cool

Paola Gianturco and her 14-year-old granddaughter, Avery Sangster, have joined the battle against global warming with the debut of their new book for Earth Day 2022, COOL: Women Leaders Reversing Global Warming. This webinar will feature a discussion with the two authors based on their recent book to discuss how to successfully collaborate with them to create and initiate environmental solutions.

For more details, see [World Affairs].

21 April 2022 @3:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Stanford University, USA

The Tokyo War Crimes Trial

Gary Bass, professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University, will talk about his recent award-winning book, The Blood Telegram. This book project will examine the Tokyo war crimes court's history, politics, and legislation following World War II.

Learn more about the event at [FSI].

21 April 2022 @5:00 a.m.-6:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Stanford University, USA

The Politics of Gender Equality in South Korea

This panel will discuss modern public perceptions of gender equality in South Korea and institutional acceptance for it. It will provide a summary of women's political presence in terms of both statistical and qualitative representation since 1948. Additionally, panelists will share their experience conducting multi-country research to offer comparable regional perspectives.

More information is available at [FSI].

22 April 2022 @ 9:30-11:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Brookings Office of Communications, USA

Climate change: Tackling a global challenge in Africa

Africa has already established itself as a global leader in the fight against climate change. Africa is suffering the most severe consequences, yet contributing the least to the crisis. In honor of Earth Day, this webinar will discuss the climate change outlook in Africa, as well as the ramifications and hopes for COP27, Africa's COP, scheduled to take place this year in Egypt.

For more information, see [BROOKINGS].

22 April 2022 @2:00 -2:45 p.m. (GMT-5), The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, USA

Nakate on Climate Justice and Youth Activism

African perspectives are typically absent from the global climate movement. On Earth Day, Vanessa Nakate, a major climate justice activist, will join the Council to address the critical role of the next generation and marginalized voices from the global south in resolving the climate challenges and building a sustainable world for everyone.

Visit [The Chicago Council] to find more details of the event.

22 April 2022 @6:00 -7:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Stanford University, USA

US-China Relations in the Age of Uncertainty with Professor Yasheng Huang

The US-China relationship is approaching a period of uncertainty. The two big powers' relations, more than any other bilateral relationship in the world, are fraught with complications. Although the two countries contest each other in a variety of fields, the rivalry occurs within a broader context of mutual reliance and partnership. Russia's invasion of Ukraine threatens to further destabilize US-China relations. This presentation will investigate and debate these topics.

To find more about the event, click on [FSI].

22 April 2022 @ 9:30 a.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

PIPEDREAM at the disco: Implications for international security and operational technology

This panel discussion will focus on the PIPEDREAM malware. Experts will assess the revelation of this offensive program and its implications for industry, allies, partners, and rivals.

If you wish you attend this event, register at [Atlantic Council]

25 April 2022 @ 6:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

The Chuck Hagel Forum in Global Leadership

This online event series convenes global leaders to discuss crucial problems in quest of solutions to today's global crises.

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

25 April 2022 @1:30 -3:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Stanford University, USA

The Web of Power: How Elite Networks Shaped War and China with Professor Ruixue Jia

This webinar will feature Ruixue Jia who will talk about her research findings. The paper examines the Taiping Insurrection (1850-1864), the worst civil war in history, to demonstrate how one individual, Zeng Guofan, used his own elite networks to raise an army that destroyed the revolt and how these networks impacted the nation's power distribution. The session will emphasize the important role of elite networks in transmitting individual-level influence and impacting national politics and power distribution in a society.

Follow [FSI] to learn more about the event.

26 April 2022 @1:00 -2:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Stanford University, USA

How Credible Nuclear Security Guarantees Backfire

The client's concerns about nuclear escalation by their guarantor may prompt countries to withdraw from the alliance or pursue greater independent nuclear capabilities. Through survey experiments and case studies of US alliances in East Asia and Europe, this study investigates the dangers of credible US nuclear security promises.

For more information, see [FSI].

26 April 2022 @5:00 -6:30 p.m. (GMT-5), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Students, Stanford University, USA

Rethinking China's Presence in Southeast Asia: Influences, Unintended Consequences, and Ripple Effects

The majority of research on China's relations with Southeast Asia focuses on the country's strength and influence. Professor Enze Han's research will focus on the unexpected consequences and cascading representations of China's influence in the region. He will present a typology for considering China's regional presence and its varied everyday manifestations.

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

26 April 2022 @ 6:00-7:00 p.m. (GMT+10), Australian Institute of International Affairs- (QLD) Inc., Australia

Blue Pacific: strategic opportunity and challenge

The region of the Pacific islands has become the subject of heightened strategic attention and anxiety. The region is energetic, dynamic, and diversified. Considering the global crises from climate change to COVID-19 and beyond, the perspectives and concerns of Pacific leaders and their communities are critical to Australia's regional strategic success.

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

26 April 2022 @ 6:30-7:30 p.m. (GMT+10), Australian Institute of International Affairs- NSW, Australia

China-EU economic relations: geo-economic competition and rival models of capitalism

China's state capitalism has become a source of increasing contention for its trading allies in free democracies. The EU is reevaluating its ties with Beijing on more than economic grounds. In an EU-China setting, this lecture examines the policy implications of geoeconomics rivalry on sovereign-driven investment.

For more details, see [AIIANSW].

26 April 2022 @ 6:30-8:30 p.m. (GMT+10), Australian Institute of International Affairs- South Australia, Australia

'Diplomacy at the Bar' with Prof Matt Fitzpatrick - The Shattered Peace of Europe: What Next?

Ukraine's war has irreversibly altered Europe's future and, with it, the possibilities for global security. In this webinar, Professor Matt Fitzpatrick will analyze the likely consequences of Central and Eastern Europe's rearmament and argue that Russia and NATO must find new approaches to cooperate in this turbulent atmosphere.

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

25 April 2022 @ 12:30-1:30 p.m. (GMT-5), Brookings Office of Communications, USA

How America can get big things done: A conversation with Will Hurd

In this webinar, Will Hurd will talk about his latest book, American Reboot, which sets out an audacious political vision for how the United Nations should address the country's most pressing concerns. The speaker will address inequality, political corruption, technological innovation, the regression of democracy, and growing challenges to America's global leadership and influence.

For further event details, see [BROOKINGS].

26 April 2022 @ 10:00-11:30 a.m. (GMT-5), Brookings Office of Communications, USA

Breaking the cycle of poverty through innovative finance

Despite progress toward eradicating extreme poverty on a global scale, many individuals have been left behind. Innovative financing systems have the potential to help close the wealth gap. Through a graduation model approach focused on growing consumption and assets, the Village Enterprise DIB targeted first-time entrepreneurs living in extreme poverty in Kenya and Uganda. This event will convene Village Enterprise DIB project stakeholders, high-level professionals to share lessons, leading thinkers, as well as representatives from the development community to share lessons gained and evaluate opportunities and threats of the impact bond approach for tackling global poverty.

Visit [BROOKINGS] to find more event details.

Recent Book Releases

Vladislav M. Zubok, ***Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union***, Yale University Press, 560 pages, published on November 30, 2021, briefly reviewed in [Foreign Affairs].

David Lyon, ***Pandemic Surveillance***, Polity, 176 pages, published on January 18, 2022, with a review in [LSE].

André Lecours, ***Nationalism, Secessionism, and Autonomy***, Oxford University Press, 256 pages, December 7, 2021. For a review, visit [LSE].

Gideon Rachman, ***The Age of the Strongman: How the Cult of the Leader Threatens Democracy Around the World***, Other Press, 288 pages, published on April 19, 2022. A review is available at [The Guardian].

Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, ***The Forever Prisoner: The Full and Searing Account of the CIA's Most Controversial Covert Program***, Atlantic Monthly Press, 464 pages, published April 12, 2022. Visit [The New York Times] for a review.

Mark Mazower, ***The Greek Revolution: 1821 and the Making of Modern Europe***, Penguin Press, 608 pages, published on November 16, 2021, reviewed in [The New Statesman].

Calls for Papers

The **European Yearbook of Constitutional Law** invites paper proposal for its fifth volume (2023) on ***"Constitutional Law and the Algorithmic State"***. Closing date for proposal submission is June 1, 2022. For more information, see [Tilburg University].

Population Europe invites paper proposals for its ***International Forum on Migration Statistics 2023*** to be on January 24-26, 2023, in Santiago, Chile. Deadline for submission May 28, 2022. Learn more about the call at [Population Europe].

Jobs and Positions

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is looking for a ***Project Manager***. The position

is based in Delhi, India. Deadline for application is April 19, 2022. For more information, see [UNDP].

The **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)** is hiring a ***Senior Protection Officer***. The position is based in Bucharest, Romania. Closing date for applications is April 21, 2022. Visit [UNHCR] to find more details.

The **Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)** is recruiting an ***Area Programme Manager East & West Ukraine***. Applications are accepted until April 23, 2022. Further information is available at [NRC].

The **European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)** is looking for a ***Research Officer – Gender Equality***. The position is based in Vilnius, Lithuania. Deadline for applications is May 3, 2022. See [EIGE] for more information.

Team:

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