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# Asia in Review

*Grasp the pattern, read the trend*

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Dear Readers,

The Asia in Review (AIR) team is pleased to present you this week´s AiR issue with the latest events, developments and trends in domestic politics, international relations and geopolitics in East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

I wish you an informative read and extend special greetings to everyone who celebrates Saint Lucia's Independence Day and Brunei's and Kuwait's National Day this week.

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

## China: New home prices rise in January

(ms) According to data from China's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), new home prices are expected to have risen 0.1 percent in January compared to the previous month, the first increase in almost a year.

However, a certain form of caution is required when it comes to the validity of these figures, as they are contrary to an article published by Caixin Global at the beginning of February, which, based on data from China Index Holdings, still reported a nationwide price decline of 0.02 percent [see AiR No. 6, February/2023, 1].

Regardless of the actual values, an effect of the Chinese government's measures to support the struggling real estate sector can be seen. Both the NBS figures and the Caixin Global report confirmed price

increases especially in first-tier cities in China, although the number of cities differed. [Reuters]

## China: Xi focuses on high-quality foreign investment and private sector

(ms) President Xi Jinping emphasised the importance of foreign investment, high exports and in particular the importance of the relationship with developing countries in a newly published speech.

The speech was made at the Central Economic Work Conference in December last year, now published in the party journal Qiushi on February 15.

In order to achieve the economic recovery of the Chinese economy and its growth, Xi attaches great importance to China's foreign economic position. He calls for maintaining high-quality foreign investment in developing countries and emerging nations, as he sees greater competition there in the future.

Regarding the domestic economy, Xi stressed the need to support the private sector, a development that contrasts with the nearly two-year crackdown on the country's big tech companies. Its implementation, however, is already evident in the early days of the year, with a meeting between the government and the heads of the country's Big Tech companies just days after the speech was published (see entry below). [South China Morning Post] [Xinhua]

Also, since the beginning of the year, the Chinese government has allowed Alibaba subsidiary Ant Group's plan to raise the equivalent of USD 1.5 billion for its consumer unit [see AiR No. 2, January/2023, 2] and allowed ride-hailing company Didi to relaunch after an 18-month ban on the company from app stores [see AiR No. 4, January/2023, 4].

## China: Government meets with Big Tech companies

(ms) A symposium hosted by the Chinese government on February 17 was attended by the founders and chief executive officers of Chinese big tech companies, including Tencent Holding, Baidu, Xiaomi, NetEase and Didi Chuxing. .

While more specific details about what was discussed at the meeting were not made public, the tech giants are said to have agreed with the government on

accelerating the growth of the digital economy, support from tech companies to expand and improve China's digital infrastructures and further develop new technologies such as 6G, artificial technology and quantum computing.

In general, the companies are committed to aligning themselves more closely with the goals of the Chinese Communist Party and adjusting regulations accordingly, without going into too much detail. [South China Morning Post]

Despite the limited information, the meeting is a further step in easing the crackdown on big tech companies, which have been given a key role in the recovery of the Chinese economy after three years of zero-COVID.

## China: 78,000 public servants indicted between 2018 and 2022 for accepting bribes

(ms) China's Supreme People's Procuratorate released official data on indictments over the past five years on February 15. For the first time, it provides insight into the number of state security charges.

With a conviction rate of over 99 percent in recent years, it can be assumed that the number of indictments is roughly equivalent to actual convictions. [China Justice Observer]

The anti-corruption campaign that has gained momentum, particularly since President Xi Jinping took office in 2012, resulted in 78,000 indictments between 2018 and 2022. These include about 100 officials of ministerial rank or higher.

The case surrounding Sun Lijun, the former Vice Minister of Public Security, who along with a clique of other high-ranking officials including former Chinese Justice Minister Fu Zhenghua were accused of plotting a coup against President Xi Jinping, was among the most prominent cases. Sun and Fu were sentenced at the end of September last year to a suspended death sentence among others for corruption offences, which will be commuted to life in prison without parole after two years [see AiR No. 39, September/2022, 4].

In addition to the corruption figures, the number of national security charges is particularly relevant, as this has not previously been published as a stand-alone figure. Between 2018 and 2022, according to the data, there were more than 1,400 charges related to

endangering state security, which includes crimes such as espionage or subversion.

Also, during the period, there were 435,000 indictments related to endangering public safety, a charge often used against protesters who participated in demonstrations.

In addition, the number of serious violent crimes decreased by about a quarter compared to the previous five years, but the number of cybercrime indictments increased significantly to nearly 130,000.

Overall, the Supreme People's Procuratorate reported a 9.5 percent increase in criminal prosecutions over the past five years, which translates into a total of 5.83 million prosecutions in real terms. [Caixin Global] [China Daily] [South China Morning Post]

## China: Stronger action against independent media coverage

(ms) The Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China plans to expand its crackdown on unregistered media coverage.

According to the plans, the government will further expand its control over news coverage under the stated goal of combating “fake news.” In particular, foreign news companies and citizen journalists are to be the target of the intensification of the campaign. Precise measures were not announced.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese government has taken even stronger action against citizen journalists who independently reported on the outbreak of the pandemic in Wuhan or the situation in individual parts of the country, for example via social media.

In order to be accredited in China, especially as a local journalist, and thereby operate legally, they must pass a test by the National Press and Publication Administration (NPPA) [see AiR No. 3, January/2023, 3], citizen journalists, however, are not allowed by NPPA to take this test, which puts them at risk of prosecution for their reporting. [South China Morning Post]

## China: Co-president of real estate giant arrested

(ms) Co-president of real estate giant China Fortune Land Development (CFLD) Meng Jing has been arrested by the Hubei Supervisory Commission on unspecified charges, the company announced on February 14.

CFLD was among the first Chinese real estate companies to default on its debt in the early days of the real estate crisis, which began in 2021 and set the crisis in motion.

The arrest of Meng Jing comes just a week after reports about Hong Kong-listed Seazen Group, one of China's largest homebuilders, being unable to contact its vice chairman Qu Dejun. According to new reports from Chinese state broadcasters, Qu is said to be assisting the authorities in an investigation into the multinational conglomerate and property developer Dalian Wanda Group, where Qu previously held senior management positions. [Caixin Global] [Mingtiandi] [South China Morning Post]

On February 16, the Chinese financial institution China Renaissance reported that they have also lost contact with their founder and chairman Fan Bao, according to information. Fan's relatives are said to have been told that he, like Qu, would also support the authorities in an investigation, but no official announcement has been made yet.

The three cases, which occurred in such close succession, raise initial doubts about the extent to which the Chinese government has actually ended the crackdown on the private sector, which was hoped for with the end of the zero-COVID strategy and the return to a policy prioritising economic growth. [Bloomberg 1]

In addition to the link between the cases of Meng and Qu, which also may indicate that the Chinese government is intensifying its crackdown on those responsible for the Chinese real estate crisis, Meng also represents another person involved in Chinese football who has been arrested in recent days by anti-corruption bodies.

The arrest of Meng, the former board member of the Hebei Football Club, was announced on the same day that the investigation into the president of the Chinese Football Association (CFA) began for “serious violations of discipline and law,” an often-used euphemism for corruption cases.

Both Chen and Meng were considered close associates of the former coach of the Chinese national men's team Li Tie, upon whose investigation, on the same charges, other investigations of this kind also began

against both players and staff of the CFA. [Bloomberg 2] [Global Times]

## China: 190,000 new civil service jobs to tackle youth unemployment

(ms) 31 provincial governments are planning to create a total of 190,000 new civil service jobs this year, 16 percent more than last year, a step that is intended in particular to combat the problem of unemployment among young people.

China's unemployment rate in January, as in December of last year, was 5.5 percent, with an unemployment rate in the 16-24 age group of 16.7 percent. [Trading Economics]

It is precisely these unemployment rates that the provincial government is now trying to combat with its job offensive. Policies such as the waiving of work experience requirements in the majority of job advertisements are intended to make the positions more attractive to young people.

In particular, Guangdong with about 18,000 and Hubei with more than 11,000 new positions are particularly expanding their job offerings in terms of numbers. Only Shanghai, Jilin, Hunan and Shaanxi and Tibet are reducing recruitment numbers.

Already in October of last year, the State Administration of Civil Service also announced the creation of additional 37,000 new positions in the Chinese central government, 67 percent of which are to be distributed to fresh graduates.

Despite the urgent need for new jobs, concerns about the financing of the new jobs have been raised, especially since the provincial governments have suffered economically under the Zero-COVID policy, which has already led in part to wage cuts or delays in wage payments. [South China Morning Post]

## China: "Broker Butcher" to become top securities regulator

(ms) Yi Huiman is being named as the most likely successor as chairman of the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission (CBIRC), China's supervisory authority over banking and insurance institutions.

Currently, Yi is chairman of the China Securities Regulatory Commission (CSRC), but is likely to be succeeded there by Wu Qing, a vice mayor of Shanghai.

The basis for the presumption for the appointment is that Yi was appointed full member and Wu alternate member of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party at the 20th National People's Congress, while in contrast, the previous chairman of the CBIRC lost his position.

Yi, who has been nicknamed the "Broker Butcher" due to his crackdown on traders, has been responsible for record fines for insider trading and the halting of Ant Group's listing, among other things, in his current position.

However, economic experts do not expect any serious changes under him, meaning he will likely be primarily responsible for keeping the business running.

The appointments of Yi and Wu are expected to be announced during the National People's Congress to be held in early March. [Bloomberg]

## China: Five national banks fined for irregularities in their business

(ms) The China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission (CBIRC) announced on February 17 the fining of five Chinese financial institutions for a total of USD 56.5 million.

Among the fined entities were the Bank of China, the China Minsheng Bank and the China Bohai Bank for irregularities, in particular for misappropriation of loan funds and false statistics.

While the China Construction Bank and the Standard Chartered Bank (China) Ltd. were fined for irregularities such as serious violations of prudent loan management operation rules and non-compliance with wealth management business operations.

In Chinese state news, the move is seen as a further intensification of government efforts to stabilise the market. [Global Times] [Xinhua]

## China: Protest over medical care cuts escalates

(ms) Tens of thousands of people, mostly retirees, gathered on November 15 in Wuhan, the capital of central China's Hubei region, and Dalian, a port city in northeastern Liaoning province, to protest against medical benefit cuts.

The first protest occurred in Wuhan on February 8, after an announcement by the Chinese government of benefits being cut by more than half compared to the previous month. The protesters gave the local government an ultimatum to respond to the protests [see AiR No. 7, February/2023, 2].

However, the said ultimatum passed without any reaction from the government and as announced, the second round of protests has now occurred, which was significantly larger.

Although the local governments of both cities denied knowing about the first protests, reports indicate that the police presence on the ground was significant. In addition, some residential areas were placed under lockdown, public transportation was partially suspended, and telephone poles were turned off to prevent people from participating in the protests and to limit communications.

The timing of the protests may force the Chinese government to act quickly to prevent the protests from spreading just two weeks before the National People's Congress in early March, during which Xi Jinping will most likely secure his third term as the country's president. [BBC] [Radio Free Asia] [The Guardian]

## China: Free-to-air broadcasters in Hong Kong ordered to broadcast patriotic program

(ms) The Hong Kong government is imposing new rules on free-to-air TV and radio broadcasters to broadcast at least 30 minutes per week of content on national education and identity and national security law.

Affected by the regulations are the television stations HOY TV, Television Broadcast (TVB) and ViuTV and the two radio stations Commercial Radio and Metro Broadcast.

The measure is part of a new package of rules under the mid-term review. Other new requirements are that the weekly TV programming quota for "young persons" is to be doubled while the minimum number of hours for children's programming is halved.

Also, the minimum number of hours of English-language content on English-language radio stations has been reduced from 80 percent to 55 percent.

In particular, the 30 minutes of nationalistic content is supposed to increase the patriotism of the Hong Kong population, but experts doubt the effectiveness of the new measures. [Hong Kong Free Press] [South China Morning Post]

## China: National security requirements for financing by Continuing Education Fund

(ms) Members of the Hong Kong Legislative Council (LegCo) are calling for the inclusion of national security requirements for qualifying for funding from the Continuing Education Fund (CEF).

The call was triggered by the observation of a review from October last year, which documented several cases in which CEF-funded education providers advertised their services as preparing for emigration.

The CEF was established in 2002 to transform the Hong Kong population into a knowledge-based population in the face of advancing globalisation.

In addition to the inclusion of the national security requirement, which would likely prohibit such advertising, members are also calling for providers of teaching services to submit their teaching materials with the application for funds from the CEF in order to increase the Hong Kong government's control over such teaching. [South China Morning Post]

## China: Hong Kong police chief doubles down on clap down against "acts of terrorism"

(ms) The Hong Kong police chief stressed that the priority of the local police will continue to be ensuring national security and fighting terrorism, and that this will be achieved with the support of the city's population.

According to the police, in 2022 alone, more than 400,000 tip-offs were received through the hotline, through which citizens can report possible violations of the National Security Law, which was introduced in response to the anti-government protests in Hong Kong in 2019.

The hotline is not limited to Hong Kong, as Hong Kongers who no longer live in the city or people who are not from the city and do not live there can also be reported through the hotline. [Radio Free Asia]

## China: PLA conducts attack drill in South China Sea

(ms) The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has successfully completed a long-range drill with H-6K bombers in the South China Sea, according to a published report.

The bombers reportedly flew more than 5,000 kilometres during the drill, which lasted more than seven hours and included overflights of the Spratly Islands, a group of islands between Vietnam and the Philippines that are claimed by several countries in the region, including China, the Philippines, Vietnam but also Taiwan.

Along with early warning aircraft and fighter jets, the H-6K coordinated several manoeuvres that military experts said could simulate how "Chinese aviation units could carry out missile strikes on targets within the first island chain." [South China Morning Post]

## Japan: Justice ministry considers raising the age of consent

(cc) On February 17, the Japanese Justice Ministry panel proposed that Japan should change the age of consent from 13 to 16. The move was part of an effort to overhaul Japan's sex crime legislation, which included reforms in the rape prosecution process and the criminalization of voyeurism. The proposal regarding the change in the age of consent came after a series of acquittals on rape charges sparked several public uproars.

Currently, Japanese law considers children the age of 13 and above to be capable of consent in participating in sexual activities. As a result, Japanese teen rape survivors usually face difficulty prosecuting their offenders, as the perpetrators could argue that the children were the ones that initiated the sexual acts. While some regions try to mitigate the issue by imposing ordinances banning dirty deeds with minors which effectively raises the de-facto age of consent to 18, many activists still see the punishment of those decrees as too benign.

Japan's age of consent has remained at 13 since its enactment in 1907 and is the lowest among the G7 nations. [Japan Today]

## Japan: Kishida promises to increase child-rearing budget

(cc) On February 15, during a parliamentary session, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida promised to increase the budget for child-rearing to four percent of Japan's gross domestic product (GDP). Though, he did not elaborate on what his government would do to achieve the objective and avoided questions on the other aspects of the marital matter.

In fiscal 2020, Japan's public expenditure on family support was approximately JPY 10 trillion or 2.01 percent of the national GDP. Meanwhile, in other developed economies, the percentage of family-related welfare spending in GDP stands way above 2 percent, with Sweden's at 3.46 and Britain's at 2.98.

Japan is suffering from a declining birthrate issue. According to official data, the number of babies born in Japan decreased to a record low for a seventh consecutive year in 2022, with the number standing below 800,000. Furthermore, Japan's fertility rate is also declining. In 2021, the rate dropped by 0.03 points to 1.30. [Japan Today]

## Japan: Kishida orders ministers to calm public concerns on change in nuclear policy

(cc) Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida instructed the ministers to lessen public concerns regarding the government's policy revision that would permit nuclear power plants to operate beyond the current 60 years limit.

The order came following a decision by Japan's nuclear watchdog to examine regulatory standards dictating the lifespan of nuclear reactors, despite opposition from one of the five commissioners.

With the related bills expected to be submitted to the current parliamentary session, the new policy aims to extend the service time of nuclear reactors by excluding the time used on inspections and offline periods from the reactors' supposed service life.

Some expressed concerns about the planned change. Akira Ishiwatari, a commissioner of earthquake and tsunami countermeasures, stated that the revision is not made with regard to technical or scientific considerations. [Japan Today]

## Japan: Court orders payment of wages to Cambodian workers

(cc) On February 10, the Maebashi District Court ordered three people to pay seven Cambodian women around JPY 170,000 (USD 1,300) per person in unpaid salary, totalling approximately JPY 1.21 million (USD 9,100).

However, the court dismissed the plaintiffs' forced prostitution suit, citing that they might have known that their work in Japan would include prostitution.

The written complaint describes that the seven Cambodian women signed verbal employment contracts to work in Japan for around JPY 269,000 (USD 2,000) after coming to the country in November 2016. They contended that they were not paid and were forced to participate in prostitutional work. [The Mainichi]

## Japan: Rally holds to push LGBT rights

(cc) On February 14, activists supporting the LGBTQ community organized a rally in front of the Members' Office Building of the House of Councillors in Tokyo, calling for legislation punishing discrimination based on sexual orientation.

During the event, participants representing minority groups took turns discussing their experiences and demands. Reading messages from LGBTQ persons and their families, Soshi Matsuoka described the prejudice the LGBTQ people face and stated the wish to see the government take a tangible response to the issue. Using sign language, Monky Takano, a deaf transgender, explained the obstacles people with disabilities have to endure to gain information and help on LGBTQ-related matters.

While several members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party have stated their support for the 'LGBT understanding promotion bill', people at the rally demanded more concrete efforts, proclaiming that they do not need a law promoting an

understanding but an anti-discrimination law. [The Mainichi]

## Japan: Unions demand wage increase

(cc) On February 15, in response to the impacts of inflation, labor unions of Japan's eight major automotive companies pushed for wage increases.

While Toyota Motor Corp.'s union did not reveal their demanded amount, union representatives of Honda Motor Co. and Nissan Motor Co. called for JPY 19,000 (USD 140) and JPY 12,500 (USD 93) monthly pay hikes, respectively. Overall, out of eight unions, six have made higher demands compared to a negotiation in 2022.

At the press conference, Akihiro Kaneko, the chairman of the Confederation of Japan Automobile Workers' Unions, stated the intention to make the 2023 negotiation a turning point for Japan's economy and industry and discussed the need for a wage increase for Japanese workers.

Currently, the confederation is aiming for an approximately five percent pay raise, the highest demand from the organization in 28 years. It supposes that more than half of the raise would come from a base pay hike, while the rest from yearly seniority-based raise. [Kyodo News]

## Japan: Ex-chairman of ad agency admits guilt of bribery during Tokyo 2020 Olympics

(cc) On February 17, Shinichi Uneo, a former chairman of advertisement agency ADK Holdings, admitted to the Tokyo District Court that his bribery allegation related to the Tokyo 2020 Olympics was accurate.

Uneo was accused of bribing Haruyuki Takahashi, a former organizing committee executive of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics who had influence in choosing sponsors for the event, with approximately JPY 15 million (USD 111,000).

Takahashi is a prominent figure in the corruption scandal involving sponsorship deals for the Olympics and has already been indicted four times on charges of bribery related to the 2020 Games [See AiR No. 6, February/2023, 1]. He is suspected of receiving around

JPY 200 million (USD 1.5 million) in bribes from various firms.

Earlier on February 8, the police also arrested four people on the charge of violating the anti-monopoly law by conspiring with one another during the bidding process for the Olympics' test events [See AiR No. 7, February/2023, 2]. [Japan Today]

## Japan: Depot potentially for missile sites to be built

(cc) According to government sources, Japan plans to build four ammunition silos, likely for long-range missiles, at Self-Defense Forces bases in Oita and Aomori prefectures.

With a total cost of around JPY 5.8 billion (USD 43 million), the construction of the facilities will reportedly begin in fiscal 2023, starting in April.

The military build-up is part of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's plan to acquire weapons to deter potential attacks from the enemy amid rising regional tensions. Aside from developing a high-speed glide weapon, the government has aimed to equip the Self-Defense Forces with American cruise missiles and surface-to-ship guided missiles in fiscal 2026. [Kyodo News]

## Mongolia: Host of World Export Development Forum 2023

(sw) Mongolia is organizing together with the International Trade Center the World Export Development Forum 2023 which will take place between June 27-28. The forum will be held under the theme “Diversify with Green Trade; explores organic, digital and sustainable solutions to multiple crises”. [Montsame]

## North Korea: Leader launches housing and farming projects amid food shortage

(ge) On February 16 the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un attended the opening ceremony of the construction sites of a massive housing and greenhouse project in Pyongyang. According to state media, in 2023 North Korea plans to build 10.000 flats in Pyongyang and a large greenhouse in the Kangdong farm site.

The state media reportedly declared that the North plans to build 50.000 new flats in Pyongyang by 2025 as part of the country's five-year project to provide more housing to the capital's residents.

The North Korean leader also attended a separate ceremony for a greenhouse construction site opening in Hwasong. North Korean authorities emphasized that improving agricultural and farming production is a "top-priority" of the government and the project is expected to help authorities overcome the food shortage that is currently affecting the country. [Rodong Sinmun] [KCNA] [Reuters] [NK News]

In this regard, on February 15 the South Korean Ministry of Unification declared that North Korea is likely facing food shortages as Pyongyang cut the daily food ration of its soldiers for the first time since 2000. [Dong-A Ilbo 1]

North Korea has seemingly acknowledged the problem and decided to hold a Plenary Meeting at the end of February to discuss farming and agricultural issues (see AiR, No. 6, February/2023, 1), however it has not officially declared a food crisis.

According to the South Korean minister of inter-Korean relations, the food shortage has been worsened by North Korea's crackdown on the trade of grains at local marketplaces, which has created disruption in the food supply chain. This had already been critically damaged by North Korea's self-imposed lockdowns during the Covid-19 Pandemic.The suspicion is corroborated by South Korean newspaper Dong-A Ilbo reporting that North Korean authorities have lowered food rationing to the military, which is the government's prioritized group, suggesting that the food shortage might be severe [The Dong-A Ilbo 2] [Reuters] [Yonhap]

North Korea experts say that it's unlikely North Korea will face a similar famine as the 1990 "Arduous March", but it remains difficult to assess with certainty the extent of the crisis. [NK News]

## North Korea: Army expanded, reorganized

(ge) According to North Korean State media the People's Army has been "expanded and reorganized" due to changes in the situation and in the strategic and operational missions of the affected units. What kind of changes that have been approved have not been disclosed. It was only mentioned that colors of the

military units have been changed to be in line with the new strategic missions.

This statement comes after the massive parade held in Pyongyang on February 8 to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the North Korean People's Army and the leader's call to perfect combat readiness [see AiR, No. 7, February/2023, 2]. [Yonhap] [KCNA]

## North Korea: Hacking group stealing data through new malware

On February 14, the analysis team the AhnLab Security Emergency Response Center (ASEC), an emergency response organization consisting of of malware researchers and security experts, reported that North-Korean sponsored hacking group RedEyes (also known as APT37 or ScarCruft) has been distributing malwares through the Hangul EPS (Encapsulated PostScript) vulnerability (CVE-2017-8291), stealing information through Windows and mobile phones.

According to ASEC, the group is known for targeting individuals, in particular journalists, human rights activists, and North Korean defectors through the distribution of malicious codes using the steganography technique. ASEC analysts have detected that the North Korean group has been distributing since January 2023 a new piece of malware, dubbed M2RAT, to carry out attacks against South korea. [ASEC, in Korean] [The Hacker News] [Bleeping Computer]

## South Korea: Prosecutors seek arrest warrant for Democratic Party leader

(ge) The Seoul Central District Prosecutor Office sought an arrest warrant for Democratic Party (DP) leader Lee Jae-Myung  over investigations into development projects and bribery allegations [see AiR No. 6, February/2023, 1]. Lee is believed to have leaked official secrets and handed public real estate projects to private associates during his time as Seongnam Mayor between 2010-2018. In addition, it is estimated to have caused losses of over KRW 489.5 billion (USD 509 million) accumulated by Seongnam Development Corporation.

Lee is the first opposition leader and former runner in the presidential election in the nation to be wanted for arrest. The opposition leader has already gone through

three rounds of questioning in the month of February, denying in each instance all accusations and claiming that the allegations have political purposes and that President Yoon Suk-Yeol's government is using the prosecution to remove him as political opponent.

The DP insisted that there is no concrete evidence confirming the allegations and that the ruling People Power Part (PPP) is using Lee's prosecution to shift attention away from the Deutsche Motor stock price manipulation scandal involving First Lady Kim Keon-Hee.

Due to parliamentary immunity Lee is expected to avoid arrest. According to the law, in order to carry out the arrest, the prosecution must obtain the National Assembly's approval to waive Lee's immunity. However, the motion is unlikely to pass since the DP holds 169 out of 299 seats.

The prosecution's request for parliamentary consent for Lee's arrest is set to be voted on February 27. [Yonhap 1] [Yonhap 2] [Yonhap 3] [The Korea Herald] [The Straits Times] [The Korea Times]

## South Korea: Political tension between the government and labor unions escalates

(ge) Tensions between the government and labor unions are mounting, as the revision of the Trade Union and Labor Relations Adjustment Act is being pushed for a vote in the National Assembly by the Democratic Party (DP) and the Justice Party.

The bill, also known as "Yellow Envelope Act ", should amend Arts. 2 and 3 of the Trade Union Act and guarantee negotiating power of indirectly hired workers. If passed, the act would protect workers on strike from being sued for damages by their employers and for participating in illegal strikes. Also, it might give employees of subcontractors the right to take legal action against their primary contractors.

The DP and the Justice Party have met the resistance of the ruling People Power Party (PPP) and of President Yoon Suk-yeol. PPP lawmakers maintain that the opposition parties are pushing the bill as a retaliatory measure against the president over the request of an arrest warrant for DP leader Lee Jae-Myung. The labor minister has also expressed concern over the bill, saying that conflicts between labor and management could increase, generating corporate losses and falls in investments.

On February 20 President Yoon said that he will consider the suspension of government subsidies to the labor unions who refuse to open their accounting books under the government's scrutiny. The government had requested unions with 1,000 members or more to submit their account books between February 1 and 15 to verify accounting transparency of unions. The labor ministry extended the deadline for compliance by two weeks after less than 40 percent complied with the demand and issued a warning that those who did not provide accounting documents would be subject to fines and on-site examinations.

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions criticized the move, declaring that the president is repressing labor unions and threatening their independence. It also added that the current law does not allow the investigation into labor unions by the administrative branch.

If the bill is approved in the parliament's plenary session, the President is likely to exercise his veto power. [The Korea Herald] [Yonhap 1] [Yonhap 2] [Yonhap 3] [Korea JoongAng Daily]

## South Korea: President freezes public utility fees for first half of the year

(ge) During the 13th Emergency Economic and Public Welfare Meeting held on February 15, President Yoon Suk-yeol pledged to freeze the cost of public utilities in an attempt to ease economic burden on citizens.

The main topic of the meeting centered on public welfare stabilization measures concerning utility bills, energy bills, communication costs, and interest rate burden relief.

Following the President's resolution, the Seoul City Government reversed the plan to increase subway and bus fares, setting the plan to the second half of 2023. [Office of the President Newsroom] [Yonhap 1] [Yonhap 2]

## South Korea: Democratic Party pushes for probe over first lady's stock manipulation allegations

(ge) On February 13 the Democratic Party (DP) pledged to start an independent investigation on the first lady

Kim Keon-hee over her alleged involvement in the Deutsche Motors Inc. stock price manipulation scandal which saw the Korean car dealer's chairman Kwon Oh-Soo guilty of violating the capital market law.

The DP maintains that the first lady has provided money in the stock manipulation process, playing the role of financier. During the first ruling the court ruled that the suspicious transactions were made after October 20, 2010 and that two of the first lady's bank accounts were used to commit the crime.

This contradicts the president's declarations that the stock manipulations happened between 2011 and 2012. During the February 14 ruling, Kwon was sentenced to a suspended prison term but the court acquitted but the court acquitted the financiers involved in the stock manipulation before October 2010 due to the expiration of statute limitations.

The Presidential Office claimed that the DP is trying to spread false information. On the other side the DP has requested a special probe into the first lady. [Hankyoreh] [The Korea Herald] [Yonhap]

## South Korea: Arms exports to be boosted

(ge) On February 14, the Minister of Trade, Industry and Energy and the Minister of Defense met at the 10th Defense Industry Development Council to discuss measures to increase arms exports and to announce the country's dDefense export strategy.

The main points consist of  investing more than KRW 1.5 trillion (USD 17.3 billion) through 2027, in order to foster private-military cooperation, secure the ability to produce 40 essential components and materials for the arms industry locally, and develop skilled labor in the defense sector.

The government is further investing KRW 2 trillion in feasibility assessments for 16 different technology-related R&D initiatives. The Presidential Advisory Council on Science and Technology is expected to complete the overall strategy later this month.

Due to significant contracts won by domestic military companies, South Korea's defense exports last year hit a historic high of USD 17.3 billion. [Yonhap] [Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy] [Ministry of National Defense]

## Taiwan: Commitment to net-zero carbon emissions by 2050

(sw) On February 15, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen signed a climate change law that commits to net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, a carbon fee system for large emitters and a tariff on imports of carbon-intensive products. Taiwan is the 18$^{th}$ country that puts a net-zero target into law.

The Greenhouse Gas Management Fund will receive the revenues to invest in low-carbon technologies and to pay for climate policy-related costs of local governments. Taiwan also plans to build new wind farms and initiate projects that capture carbon, and plant trees.

A key challenge is the phasing out of coal plants because Taiwan plans to eliminate nuclear power by 2025. The goal is to expand the use of renewable energy to 20% by 2025, coal-powered electricity at 30% and natural gas at 50%. [Asia Nikkei 1] [Asia Nikkei 2]

## Taiwan: DPP to ban ex-convicts from running for office

(sw) Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) amended its rules regarding the nomination of party candidates during a meeting of its Central Executive Committee. Members, who have been charged with involvement in organized crime or other illegal activities or named by law enforcement as gangsters, are banned from running for public office or party posts. However, individuals can run for office, if they were acquitted of those crimes.

The rule changes still need to be passed by the DPP National Party Congress which will take place in the second half of this year. Hence, when the revisions take force, the DPP will already have chosen its presidential, vice presidential and legislative candidates for the elections in 2024.

The DPP adopts stricter nomination standards, because some DPP members were linked with criminal gangs, which was a factor for the party's losses in the local elections in 2022. [Focus Taiwan]

## Taiwan: KMT prevents speech of Premier

(sw) Taiwanese Premier Chen Chien-jen from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) could not hold a policy address in the parliament because Kuomintang (KMY) politicians blocked the stage, where he was supposed to present.

The KMT justified the act as a protest against the DPP's policies of labor insurance reform, energy policy, low wages, housing, and the lack of long-term care staff. They stated that Chen can only deliver his speech, if the DPP increases the planned cash rebate to every Taiwanese citizen from USD 200 to USD 330.

There was no physical confrontation between the legislators, and the Premier is expected to hold the policy address on February 24. [Taiwan News]

## Taiwan: Foxconn founder plans to return to KMT

(sw) Terry Gou, the founder of Foxconn, the world's largest technology manufacturer with nearly 1.3 million employees in 2020, has made public that he wants to return to the Kuomintang (KMT) which indicates a potential run for president. The presidential election is scheduled for early 2024.

However, after he had lost a presidential primary election in 2019, Guo withdrew his long-time KMT membership. According to party rules, rejoining is only possible after at least four years. Therefore, Guo would have to wait until September and would be too late to participate in the KMT primaries for the 2024 presidential election. Nevertheless, it is possible that the KMT Party Central Committee will introduce special measures to facilitate rejoining the party. [Taiwan News]

## Taiwan: Plans to subsidy housing, student loans and cultural industries

(sw) The Ministries of the Interior, Education, and Culture proposed a special bill to strengthen economic and social resilience to support the Taiwanese citizens in the post-pandemic era. It aims to reduce living costs and increase care for disadvantaged students by subsidizing housing and student loans. Furthermore, Taiwan's arts and culture industry will be restored with cultural revitalization projects.

The special post-pandemic recovery bill provides a one-time payment of USD 900 to households that have

an income and personal housing loan below a certain threshold. It will benefit around 550.000 mortgage borrowers who were pressured by the rising interest rates and the pandemic.

Also, the special budget reduces the financial burdens of almost 550.000 students. Moreover, the government aims to revitalize the culture industry by providing a voucher of USD 40 for young people to spend on arts and cultural activities. [Executive Yuan, Taiwan]

### Taiwan: Navy expands its submarine fleet

(sw) The Taiwanese Navy budgets USD 332.77 million to expand its submarine fleet and plans to build a submarine rescue vessel.

Because of Chinese pressures that deter countries from selling submarines to Taiwan, the government has launched a project to  develop a prototype until the end of 2025. Currently, the Navy has two submarines but will expand to eight.

The specialized submarine rescue ship is supposed to conduct deep-sea missions to help out submarines. [Taiwan News]

### Taiwan: Navy launches third domestically made missile corvette

(sw) On February 16, the Navy launched its third domestically built Tuo Chiang-class corvette. Taiwan aims to build eleven Tuo Chiang corvettes by the end of 2026.

The corvettes are equipped with Hsiung Feng III (HF-3) anti-ship missiles and air defense systems, along with a close-in weapon system, and 76-millimeter guns rapid-fire guns on the bow. [Focus Taiwan] [Eurasian Times]

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

## Bangladesh: Polls will not be held according to any foreign advice, ruling Awami League says

(az) The chairman of the Jubo League, the youth wing of Bangladesh's ruling Awami League party, has said the upcoming national election will be held under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and there will not be any foreign intervention. [Dhaka Tribune 1]

Meanwhile, Dhaka-based representatives of European Union member states met with Awami League officials on February 16. The party representatives assured the EU delegations that the next election would be inclusive, but also said that installing a caretaker government was not possible. The EU delegation, for its part, demanded a peaceful election in Bangladesh.

Notably, the meeting also centered on the national election held in 2014, which was boycotted by the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and delivered a two-thirds majority to the incumbent Awami League. The Awami League leaders said that at the time the BNP intentionally boycotted the election and later also refused the prime minister's offer of two crucial ministries. [Dhaka Tribune 2]

## Bangladesh: Supreme Court dismisses petition seeking halt of graft proceedings against BNP senior

(az) Just as the national election is nearing, the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court on February 16 dismissed a review petition of Mirza Abbas, a member of the standing committee of Bangladesh's main opposition Nationalist Party (BNP). Mirza Abbas allegedly hid information of USD 31,500. The apex court bench ordered continuing the trial proceedings at the lowest court. [Dhaka Tribune]

## Bangladesh: Security situation in the Rohingya camps deteriorates as terrorist groups, gangs remain active

(az) Bangladesh's defence ministry has expressed concerns about the security inside the Rohingya refugee camps of Cox's Bazar. The ministry informed that almost ten terrorist groups and gangs are currently active inside the camps, with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) being the top threatening group, influencing most of the area.

The defence ministry also highlighted some points of lackings on which these groups thrive. Lack of surveillance and regular patrolling, cramped living conditions of the Rohingya people without the freedom of free movement, severe lack of educational opportunities for the Rohingya children and youth, and abuse of power by Bangladesh's Armed Police Battalion (APBn) are some significant reasons that make the Rohingya people frustrated and they search for violent options of crime and disputes. Added to the burden of the economic crisis, the reduced foreign funds are putting the government under pressure to care for millions of refugees. [The Daily Star]

## Bhutan: Lack of proper policies block the development in agricultural sector.

(az) The lack of implementation of proper government policies and innovations are barricading the development of Bhutan's agricultural sectors. The improper government initiatives are making agriculture more unpopular among the young generation.

It was noted that in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the agriculture sector contributes the least. Consequently, Bhutan being an agrarian state, still imports agri products to fulfill its demand. Despite the emphasis on the agricultural sector, only 7 percent of total lands are agrarable in the country. Added to the problem is water shortage and lack of machinery. [Kuensel]

## India: Supreme Court non-committal on early hearing of collegium system case

(wr) India's Supreme Court has refused to consider an early hearing of a petition challenging the collegium system of appointment and transfer of judges to the apex court and high courts. The plea was given by various advocates in favor of the revival of the National Judicial Appointment Commission (NJAC) and abolishing the collegium system as it results in "denial of equal opportunity." However, the Supreme Court judges referred the matter to be examined thoroughly, and then it will be considered for hearing. [ThePrint] [ANI]

Envisioned in 2014, the NJAC body which would have been responsible for the recruitment, appointment and transfer of judicial officers, legal officers and legal employees under the central government and in all state governments. But in October 2015, the Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court by majority vote upheld the collegium system and struck down the NJAC as unconstitutional.

Regarding the collegium system, there has been an on-going rift between government and judiciary, with the former questioning the "opacity" of the system of judicial appointments, which remains with the Chief Justice of India, and demanding a reform within the practice. [AiR No. 3, January/2023, 3]

## India: Supreme Court rejects government's sealed cover suggestion in Adani Group case

(wr/lm) India's Supreme Court on February 17 rejected suggestions by the central government for a committee proposed to examine allegations against the Adani Group conglomerate, saying that public confidence would take a hit if an impression was created that the Modi administration was steering the process with the apex court's nod. The Supreme Court tends to pass the orders to constitute an expert committee to review the regulatory mechanism. It observed market experts' selection for the committee and urged to maintain "full transparency" within the process. [Press Trust India] [The Print]

## India: Supreme Court rules on Delhi mayoral polls

(wr) India's Supreme Court on February 17 issued a decision on mayor's elections, upholding that 12 nominated members cannot vote and ordering the

issuance of a notice within 24 hours for convening a meeting to determine the date to vote. The decision came after a two-month stalemate between the Delhi and the central government, which had put the mayoral election on hold. The conflict was over the right of the nominated members to vote.

The decision is being praised by the ruling Aam Aadmi Party, which has been targeting the lieutenant governor of Delhi, and Chief Minister Kejriwal has referred to the verdict as "a victory for democracy." [Times of India] [ABP] [Hindustan Times]

## India: Supreme Court to consider listing of pleas challenging abrogation Kashmir's special status

(wr/lm) India's Supreme Court has reaffirmed that it might consider an early hearing of petitions challenging the central government's decision in 2019 to scrap the law that granted special status to Indian-administered Kashmir. The petitions demand constitutional validity of the abrogation and the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, which divided the Jammu and Kashmir state into two union territories - Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh - directly ruled by New Delhi. [Press Trust India] [The Economic Times]

## India: Supreme Court reserves verdict on Nabam Rebia case

(wr) India's Supreme Court on February 16 reserved its decision on a petition for a larger bench in the re-examination of the Nabam Rebia case. In the judgment, the Supreme Court had ruled that the Speaker of a House cannot decide a disqualification petition filed under the anti-defection law while a notice under Article 179(c) of the Constitution for the Speaker's removal is pending. [Tribune India] [Press Trust India]

The apex court's decision is part of pleas heard in relation to a legal dispute between the incumbent chief minister of India's western Maharashtra state, Eknath Shinde, and his predecessor Uddhav Thackeray. In June of last year, Shinde led an intra-party rebellion that eventually resulted in Thackeray's resignation as chief minister. But Thackeray later petitioned the Supreme Court seeking the disqualification of at least 16 rebel legislators.

The Thackeray faction has vowed to challenge the Election Commission's February 17 order, which allows Shinde to keep the Shiv Sena party's original name and symbol. [The The Indian Express]

## India: Supreme Court directs courts, media not to disclose sexual assault victim identity

(wr) During a hearing, India's Supreme Court directed courts not to reveal the names and identities of rape and sexual assault victims, including those who had died, while objecting to the Madras High Court's judgement, which reveals the victim's identity and ordering its removal. It further argues that the media remain "duty bound" and obliged not to "sensationalize" such cases or disclose the identity of the victim in any manner. [Times of India] [Press Trust India]

## India: Government prevents declassification of 'sensitive' 1947 Kashmir papers

(wr) India's central government may prevent the declassification of papers believed to include political and military arguments for why the country's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, called for a ceasefire with Pakistan and granted special status to the Jammu and Kashmir region as it fears the "sensitive" letters could affect foreign relations.

The letters, known as the Bucher papers, refer to communications between General Sir Francis Robert Roy Bucher, who served as second commander-in-chief of the Indian army between 1948 and 1949, and government officials, including Nehru. According to *The Guardian*, they reveal that the prime minister was aware and informed of the military development in Kashmir, including Pakistan's attempts to use external military assistance to escalate the situation. That advice may have influenced Nehru's decision to grant Kashmir special status under the now-revoked Article 370 of the constitution. [The Guardian]

## India: Tax officials conclude 3-day inspection at BBC offices in Delhi, Mumbai

(wr/lm) Officials from India's Income Tax Department on February 16 left the *BBC*'s offices in New Delhi and Mumbai after a three-day inspection that involved the cloning of data from some digital devices, the department said. Notably, however, the raid was timely executed after the federal government reacted angrily to a *BBC* documentary about Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The broadcaster, which said its operations in India had returned to normal, has called the situation stressful and disruptive. [The Straits Times] [The Guardian] [The Hindu]

Last month, the *BBC* released a documentary that scrutinizes Prime Minister Modi's role during inter-communal riots in the western Indian state of Gujarat in 2002. The production has been criticized by the government as a "propaganda piece" while the broadcaster has said its two-part series was "rigorously researched." New Delhi also blocked the documentary to be aired in India, while the ministry of information and broadcasting blocked social media giants from uploading related content. [AiR No. 4, January/2023, 4]

Against this backdrop, human rights and media rights watchdogs have criticized the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party for its alleged escalation of a crackdown against press and journalism freedom in India. [Human Rights Watch]

## India: Government may consider tax cuts on some items to ease inflation

(wr) The Indian government might consider cutting taxes on some items, such as maize and fuel, in response to the central bank's recommendations to help rein in climbing retail inflation, *Reuters* reported on February 15, citing two sources with knowledge of the discussions.

However, a decision will only be taken after the release of February inflation data. According to the latest report, India's annual retail inflation rate increased to 6.52 percent from 5.72 percent just within a month. [Reuters] [Times of India]

## India: Enforcement Directorate conducts raids in Chhattisgarh state against opposition Congress Party

(wr/lm) India's economic intelligence agency, the Enforcement Directorate (ED), carried out raids on

February 21 against members of the main opposition Indian National Congress Party (INC) in the country's central Chhattisgarh state. The ED claims it has documented evidence that links the INC leaders to a coal levy scam in the state, while the party termed the raid a "political vendetta". So far, nine people have been arrested on suspicion of an alleged conspiracy, including bureaucrats and businessmen. [Press Trust India] [Tribune India] [India Today]

Chhattisgarh is currently ruled by the INC, which controls 71 seats in the 90-member state assembly. The ED, however, is part of India's department of revenue under the finance ministry, which is controlled by the central government.

## India: Protesters clash with police ahead of budget session in Uttar Pradesh state

(wr) Around 100 legislators of the Samajwadi Party, a socialist political party from India's Uttar Pradesh state, got into a scuffle with the police in the assembly premises during a protest against the ruling BJP's Uttar Pradesh government.

The anti-government protest took place ahead of the assembly budget session while protestors highlighted farmers issues and failed law and order situation notably the anti-encroachment drive and raised slogans such as "bulldozers," "sugar cane dues" and "unemployment". Furthermore, their demand includes ensuring the caste census within the state which the BJP seems reluctant to carry out. [Hindustan Times]

On the other hand, the deputy Chief Minister termed the protest as an attempt to "vitiate" the atmosphere and divert attention, with no real cause. [NDTV]

## India: Opposition demands probe into possible election interference by Israeli contractors

(wr/lm) Against the larger backdrop of an investigation into claims by Israeli contractors to have manipulated more than 30 elections around the world, India's main opposition party, the Indian National Congress (INC), is demanding an inquiry into the alleged use of said team to interfere in the electoral process. In a press conference, Congress's leadership accused the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s IT cell of operating fake social media campaigns and spreading misinformation

in collaboration with an Israeli firm during the elections. [NDTV] [The Wire]

On February 15, a consortium of 30 news organizations unveiled a more than eight-month long investigation exposing a unit of private Israeli contractors who claim to have manipulated elections and concocted disinformation campaigns across the world. Headed by a former Israeli special forces operative, the group goes by the codename 'Team Jorge,' after its leader's pseudonym. [The Guardian]

## India: Opposition Congress considers changes to party's constitution

(wr) To be "in sync with the times," India's main opposition Congress party considers implementing reforms within the party at the Udaipur Constitution Amendment Committee (CAC) meeting. The amendments are to be made in eligibility criteria for members and intend to reserve 50 percent of the party posts for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), women, and minorities for the upcoming 2024 general elections. [The Hindu]

## India: Anti-terror agency searches Rajasthan state in PFI conspiracy case

(wr) India's top anti-terror agency, the National Investigation Agency (NIA), searched seven districts in Rajasthan state on February 18, as part of investigations going on for months against the banned Popular Front of India (PFI) for its "unlawful activities." The investigations have intensified over the period as suspected associates and "people who are influenced" by PFI's ideology are being targeted. NIA officials recovered digital devices and incrementing documents containing propaganda pieces and texts projecting PFI ideology. [ThePrint] [Times of India]

The PFI is a controversial Muslim group that was banned for five years in September 2022 for allegedly having links with banned Islamist groups, such as the Students Islamic Movement of India (Simi), the Jamat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), as well as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). [AiR No. 40, October/2022, 1]

## India: Lithium reserves discovered in Kashmir region

(lm) Indian officials announced earlier this month that 5.9 million metric tons of inferred lithium resources had been discovered in Indian-administered Kashmir - a potential geopolitical game changer that has excited many industries dependent on the scarce resource. [Ministry of Mines]

In fact, the lithium discovery could help reduce India's heavy reliance on light metal imports; currently 80 percent of the lithium India uses comes from abroad. If used to store energy for solar panels and electric vehicles, it can also help fuel New Delhi's clean-energy transition, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has designated a top priority. [India Today]

But for it to pay off, India must overcome technical obstacles, for New Delhi currently lacks the technology to excavate and produce lithium. Furthermore, lithium extraction requires significant water resources and generates polluting emissions, and natural resource extraction has fueled anger in other local communities, contributing to conflict in parts of eastern India. [Quartz]

## India: Water security a major concern, Prime Minister Modi says

(wr) Prime Minister Narendra Modi recognized water security, pollution, and its depletion as major concerns for the country and highlighted his government's efforts to curb water degradation. He also called for a nationwide approach to water conservation. [Hindustan Times] [The Economic Times]

## India: AMASR infrastructure bill to be reintroduced in upcoming Budget session

(wr) India's government is expected to bring legislation in the upcoming parliamentary budget session to reintroduce the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (AMASR) Amendment Bill. It allows the government to take up infrastructure projects within prohibited "preserved ancient and historical" areas and monuments based on the recommendation of the National Monuments Authority. The government aims to generate revenues in this manner. [Deccan Herald]

## India: Government to earmark 75 percent of defense procurement budget for domestic industry in 2023-24

(wr/lm) India will earmark a record 75 percent of its defense procurement budget for the domestic industry in 2023-24, Defense Minister Rajnath Singh said while addressing the the Valedictory Ceremony of Aero India. The decision intends to minimize dependency on defense imports by strengthening domestic production. [Ministry of Defence] [The Print] [Reuters]

## India: M.V. Suchindra Kumar appointed Army Vice Chief

(wr) Lieutenant General M. V. Suchindra Kumar has been appointed as the new Indian Army Vice Chief, while the current officer holding the position, Lieutenant General B. S. Raju, has been shifted to the South Western Army Command as a successor to Lieutenant General A.S. Bhinder, who is set to retire on February 28. Prior to this, Kumar also served as the deputy chief of Army Staff (strategy) and has been part of various important assignments, including the White Knight Corps in Jammu and Kashmir.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant General NSR Subramani has been promoted to the rank of Army Commander and has been appointed as the next Central Army Commander in Lucknow. He is currently the Chief of Staff in the Northern Command and is known for being a tough task master. The Central Command looks after the Line of Actual Control with China in the central sector in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. [Outlook India] [ANI]

## Nepal: Former King Gyanendra Shah joins campaign to reinstate country as Hindu Kingdom

(lm) Gyanendra Shah, who was the last King of Nepal, reigning from 2001 to 2008, made a rare public appearance on February 13 when he inaugurated a campaign to reinstate the Himalayan nation as a Hindu state. The campaign is being coordinated by Durga Prasai, a Central Committee member of the opposition Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist)

led by former Prime Minister KP Oli. [Republic World] [The Kathmandu Post]

Notably, the event took place on the day the Prime Minister Pushpakamal Dahal-led government declared a holiday on the occasion of the anniversary of the beginning of the Nepalese Civil War that took place from 1996 to 2006. The armed conflict saw countrywide fighting between the Nepalese royal government and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), with the latter making significant use of guerrilla warfare.

Reports suggest that the decision was met with widespread criticism, most notably by conflict survivors, and the relatives of those who were killed or disappeared during the Maoist insurgency. Besides the Maoists, other members of the ruling seven-party coalition have also come under criticism for not just not opposing the decision, but also not officially speaking out against it. The opposition Nepali Congress has also been singled out, since its party members were especially targeted by the Maoists for execution and torture during the conflict. [Nepali Times]

## Pakistan: Additional taxes to be imposed to unlock International Monetary Fund(IMF) funding

(fm) On February 15, a supplementary finance bill was proposed in Pakistan's Parliament to impose additional taxes to meet the terms reached with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for the revival of the loan program as the country's economy is on the verge of collapse with escalated inflation and macroeconomic problems.

Thus, an increase in general sales tax (GST) from 17 percent to 18 percent, excise duty (FED) on cigarettes and sugary drinks and a 10 percent withholding adjustable advance income tax on marriages in wedding halls was tabled. In addition to that, tax on luxury items was suggested to increase from 17 percent to 25 percent  and FED on business and first class air-tickets to be raised up to 50 percent. However, no additional taxes are to be levied on essential goods.

Subsequently, a session of the National Assembly – the lower house – was summoned on February 17, which was adjourned until February 20 with no vote. It was debated that these taxes will have an adverse effect on the poor population. [The Frontier Post] [Arab News]

## Pakistan: Lahore High Court dismisses former premier Khan's plea for protective bail

(lm) A high court in Pakistan on February 16 dismissed a petition by the country's opposition leader and ousted prime minister, Imran Khan, who sought protective bail in a case pertaining to alleged vandalism during protests in Islamabad against his disqualification by the Election Commission (ECP). Khan failed to appear in person before the Lahore High Court. [DAWN]

Khan was booked in the case in October last year after the ECP had disqualified him from holding political office for five years, citing false statements he had made regarding the declaration of the sale of state gifts while in office – an offense that is illegal under the constitution. The ECP's decision had sparked countrywide protests [see AiR No. 43, October/2022, 4]. The matter was taken to the high court after an anti-terrorism court in the capital Islamabad had dismissed the pre-arrest bail of Khan for constant non-appearance.

## Pakistan: Supreme Court seeks report on delay in Punjab assembly election

(lm) A division bench of Pakistan's Supreme Court has referred the matter of delay in assembly elections in Punjab province to Chief Justice Umar Ata Bandial to invoke *suo motu* jurisdiction. Earlier, the apex court had directed the country's chief election commissioner to submit a detailed report about the obstacles the electoral body was facing in holding the elections and adjourned the case's hearing until February 17. [Daily Times]

Assemblies in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces were dissolved in mid-January as part of ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan's bid to force early national polls [see AiR No. 3, January/2023, 3]. Later the same month, the election commission wrote to the governors of the two provinces, telling them elections should be held no later than April 13 and April 17, respectively.

But on February 11, the Lahore High Court directed the election commission to immediately announce the date of elections in Punjab to ensure that elections are held within 90 days of the dissolution of the

assemblies, as outlined in the constitution. The commission, however, later the week filed an intra-court appeal against the high court verdict, maintaining that it has no constitutional authority to announce the date for elections. [Samaa]

## Pakistan: Prime Minister convinces junior coalition partner to stay clear of by-polls in March

(lm) Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on February 15 held a meeting with the chairman of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, and managed to convince the foreign minister against contesting by-elections on at least 40 seats in parliament's lower house this March. [DAWN]

House Speaker Raja Pervez Ashraf last month accepted the resignation of 113 opposition Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) party lawmakers. However, 45 PTI lawmakers collectively withdrew their resignation on January 23 on orders of party chairman and former Prime Minister Imran Khan. Furthermore, the Lahore High Court earlier this month barred the Election Commission from holding by-polls on 43 vacant seats in parliament's lower house.

Against the larger backdrop of the country's economy teetering on collapse, inflation at decades-high levels and a significant shortage of energy, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) of Prime Minister Sharif had already decided that it would not contest the by-polls. But the PML-N's main ally, the PPP, was uncertain on this question, having already indicated their desire to compete in Punjab province.

## Pakistan: Former Prime Minister Khan writes to president, demands 'immediate inquiry' against army chief

(lm) Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan has written a letter to the country's president seeking an "immediate inquiry" against the former military chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, for violating "his oath of office repeatedly". In his letter dated February 14, Khan lists four ways in which the former army chief allegedly violated the constitution, including remarks published on February 9 in a column by Pakistani journalist Javed Chaudhry, as purported evidence for his claim. [DAWN]

General Bajwa, who retired last November, in a nationally televised address shortly before his retirement acknowledged that decades of "unconstitutional" interference in national politics by the military had periodically exposed it to public criticism. Importantly, the general said his institution in February had decided that it would never again interfere in any political matter in future - but did not further explain what prompted the military to disengage from politics. In light of this, General Bajwa also rejected as "fake and false" claims by Khan that the United States had played a role in toppling his government in April this year.

## Pakistan: Court sentences supporter of ousted premier Khan to to three years in jail for tweeting against Army

(lm) A court in Pakistan's Punjab province has sentenced a supporter of former Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party to five years in prison and imposed a fine of nearly USD 1,000 for making "obnoxious tweets against Pakistan Army and its senior officers". [DAWN]

Legal proceedings were carried out under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, which provides for a range of punishments for online acts that are deemed unlawful. The court also invoked sections 500 (punishment for defamation) and 505 (statements conducing to public mischief) of the Pakistan Penal Code.

In August 2022, a military helicopter crashed due to bad weather in flood-hit southwestern Baluchistan province, killing all six senior officers on board, including a regional corps commander, a major-general, and one brigadier [see AiR No. 32, August/2022, 2]. In the wake of the crash, a social media campaign emerged, which was condemned by the army as "insensitive". The Federal Investigation Agency then began investigating the people behind the campaign.

## Pakistan: Taliban militants storm police station in southern city of Karachi, killing at least two people

(lm) Heavily-armed members of the Pakistan Taliban, known by its acronym TTP, stormed a police station in the southern Pakistani city of Karachi on February 17,

killing two people and wounding another eleven before they themselves were killed. [Reuters] [Business Standard]

## Pakistan: At least seven militants killed in North Waziristan clash

(lm) Seven militants of the outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) were killed when cops repulsed an attack on a police van carrying three detained militants on February 13. [DAWN]

## Sri Lanka: Election Commission says it lacks fund to hold local elections; protests dispersed by police

(sn/lm) Opposition supporters in Sri Lanka marched in the country's capital on February 20 demanding that the government hold next month's local council elections as planned. Earlier the same day, the Election Commission (EC) had instructed its lawyers to inform the Supreme Court that it had not received financial resources and the required support to conduct the voting on March 9.

The local elections, postponed from last March by the Minister of Provincial Council and Local Government because of economic and political turmoil, won't affect the government's majority in the 225-seat Parliament. But they are widely seen as a test of the popularity of the governing coalition, which has been criticized for raising taxes and electricity charges. [Economy Next], [Colombo Times], [News First]

Sri Lanka's Supreme Court granted permission on February 10 for the National Election Committee (NEC) to proceed with conducting Local Government Elections as scheduled [see AiR No. 7, February/2023, 2]. But Governing coalition lawmakers say it isn't an appropriate time to hold elections because the administration is struggling to find enough money to pay the salaries of civil servants and conduct other administrative functions.

On February 15, the Department of Government Printing refused to submit the printed postal ballot papers to the EC until the printing costs were paid, resulting in the indefinite postponement of the postal voting which was originally slated for February 22-24. In light of this, the EC asked the police to increase the

security at the government printer. [The Island 1] [Dev Discourse]

Furthermore, there have been reports of death threats against three EC commissioners, who were reportedly pressured to resign from their positions.

Against this backdrop, the Executive Director of the Institute of Democratic Studies and Electoral Reforms has criticized President Ranil Wickremesinghe for potentially disrupting local government polls. He also accented that if a public official refuses without reasonable rationale to comply with the Commission, it would be an offense under Article 104GG of the Constitution.

The ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party suffered from splits in within the group following the onset of political and economic crisis in the Kingdom. As such, the public accuses the state government of postponing elections to secure its hosting position. Indeed, the polls-monitoring organization, Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), expressed concern that the ruling SLPP party made multiple attempts to disrupt long overdue local elections in Sri Lanka. [ANFREL]

## Sri Lanka: President reacts to protest agenda on the launching ceremony of a policy research department

(sn) On February 15, Sri Lanka's president attended the launching ceremony of the Centre for Governance and Public Policy (C–GaPP) at the Sri Lanka Technological Campus (SLTC) Research University in the capital of Colombo. He made a public speech during the event and addressed the matter of protests. State Minister of Higher Education and Associate Professor at the Social Studies in The Hague attended the event.

The President, Ranil Wickremesinghe, said that the government does not accept the requests from demonstrators to remove certain officials of their free will since the state plans to follow legal regulations for procedures in such matters. He referred to the 2 protests happening simultaneously with the C–GaPP launching ceremony at the SLTC. He further expressed concern over some universities' agendas and aimed to examine their function. [News Wire]

### Sri Lanka: Court orders temporal removal of state official over bribery accusations

(sn) A government official and the Chairman of the Mawanella Pradeshiya Sabha office, Noel Steven, was arrested on February 13 over accepting bribery to approve a building plan. The announcement came the following day from the Governor of Sabaragamuwa Province, along with the allocation of a new Vice Chairman of the Mawanella Pradeshiya Sabha. Media reported that Noel Steven is also a member of an SLPP party. A former High Court Judge was assigned to probe the matter in the three forthcoming months. [ADA derana]

### Sri Lanka: Navy holds Colombo Naval Exercise (CONEX)

(sn0 The Sri Lankan Navy held the fifth iteration of its Colombo Naval Exercise (CONEX) in the Colombo Harbor from February 6-12. The program aimed to increase the readiness efficiency for different kinds of maritime security threats. This year, the training covered Gunnery, Search and Rescue, Screening, Encounter, Tracking, Replenishment at Sea, and other exercises. [Ministry of Defence – Sri Lanka]

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

### Cambodia: Hun Sen offers jobs to former VOD workers

(sn) On February 14, 2023, Prime Minister of Cambodia Hun Sen announced that the government is willing to provide a “state framework job for those who wish to serve in public service” to former employees who lost their jobs following the media license annulment of the Voice of Democracy (VOD) outlet. The order to shut down the independent media came into force the preceding day.

On the evening of February 15, 2023, multiple Royal Cambodian Army representatives, including members of the Takeo Divisional Military Operation Area Part 2 and Colonel Mao Sophan, made a public statement supporting the decision made by Prime minister Hun Sen to repeal the license of VOD company.

The news publisher came under the critique of the state government following an article alleging that the son of the Prime Minister signed documents on behalf of the governor.

Hun Sen first demanded apologies from the media outlet, but later went ahead with the decision to de-license the VOD. [Cambodianess], [Royal Cambodian Army 1], [Royal Cambodian Army 2] [Air No. 7/2023, 2]

## Cambodia: Youth protests against Koh Kong privatization; a former state worker sentenced for selling land in the province

(sn) On February 15, 2023, the Koh Kong province government official received a sentence of 18 months in prison from Phnom Penh Municipal Court for unlawfully sellinghectares of the local government land to his friend in 2019. The accused is a former information officer of the Ministry of Information, Kong Sophea. Despite taking the payment, the former state worker defrauded the victim by promising a land title but failing to deliver it for him. The Cambodian court also ordered the defendant to repay compensation and additional charges.

A Cambodian group of young environmental activists, The Mother Nature, staged a protest against the Environment Ministry with multiple aims on February 14, 2023. The group wanted to highlight the preservation importance of the natural sites and their resources. The day coincided with Valentine's Day, and the activists brought flowers to the ministry entrance to show their positive intentions and love for the Koh Kong Krao natural sites. The youth also requested the Ministry to keep the area out of privatization projects. The Mother Nature raised those concerns since the

proposed Marine National Park area overlaps with some of the Koh Kong biodiverse regions.

The preceding day the Ministry of Environment criticized the youth movement for conducting political activity under the guise of environmentalism. He asked to omit the scheduled demonstration and urged to avoid falling under the influence of activist foreigners, like Alex Gonzalzez-Davidson, who "opposes peace and development in Cambodia."

On the same day, the Preah Sihanouk administration extended the deadline for business owners to dismantle their resorts in the Koh Kong Sanloem island area on the border with the Koh Kong province. Local governors plan to compensate its residents affected by the new development project, and some businesses demanded the same approach to their ownership rights.

The government plans to provide the dismantled areas for development by private companies, citing contracts approved some years ago. [Cambodia Daily], [Phnom Penh Post], [Khmer Times 1], [Khmer times 2]

## Cambodia: Head Temple Authority banished a monk protesting for ethics restoration for the peace disruption

(sn) One Cambodian Buddhist monk, Venerable Soy, joined a march organized for the restoration of social ethics by the opposition Candle Light party (CL) in February 2023. The peaceful protest was conducted with permission from the Interior Ministry.

Nonetheless, the Head Monk of his temple, the Phnom Plouch Pagoda, ordered the Venerable Soy to leave the Pagoda at risk of losing his monk rank. The temple authority explained the demand by alleging that the monk disrupted public peace. While it is not uncommon for monks to participate in the peaceful protests, the case of banishment is not a typical response for authorities of religious institutes.

The Cults and Religion Minister refused to comment on the matter, but said that he will investigate this encounter. [Radio Free Asia]

## Cambodia: Ministry of Defense military official announced psychological

## education plans for an Intervention Brigade

(sn) On February 13, 2023, the Cambodian Military Service Director from the Ministry of National Defense visited the 2nd Intervention Brigade to announce to its members the new proposed psychological education program developed in coordination with the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces.

The Director General debriefed the brigade on the 2023 situation and highlighted previous achievements. On a recent mission conducted in 2022, the unit helped the residents who volunteered to relocate with the logistics and setup. The speaker also urged the brigade to explore the history and national cultural heritage to enhance national identity. [Ministry of National Defence – Cambodia]

## Indonesia: Parliament delays vote on presidential emergency decree on job creation, investment rules

(os) Indonesia's parliament on February 16 pushed back a final vote on a contentious presidential emergency decree on jobs and investment rules until its next sitting in March, after parliament's legislative body approved the decree the day prior - a move some legal experts said could violate the constitution. [Reuters] [The Jakarta Post]

President Joko Widodo issued the decree, officially known as a government regulation in lieu of law, or its Indonesian abbreviation, "perpu", in December to replace a controversial 2020 Jobs Creation Law.

President Joko Widodo issued the decree as an emergency regulation last December to replace a 2020 job creation law that was previously deemed to be not in line with the constitution [see AiR No. 1, January/2023, 1]. However, the emergency regulation received criticism for allegedly foregoing public participation and sparked protests [see AiR No. 3, January/2023, 3]. In light of this, the government recently held a public consultation to increase public participation regarding the law [see AiR No. 7, February/2023, 2].

According to the Indonesian constitution, presidential decrees must be approved by parliament during its first session after the decree was issued. Therefore, some suggest that the decree could now be considered

annulled - but both government and parliament point out that the decree remains in effect.

## Indonesia: Islamic pilgrimage fee for 2023 officially announced

(os) Indonesia's parliament has reached an agreement with the country's Religious Affairs Ministry regarding the fees for the Hajj, an annual Islamic pilgrimage to the holiest city for Muslims - Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

After an elongated two-day meeting, the fee for each person was set at USD 3,200, which is lower than the USD 4,600 proposed initially by the ministry. However, the costs are still higher than the years before. According to the ministry, the price hike was necessary to ensure the liquidity of state funds to subsidize the Muslim pilgrimage [see AiR No. 6, February/2023, 1]. [The Jakarta Post]

## Indonesia: Former minister elected as new chairman of national soccer association

(os) Erick Tohir, who had been state-owned enterprise minister, has been elected as chairman of the Indonesian Football Association (PSSI). His election comes months after the deadly stadium stampede in Malang in October 2022, which left 135 people dead [see AiR No. 40, October/2022, 1]. Erick's main task will be to improve safety in Indonesian soccer, particularly with the view to the Under-20 World Cup, which Indonesia is going to host in May 2023. [Jakarta Globe] [Reuters 1] [The Jakarta Post 1]

Sports Minister Zainudin Amali has been elected as deputy chairman of the PSSI. In order to focus on this job in the future, he has informally brought forward his wish to resign from his current position as minister. [The Jakarta Post 3]

The path to increased safety in Indonesian soccer will be long. Recently, police have made use of tear gas once again at a soccer event. On February 17, police tried to disperse fans that attempted to enter a soccer match that allowed no spectators due to safety concerns. The situation escalated as fans started throwing rocks and police fired tear gas. Thus far, no casualties have been reported. The use of tear gas was also the main reason for the unfolding of the soccer

stampede in Malang, East Java, according to Indonesia's human rights commission. [Reuters 2]

In response to the most recent tear gas incident, Erick has set up an ad-hoc hooliganism committee to bring supporters of soccer clubs to the table to address the issue. He has also announced his plans to fight the soccer mafia in Indonesia and tackle the issue of match fixing. [The Jakarta Post 2]

Regarding the stampede in 2022, there is a trial against five people ongoing [see AiR No. 3, January/2023, 3]. However, experts have raised their concerns over the trial. Just recently, a video emerged on social media, displaying policemen that tried to disturb the trial by jeering and intimidating prosecutors when they arrived at the site. [Al Jazeera]

## Indonesia: Gelora party nominates presidential candidate for 2024

(os) The newly formed Gelora Party has announced that it would nominate its chairman Anis Matta as presidential candidate for the 2024 elections. He stated that his main priority would be to improve the social welfare programs and to accelerate Indonesia in becoming a superpower. [The Jakarta Post]

The Islamic party was founded by a group of politicians that were former members of the Prosperous Justice Party. Anis had been chairman of that party from 2014 to 2015. The Gelora Party is one of 16 political parties that have been approved for the 2024 elections.

## Indonesia: Police sets up team to negotiate release of New Zealand pilot

(os) The Papua Police has dispatched a team to negotiate the release of New Zealand national Phillip Mehrtens with the West Papua National Liberation Army (TPNPB) that is holding Mehrtens hostage. The police have also claimed that they were able to track down the location where Mehrtens is being held hostage after a video emerged that showed Mehrtens surrounded by armed rebels. In the video, Mehrtens says that he would be held captive his whole life if Indonesia doesn't recognize Papua's independence. A law enforcement operation is also being prepared in case negotiations fail. [The Jakarta Post 1] [The Jakarta Post 2] [The Jakarta Post 3]

Mehrtens was taken hostage after the pilot landed a commercial plane in the remote area of Nduga and the rebels set the plane on fire [see AiR No. 7, February/2023, 2]. Indonesia's province of West Papua has long witnessed a small independence movement after Indonesia took control of the region in 1969.

## Indonesia: Military court jails four soldiers over 2022 killings of civilians in Papua

(os) A military court in Indonesia's restive Papua region has jailed four soldiers for their roles in the murder and mutilation of four civilians who tried to buy weapons from the four in August 2022. [Al Jazeera] [The Straits Times]

Initially, six soldiers were charged with the killings. One of them died has already died and one received a life prison sentence in January 2023. Of the four remaining soldiers, two have now received life sentences and two 15- and 20-year prison sentences. All of them have been fired from the Indonesian military.

Indonesia faces a small, but deadly independence movement in the Papua region. However, the military has also been criticized for taking a tough stance on the issue, and the military has been accused multiple times of human rights violations in the region.

## Indonesia: Bomb defused prior to G20 summit by anti-terrorism squad

(os) About a month before world leaders gathered in Bali for the Group of Twenty (G20) summit in mid-November, Indonesia's counter-terrorism squad defused a fully assembled bomb during a raid on Java island, *The Straits Times* reported on February 17, citing government sources. The raid, during which the bomb was found, was just one of five raids conducted in Central Java during September and October 2022 prior to the G20 summit. [The Straits Times]

## Indonesia lays out priorities for World Water Forum in 2024

(os) During a kick-off meeting in Jakarta, Indonesia has laid out its top priorities for the 10$^{th}$ World Water Forum (WWF), which will be hosted by Indonesia in 2024. These encompass water conservation efforts,

availability of clean water and sanitation, food and energy security, and mitigation of natural disasters. The WWF is the largest event related to water worldwide. The next edition is set to take place in Bali in May 2024. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Indonesia] [Vietnam Plus]

## Indonesia, partner countries establish secretariat to fuel energy transition

(os) Indonesia in conjunction with the International Partners Group (IPG) has established a secretariat for the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP). The Secretariat will act as a coordinator for the stakeholders of the JETP. It is supported by the Asian Development Bank. [U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Indonesia]

The JETP was set up during the G20 summit in November 2022 in Bali by Indonesia and leaders of the IPG. It is aimed at helping Indonesia with the transition of its energy sector. The IPG includes the United States, Japan, Canada, Denmark, the European Union, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, and the United Kingdom.

## Malaysia: Anti-graft agency steps up corruption probe efforts

(ldm) Malaysia's former prime minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, now the current chairman of the opposition bloc, Perikatan Nasional (PN) has been called up as part of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC)'s investigations into his party, Bersatu's finances. [Malay Mail][Straits Times][NST] The probe is linked to the allegations of Bersatu receiving USD 69 million worth of donations in exchange for construction projects under his administration.

To this date, the graft-busters have suspended two bank accounts belonging to the party linked to the probable embezzlement of coronavirus stimulus packages [see AiR No.6, February/2023, 1], and launched investigations into overseas assets and investments related to Muhyiddin's son-in-law. [see AiR No.7, February/2023, 2] All allegations have been denied by Muhyiddin who instead argues that these investigations were politically motivated to weaken the party in the six upcoming state elections this year, coinciding with the words of his party's secretary general. [The Borneo Post]

As part of investigations into Jana Wibawa, a COVID-19 stimulus package for *bumiputera* contractors, the international trade and industry minister has also been called up by the MACC to give his statement. [FMT][The Star]

In a separate investigation into the 2021 Pandora Papers by the MACC, the Malaysian central bank, the Inland Revenue Board and the police, more individuals have been reportedly summoned. [NST2] Most noteworthy of this is a former finance minister who had his statement taken at Putrajaya over the unusual wealth and financial flow of 12 offshore companies linked to him and his family. [Malay Mail 2][The Malaysian Reserve] The National Anti-Financial Crime Centre is also coordinating with a special analytical working group to examine illicit financial flows. The Pandora Papers are a trove of 11 million leaked financial documents exposing world leaders, billionaires and celebrities who obscurely used offshore companies to acquire private property and assets. [The Online Citizen]

## Malaysia: Auditor-General 2021 Series 2 Report reveals flawed and inefficient financial management across government

(ldm) The Auditor-General's 2021 Series 2 Report showed that the Malaysian government recorded a deficit of USD 24 billion in 2021, covering the shortfall with domestic and foreign financing of around USD 25 billion. The deficit led to an increase in federal debt by USD 24 billion (to USD 236 billion), resulting in a federal debt-to-GDP ratio of 63.4%. Despite the increase, the ratio remains within the statutory limit of 65% of GDP. The government's funds were used to finance operating expenses, development expenses, COVID-19 expenses, loan repayments, and other expenses. The Federal Government's receipts stood at USD 57 billion, while the expenditure amounted to USD 81 billion, which included USD 9 billion of COVID-19 expenditure. [NST]

The report revealed that the loss of public funds were mainly induced by negligence in adhering to government rules or procedures and the inefficiency in planning programmes, projects and activities. [NST2] The government has also experienced astronomical losses due to expired vaccines [The Edge Markets] and the purchase of defective ventilators. [Daily Express]

As a whole, non-compliance in financial management across agencies and departments has cost the public a loss of USD 36 million due to flawed risk profiling

performed by ministries, departments and agencies. [The Star] The largest fraction of such losses was the undercollection of customs duties over imported cars in duty-free islands of Langkawi and Labuan [The Sun Daily]. Other than that, awarded subsidies to the deceased, [The Star 2] the failure to collect rent for government quarters in Putrajaya, [NST3] the problematic procedures of printing and mailing police summons [NST4], and flaws in the payment process of Malaysian driving license (LLM) card printing services have all sustained losses in public funds. [MalaysiaNow][NST5] The report also found that social obligation funds totalling USD 8 million have not been received by the Agriculture and Food Industries Ministry. [The Star 3] With regards to the financial management of government owned companies specifically, Felcra Bhd still owes the government USD 83 million as of Dec 31, 2021. [The Sun Daily 2]

In terms of the effectiveness of government-initiated programmes, only four out of six targeted infrastructure development projects have been completed thus far. [Malay Mail] Apart from that, ambulance services provided by the health ministry and the Malaysia Civil Defence Force (APM) have not reached their target. [MalaysiaNow2] As for food security initiatives, 78 percent of projects under the Food Security Fund Programme did not achieve their overall objectives due to inefficiencies in implementation, procurement management and equipment. [NST6]

One of the major side findings highlighted in the report was cybersecurity concerns over the health ministry's MySejahtera application, wherein 1.12 million cyber attack attempts were detected. This is further aggravated by the finding that a "super admin" set up by one or more anonymous persons downloaded personal information belonging to 3 million people two years ago. [Malay Mail 2][The Star 4][The Star 5]

Malaysia's auditor-general has further claimed that 689 issues highlighted in the previous AG reports remain unaddressed. Although addressing such issues is imperative, imposing a deadline is not a feasible means to ensure governmental accountability due to the multifaceted nature of issues in question and the involvement of multiple parties. [The Star 6]

## Malaysia: Constitutional amendment grants citizenship to overseas children of Malaysian mothers

(ldm) The Malaysian cabinet has agreed to amend the Federal Constitution to allow children born abroad to Malaysian mothers to gain automatic Malaysian citizenship. The amendments will change the term "father" to "at least one of the parents" in Parts I and II of the Second Schedule while amendments to Part III of the Constitution will undergo a detailed study by a committee formed under the Home Ministry. The proposed amendments are in line with the government's commitment to gender equality and to overcome gender biases in citizenship provisions. This legitimizes the citizenship status of children born overseas before or after Malaysia Day as long as one of their parents is a Malaysian. [The Star] The decision was well-received and commended by many, including the local advocacy group Family Frontiers and the Malaysian chapter of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR Malaysia). [Malay Mail] Following this, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Professor of Law in Family, Women and Children suggested that proper guidelines towards the implementation of the amendment must be listed, recommending that a temporary visa should be issued to parents while the bill is being passed. [NST]

## Malaysia: Littoral combat ship (LCS) project to be resumed

(ldm) The LCS project will be recommenced to optimize the country's maritime defense capabilities in protecting national security. Aiming to salvage the project for the construction of six LCS vessels due in 2019, the ministry is in the final phases of finalizing the cabinet memorandum which is to be presented soon. [The Star] Although the previous government spent USD 1.5 billion on the project, it was delayed for a decade and has failed to complete any of the six ordered ships. [Malay Mail] Due to such delays in construction, the defense ministry had once deliberated on terminating the contract for the six LCS vessels in the past. [MalaysiaNow]

Amid the recent Public Accounts Committee's (PAC) report that has called into question the project's integrity, Malaysia's defense minister assured the public that the first ship's base and installation of various accessories have been completed. He has also affirmed that the cost of the project would remain the same, although only five ships would be built instead of six. [NST] The defense ministry further says that action has been taken on four of the seven recommendations from the PAC and has procured surface-to-surface missiles from the original equipment manufacturer. It is important to note that

the former chief of the Royal Malaysian Navy, who was also the former managing director of Boustead Naval Shipyard (BNS) was charged with a criminal breach of trust following the published PAC report, as the unsigned report on the USD 2.27 billion LCS contract was designated only for the board. [The Edge]

## Malaysia: Surveillance of women and LGBT+ groups in civil spaces on the rise

(ldm) Criticism has been leveled against Malaysian police after many women have been denied access to public spaces due to arbitrarily defined dress codes. Public outrage was sparked as Malaysian women were sanctioned nevermind the length of their attire and their emergency circumstances to spaces including police stations [FMT], government departments [Straits Times] and hospitals [The Star].

The Malaysian Home Ministry has also recently banned a children's book on gender identity issues in schools, citing that it is "harmful to Malaysian morals". The book titled, 'Jacob's Room to Choose', was banned alongside two others, with the ministry calling them a "threat to the moral values that are taught by religion and prevailing Eastern values" that would "promote LGBT lifestyles". The ban has been met with dismay, with many condemning it as state-driven culture wars and a move that panders to conservatism. [SCMP] Some accused the government of being stuck in the outdated 1990s and of imposing unreasonable restrictions to please the conservative elements of society. [Straits Times 2]

## Malaysia: Budget 2023 will tackle inflation and improve public infrastructure

(ldm) The Malaysian government is expected to table the 2023 Budget with a lower deficit-to-GDP ratio of 5.0%, a decrease from the initial 5.5% ratio. The budget will include several "people-friendly" measures such as the 2.0% cut in personal income tax rates for middle-income taxpayers and fuel subsidies. Other expected areas of focus include supporting SMEs, resuscitating private sector domestic direct investment, encouraging the tourism sector's recovery, addressing food prices and security, improving public services such as healthcare and education, and strengthening the electric vehicle ecosystem. The budget will also emphasize prudence in spending, with a proposed Government Procurement Act to improve governance

in public spending and contracts. [NST] Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has pledged that the upcoming Budget 2023 will include measures to control inflation and alleviate the rising cost of living in the country [FMT], aligning with the hopes of many Malaysians, who look forward to affordable housing, retainment of affordable travel passes for students and M40 groups, better tax relief efforts, and one-off payments. [The Star]

## Myanmar: Prominent Protestant activist charged under Counter Terrorism Law

(ih) Dr. Hkalam Samson, one of the leading Protestant activists in Myanmar, was charged on February 14 with incitement to terrorism under Section 52 (a) by a court in Myitkyina Prison in Kachin State. According to his lawyer, the charges have been levelled against him due to meetings he had held with National Unity Government officials. The incitement charges, which carry a maximum sentence of 13 years, come in addition to the court's previous charges of criminal defamation and unlawful association with an illegal group. [RFA]

## Myanmar: Supreme Court rejects Aung San Suu Kyi's appeal on corruption charges

(ih) On February 15, Myanmar's Union Supreme Court rejected Aung San Suu Kyi's appeal of two corruption charges related to donations to the Daw Khin Kyi Foundation that the former leader accepted from military-linked businessman Maung Weik.

The Union Supreme Court has not given a reason for its rejection of the appeal> [RFA]

## Myanmar: Junta has burned down 55,484 civilian homes since coup, according to independent research group

(ih) According to independent research group Data for Myanmar, 55,484 houses were burned down by the Tatmadaw and junta-aligned forces in the period between February 1, 2021 and the end of January 2023. The vast majority of the arson attacks occurred in the resistance stronghold of Sagaing Region, where 43,292 homes were burned in the time period

reviewed. Data for Myanmar has stated that these numbers may in fact be an underestimate, as they only include confirmed cases of arson. [The Irrawaddy]

## Myanmar: Junta arrests lawyers defending political detainees in Mandalay

(ih) The military government of Myanmar has arrested four lawyers and two assistants involved in defending political detainees in Mandalay. Three of the lawyers have been identified as U Than Tun Aung, U Win Kyaw Soe and Daw Yin Mar Win. The identities of the other lawyer and assistants detained by the junta remains unknown. The reason behind the arrests is not yet known. [The Irrawaddy]

## Myanmar: Junta loosens gun laws to allow the arming of civilians loyal to the regime

(ih) The military government of Myanmar has loosened the country's gun laws, enabling state employees, retired army personnel, and other civilians deemed loyal to the regime to carry licensed firearms. Under the new gun policy individuals in possession of licensed firearms would be required to participate in security and law enforcement actions if requested by local authorities. [Khmer Times]

## Myanmar: Four political parties re-registered for elections in February

(ih) The Federal Democratic Party (FDP), Myanmar People's Democratic Party (MPD) Union Democracy Party (UDP), and the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) have all re-registered with the junta-appointed Union Election Commission this month under the new Political Parties Registration Law, in anticipation of the upcoming general elections. The USDP is a military proxy party, and the FDP, MPD, and UDP were amongst the 34 parties that met with future junta leader Min Aung Hlaing in the lead up to the 2020 election in order to request him to intervene in the case of "unfair" voting. [The Irrawaddy]

## Philippines: Senator denounces Hollywood film for country portrayal

(tjb) Senator Robinhood Padilla lashed out at the Hollywood film “Plane” for reportedly placing the Philippines in a bad light. The senator also called the Senate to not condone the film. Similarly, Senator Ronald dela Rosa stated that he is “very much disgusted” by the movie’s narrative. [Philippine Star]

Meanwhile, the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) is reported to be “committed” to banning the screening of "Plane" in the country.

The film in question, Plane, first arrived in American theaters last January. It tells the story of a pilot who had an emergency landing in Jolo, Sulu, and eventually fought rebel groups on the island. [Rappler]

## Philippines: Coast guard stations flagship vessel to West Philippine Sea

(tjb) The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) revealed that it has deployed its flagship vessel to the West Philippine Sea to increase its presence in the exclusive economic zone of the country. The PCG positioned the BRP Teresa Magbanua, a ship it acquired from a loan from Japan, in the Kalayaan Islands. Personnel of the vessel also boarded Filipino fishing boats to advise them to radio the crew for assistance. [Philippine Star]

## Singapore: Branch of the Anglican Church dissavows Church of England’s decision on blessing gay marriages

(ih) On February 18, the Anglican Church of Singapore issued a statement that it “could not condone” the decision of the Church of England to allow the blessing of same-sex marriages.

The Church stated that this decision on the part of the Church of England would not result in Singapore’s Anglican Church changing their practice or position regarding same-sex couples in any way, noting the autonomy of the Singaporean Church from the Church of England. [Straits Times]

## Thailand: Activists to sue government over alleged use of Pegasus spyware use

(aj/lm) Activists in Thailand are suing the government for the alleged use of Israeli-made spyware to monitor dissidents.

In 2021, an investigation by a global consortium of media organizations in ten countries showed how the military-grade spyware *Pegasus* – made and licensed by Israeli surveillance firm NSO – was used by governments around the world to spy on political opponents, dissidents and journalists via their mobile phones. [AiR No. 29, July/2021, 3]

Against this backdrop, Thailand-based legal non-profit *iLaw* is building and presenting a case, which alleges that the Thai government has used the *Pegasus* spyware on the phones of at least 30 pro-democracy activists and lawyers in the two-year period from 2020 to 2021. The goal of iLaw, according to iLaw lawyer Yingcheep Atchanont, the goal of iLaw's case is less about successfully putting an official or agency on trial, but for the Administrative Court to recognize that the rights of these protestors were violated. [The Straits Times]

There is no direct evidence on whether the Thai government bought and sanctioned the usage of Pegasus.

## Thailand: Prime Minister affirms House dissolution in March

(ts) Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha has affirmed that Parliament will be dissolved early before the four-year tenure ends on March 23. He insisted the intention is to allow the politicians of all parties enough time to switch sides, not in the interest of his United Thai Nation Party alone. According to the Election Commission, in case of a House dissolution, politicians must be members of a certain party, qualifying as its election candidate at least 30 days before the election tentatively scheduled on May 7. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bloomberg]

As the election approaches, the competition among parties heightens. The prime minister sets to campaign in his hometown and bellwether province of Nakhon Ratchasima in the Northeast while the opposition Pheu Thai leaders have been out at the hustings in the same region. Meanwhile, in Bangkok, the oldest Democrat Party confirms its party leader and the current Minister of Commerce Jurin Laksanawisit will run as a PM candidate. The Democrats also start to introduce some constituency candidates for the capital where it wishes

to regain its long-standing political base. [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3]

Apart from site campaigning, parties manage to share their visions through public dialog. Seven parties including Pheu Thai, Palang Pracharath, Democrat and Move Forward Party joined the economic seminar to outline their policies regarding SMEs, which are the growing sectors of the country's economy. [The Nation Thailand]

## Thailand: Parliament authorizes royal defamation law changes, including word 'monarchy'

(lm) Thailand's parliament has given its nod to plans by an ultraroyalist political party to gather signatures for proposed changes to the royal defamation law that would significantly expand the definition of those protected by the law and the word "monarchy" itself. [The Thaiger]

Warong Dechgitvigrom, the leader of the Thai Pakdee Party, submitted a request on January 18, which was approved on February 7. In accordance with the current constitution, any petition must contain at least 10,000 signatures before being considered by Parliament's lower house.

Timing of the approval is noteworthy: Late in January, political activists met with the country's biggest opposition party, Pheu Thai Party, to demand the scrapping of the royal defamation law following a possible election victory this May. However, the meeting ended inconclusively, with Pheu Thai's Secretary-General Prasert Jantararuangtong saying he encouraged public discussion of how the law was being enforced, but did not advocate its alteration or removal.

## Thailand: Senate votes on opposition-sponsored motion to hold referendum on charter rewrite

(lm) The upper house of the Thai parliament on February 21 voted on an opposition-sponsored motion to hold a referendum that could pave the way for a rewrite of the country's charter. The Senate was originally supposed to vote last November, but voting was postponed when senators decided to form a

committee to study the motion before deciding whether to second it. [Bangkok Post]

The motion, which was passed by parliament's lower house on November 3, calls on the government to hold a referendum on whether the country should have a new constitution drawn up by a charter drafting assembly made up of elected representatives to replace the current charter. It also suggests the referendum be held on the same day as the next general election, which is tentatively scheduled for May 7, 2023. [AiR No. 45, November/2022, 2]

Importantly, the voting will be preceded by the reading of a report prepared by the head of the committee that studied the motion, Senator Somchai Sawaengkarn. As per the executive summary, the committee disagrees with the rewrite of the entire charter out of concern it may affect the country's governing system, which defines Thailand as a single, indivisible kingdom under a constitutional monarchy. The committee also takes the view that charter amendments to address problematic parts can be carried out without the need to draw up a new one.

## Thailand: Soldiers' vote 'personal' but to be done in an 'informed manner', army commander says

(lm) Speaking against the larger backdrop of looming national elections, the head of the Royal Thai Army, General Narongpan Jitkaewtae, has said that no one can order a soldier to vote for a particular candidate, adding that military could provide "advice" on how to make electoral decisions. [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: Provincial police to probe allegations made by sergeant in resignation letter

(lm) Provincial police in Thailand's Suphan Buri province have set up a fact-finding committee to probe allegations made by a police sergeant in a resignation letter, in which he claimed to have suffered a "loss of faith" in law enforcement due to "protection of the guilty" and the "neglect of honest officers". [Bangkok Post]

Thailand's police force has been rocked in recent months by a series of allegations, which include potential links between Chinese gangsters as well as

involvement in large-scale online gambling activities and the extortion of tourists [see AiR No. 5, January/2023, 5]. Earlier this month, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha admitted that corruption in the Royal Thai Police has been going on for many years and that all stakeholders involved must make a concerted effort to clean up the force.

## Thailand: Government postpones enforcement of key provisions of torture and enforced disappearance law

(ts/lm) The Thai government on February 14 approved a decree to postpone enforcement key provisions of the new torture and enforced disappearance law from February 22 to October 1, prompting criticism by international and domestic human rights watchdogs.

In August of last year, the Thai parliament adopted the Bill on the Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearance, and the Act was supposed to come into force 120 days after its publication in the Royal Gazette on October 25. At that time, the promulgation was considered a critical milestone in combating torture, ill-treatment and enforced disappearances in Thailand. [AiR No. 44, November/2022, 1]

The relevant articles 22 to 25 essentially stipulate measures to prevent practices that facilitate torture and enforced disappearance by requiring officials to continuously record audio and video throughout the arrest and detention process. The reasons given for the delay are the role enhancement of relevant operational authorities, e.g., police officers and special investigation officers, and the upgrade of their equipment, e.g., portable cameras and recorders. The government claims such development and procurement need more time. [Human Rights Watch] [BBC]

In response to the government's decision, human rights groups and academics have called on the Cabinet to forward the executive decree that postponed the enforcement of sections 22 to 25 to parliament's lower house before it is adjourned on February 28. They have also urged the government to adhere to international conventions and rules associated with detainees' fair treatment and political rights, namely CAT, ICPPED, and ICCPR [see OHCHR]. [Amnesty Thailand, Twitter] [Thai PBS, Twitter] [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: Controls on migrant workers stiffened

(ts) Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha has ordered the labor ministry to strictly enforce the law against illegal migrant workers. The order shall affect those who work without a permit and those taking jobs reserved only for Thai nationals. In particular, against the backdrop of the latter, the ministry has witnessed a rising number. The ministry has further warned the violators including employers are subject to a fine of a high rate and could end up in jail.

Reserved jobs illegally taken most by migrants are, for example, street vending and public transport jobs. Worth noting is also that Burmese make up the largest proportion of migrant workers in Thailand. [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: Election Commission to redraw electoral boundaries; Constitutional Court ruling pending

(aj/lm) Thailand's Election Commission (EC) has decided to proceed with redrawing the electoral boundaries to accommodate an increase in the number of constituency lawmakers from 350 to 400, although a ruling by the Constitutional Court on the inclusion of non-Thai citizens in the formula is still pending. [Bangkok Post 1]

Electoral boundaries must be redrawn before every general election to account for population changes; the next is anticipated to take place this May. The population database, which is used to guide the redrawing of constituency boundaries, currently includes three groups of non-Thais: holders of permanent residence permits, those with temporary residence, and individuals who have lived in Thailand for over ten years. Migrant workers from neighboring countries are not included. The formula based on the population count from December last year allocates one lawmaker per 165,226 members of the public.

However, several politicians and academics have spoken out against the EC's formula, saying non-Thais are not eligible to vote so they should be excluded from the calculation - despite maintaining the inclusion of non-Thais being dictated by law. [AiR No. 7, February/2023, 2].

Against this backdrop of increasing pressure, the EC on February 16 asked the Constitutional Court to rule on

the inclusion of non-Thai citizens in its formula to calculate the number of people represented by each lawmaker. As the matter involves pressing legal technicalities, it is believed the court should not take too long to consider the petition. [Bangkok Post 2]

### Thailand: 300,000 meth pills seized by Thai border patrol

(aj) Thai border patrol officers seized 300,000 methamphetamine pills containing pesticide worth USD 873,000 from smugglers in Thailand's northeastern Bueng Kan province along the Mekong River. These meth pills targeted younger and working-class demographics, costing USD 1-3 per pill as a cheaper alternative than the "999" meth pills sold to those with a higher purchasing power. [Bangkok Post]

### Vietnam: 20th National Assembly Standing Committee Session Concludes

(ih) The 20th session of the National Assembly Standing Committee concluded on February 15. During the session, the committee discussed draft laws on Civil Defence, Protection of Consumer Rights, and electronic transactions. It also reviewed resolutions on the protection of personal data, and on the emulation and commendation of officials and agencies under the authority of the Standing Committee. Resolutions on the implementation of rules regarding National Assembly sessions and on the structure and responsibilities of the Secretariat under the Standing Committee.

The standing committee also established 1 city, 2 district-level towns, 34 wards, and 11 communal-level townships, actions intended to implement the Politburo's resolution on urban development. [Vietnam+]

## International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

## IMF has no solution to country's problems, Pakistan defence minister says

(fm) On February 18, Pakistan was titled as a 'bankrupt country' by the country's defence minister, who admitted that Islamabad had defaulted in the wake of the country's lapsed economy. He further proclaimed that an uncertainty lies in the revival of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan program and presumed that the Washington-based lender does not have the cure to Pakistan's problems. [Hindustan Times]

Additionally, he considered least regard for the constitution and rule of law for the last seven decades to have played a corresponding role. Likewise, the minister suggested the solution to Pakistan's problems to be found internally and believed the selling of two golf clubs owned by the government of Pakistan could significantly decrease the country's debt. [Daily Pakistan]

## India proposes global debt creditors to take a haircut on loans; set to host first official gathering of the G20

(mk) India is drafting a proposal for Group of Twenty (G20) nations to aid developing countries with their debts, as the global economic fallout hits them badly. It seeks to ask lenders, particularly China, which is the world's largest sovereign creditor, to take a large haircut on loans. [Reuters]

A virtual meeting of the Global Sovereign Debt Round-table, composed of the IMF, World Bank, and India, is scheduled to take place on Friday to build on the proposal. This will be followed by an official gathering of the G20 in Bengaluru next week, which will be the first under India's presidency of the Group of 20. [Business Today]

The agenda would entail a discussion on the issues relevant to the debt restructuring process, and the aim would be to come up with technical solutions to tackle the same, according to a statement by Ceyla Pazarbasioglu, Director of the Strategy and Policy Review department at the IMF. [The Hindu]

## Global South needs to 'collectively shape the global agenda', India's Modi says at summit

(mk) Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered his closing remarks at the Concluding Leaders' Session of the Voice of Global South Summit. The remarks insisted upon the importance of South-South Cooperation, and the need to collectively shape the global agenda. [PM India]

The Prime Minister also highlighted India's role as president of the G20 in amplifying the voice of the Global South. He stressed the formula of "Respond, Recognise, Respect, and Reform" as a common priority for the Global South. The summit took place on the 12-13 February, and among other things, focused on tackling global instability, as well as cooperating in the health, education, banking and finance, and infrastructural sectors. [The Hindu]

## India to strengthen cooperation with US, United Kingdom, France through historic Air India-Airbus deal

(mk) India is set to bolster its ties with France, the United States and the United Kingdom through its civil aviation sector. Air India, the flag carrier airline of India, unveiled deals on February 14 for a record 470 planes from Airbus and Boeing. This agreement is expected to generate employment and economic development for all countries that are party to it, in addition to furthering their bilateral ties with India. [The Hindu]

Following the agreement, Prime Minister Modi held a virtual meeting with President Macron, reflecting on 25 years of the India-France Strategic Partnership, and recognizing the significance of this deal in strengthening the same. [mea.gov.in]

Modi also reached out to President Biden through a telephone call and the two leaders expressed a great

deal of satisfaction at the deepening of the India-U.S. Global Strategic Partnership. [pmindia.in]

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak tweeted out his elation at the deal, which will benefit the U.K to a great extent, since it will be home to a significant portion of the manufacturing process. The large A350 aircraft are exclusively powered by Rolls-Royce XWB engines, which are assembled and tested in Derby, a press release by the Department of International Trade said on Tuesday. [NDTV] [Gov.UK]

## UN Rapporteurs concerned over harassment of rights groups in Bangladesh

(lm) Eight rapporteurs to the United Nations have written to the government of Bangladesh, expressing concern over what they say is the harassment and intimidation of two local rights groups - Odhikar and Maayer Daak - as well as the "use of excessive and lethal force" by police against opposition political activists. The rapporteurs sent two letters to the government last December but the letters only became public earlier this month. [Voice of America]

## UN rights expert calls on Bangladesh to draft anti-discrimination leprosy laws

(lm) Following an eight-day visit to Dhaka, the UN Special Rapporteur on discrimination against persons with leprosy, has called on the Bangladeshi government to come up with draft anti-discrimination laws to formally recognize leprosy as a prohibited form of discrimination. [UN News]

The World Health Organization reports that Bangladesh has the fifth highest number of leprosy cases in the world. Data on Bangladesh indicates ongoing transmission, late diagnosis, and gaps in the health system.

## UN calls on international community amid ration cut by World Food Programme for Rohingya in Bangladesh

(az) After The World Food Programme indicated that it would reduce rations for Rohingya refugees by 17 percent in March, the United Nations warned of

immediate and long-lasting consequences inside the camps. The UN also labeled it as the failure of the international communities to serve the fundamental needs for the Rohingya refugees.

Added to the high malnutrition and other vulnerabilities, the UN warned that the ration cut will lead to more violence, human trafficking, and perilous boat journey by the Rohingyas to other countries. The UN asked the international community to come forward to avoid any major consequences after the food ration cut announced by The World Food Programme. [reliefweb]

## Pakistan's 'impeccable' nuclear safety lauded from International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief

(fm) The Director General of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) concluded a two-day visit to Pakistan on February 15. He appreciated the cooperation of Pakistan in health, agriculture industry, nuclear medicine and power generation and extended full support to Pakistan. Additionally, he was overwhelmed by the good work of agriculture research institutions and the cancer hospitals in Pakistan. He further lauded the technical capacity and nuclear safety record of the country noting that Pakistan comprises of engineering capacity for new nuclear power plants including Small Modular Reactors (SMRs).

Federal Minister for Planning, Development and Special Initiatives added that Pakistan is amongst the most severely affected by climate change, despite ranking 158th among carbon-emitting countries. Therefore, nuclear energy can be the best solution to the challenge of climate change as it is sustainable, clean and a green source of energy. Correspondingly, Director of IAEA appreciated the political will and expressed optimism about the prospects for the expansion of nuclear energy. [The Nation] [Tribune]

## South Korea, Arab Nations, UAE hold FTA negotiations, launch Korea-Middle East Economic Cooperation

(ge) From February 14 to February 16, the South Korean Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy (MOTIE) participated in the seventh round of the Korea-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Free Trade Agreement (FTA) talks held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The parties

announced the resumption of negotiations in January 2022.

The talks centered on opening markets for products and services, improving the trade environment to facilitate exchanges, improving trade norms such as intellectual property rights and digital. The Korean delegation and FTA head negotiator, Kwon Hye-Jin, remarked that cooperation with CGC countries is expected to expand in various fields including infrastructure and energy. [Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy, South Korea, 1]

Furthermore, on February 16 the MOTIE, along with relevant institutions and private sector actors, launched the Public-Private Joint Committee for Korea–Middle East Economic Cooperation.

During the meeting held in Seoul, the MOTIE declared that South Korea has secured USD 35 billion through bilateral MoUs and agreements with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which are expected to boost the South Korean economy.

The Committee will provide support for core projects by managing communications between domestic companies and ministers, and their Saudi Arabia and UAE counterparts; in addition MOTIE intends to apply the Korea–Middle East Economic Committee model to establish bilateral relations with emerging markets in the Gulf, Central Asia and Africa. [Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy, South Korea, 2]

## South Korea, Japan, US reaffirm commitment to trilateral cooperation

(ge) On February 13 Vice Foreign Minister Cho Hyun-dong met his Japanese counterpart Takeo Mori and US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman in Washington D.C. for the 12th ROK-US-Japan Vice Ministerial Meeting. The representatives adopted a joint statement to reaffirm trilateral partnership in deterring North Korea's threat. They also discussed various  regional and global issues.

During the meeting the parties reassessed topics tackled on occasion of the trilateral talks held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in November 2022 [see AiR No.46, November/2022,3]. Cho held additional bilateral consultations with his Japanese and US counterparts.

The trilateral talks were centered on the North Korean threat, with the parties underscoring their commitment to jointly deter North Korea and to

achieve the denuclearization of the peninsula. The parties agreed to strengthen and diversify their cooperation, with the US reiterating its “ironclad” commitment to defend its allies against possible North Korean incursions.

They denounced North Korea’s recent provocations and called for North Korea to reopen dialogues. They also raised their concern for the human rights situation in the country, declaring that they will spread awareness on the question. [US Department of State 1]

The three countries proceeded to reaffirm their unwavering support for Ukraine and to condemn Russia's ongoing hostilities. Moving from this, the parties expressed their opposition to unilateral changes of the status quo in the Indo-Pacific and stressed the importance of maintaining peace in the Taiwan strait in order to preserve regional and global security. [US Department of State 2]

Sherman commented that trilateral cooperation should also aim at deterring Chinese actions challenging the regional and international order. [Yonhap]

The vice ministers and US Deputy Secretary of State renewed their shared vision of the new Indo-Pacific strategy for a free, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region, advocating for closer cooperation with ASEAN partner countries in addressing compelling regional challenges. In addition, the parties committed to enhancing cooperation in economic development and human rights protection. [US Department of State 3]

On the same day, Cho held a bilateral ministerial meeting with Mori. The two sides seek closer ties to counter North Korea’s nuclear threat and to accelerate the normalization of bilateral relations.

The ministers affirmed their will to improve cooperation ties and their commitment to resolve the ongoing issue of forced wartime labor during the 1910-1945 Japanese occupation of the peninsula. The parties exchanged their views on sensitive issues and declared that efforts will be made to overcome differences. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea 1] [The Korea Times 1]

The points touched upon during the talks concern South Korea’s plan to establish a public compensation fund through which Japanese companies can compensate the victims of forced wartime labor. However Japan maintains that forced labor and sexual slavery issues were settled under the 1965 treaty

establishing basic relations between the two countries.

The ministers also discussed the release of the Fukushima nuclear power plant's contaminated waters - set for the first half of the year - and potential spillovers in South Korean waters. Japan and South Korea agreed on the need to develop coordinated measures to deal with  North Korea's human rights issues.

Cho also requested Japan, as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, to advocate for a united response to North Korea's nuclear threat. [Yonhap] [The Korea Times 2] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea 2, in Korean]

Meanwhile, on February 14 Cho attended the ROK–US Vice Ministerial Meeting. He had talks with Sherman and with US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and Deputy National Security Advisor.

Discussions resumed and confirmed the points addressed during the trilateral meeting. The ministers further agreed to strengthen South Korea–US cooperation in defense and to improve the effectiveness of extended deterrence measures through an Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group meeting set to be held this year.

Additionally, Sherman assured that she will make efforts to ease South Korea's concerns on the US Inflation Reduction Act [see AiR No. 45, November/2022, 2] and the Semiconductor Science Act. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea, 1 in Korean] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea,2 in Korean] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea, 3 in Korean]

## India promises Bangladesh to help import hydropower from Nepal, Bhutan

(az/lm) During foreign office consultations held in Dhaka, India assured Bangladesh that it will facilitate the import of hydropower produced in Nepal and Bhutan to its South Asian neighbor. Bangladesh, in turn, said it will explore whether Lines of Credit provided by India can be used to fund the expansion of transmission lines inside the country. [The Daily Star]

## United States unwilling to lift sanctions on Bangladesh elite police force without

## reforms

(az/lm) During a recent visit to Bangladesh, the United States State Department Counselor Derek Chollet said that Washington is not willing to lift sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), an elite police force in Bangladesh, until it is reformed. He also said that the US is committed to helping Bangladesh strengthen its rule of law and security.

The misuse of parliamentary power and legislation and the extrajudicial killings of opposition party political leaders by the RAB have made the US authorities express their concern about the reformation of the political climate in Bangladesh, as well as the elite police force. [Macau Business]

## Bangladesh prepares to set up fertilizer plant in Saudi Arabia amid global shortage

(az) Bangladesh plans to set up a fertilizer plant in Saudi Arabia to meet domestic demand amid global shortage exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, marking the first initiative by the Bangladeshi government to set up an industrial plant on foreign soil.

Talks on the establishment of a fertilizer plant in Saudi Arabia began last year, and on February 15 a memorandum for a feasibility study was signed by the Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation and Hanwha Saudi Contracting Company. As per the deal, Saudi Arabia will co-own the plant and will supply sufficient raw materials for fertilizer production. After the estimated six months of positive feasibility tests, the government of Bangladesh will start to implement the plan with the Saudi authorities. [Arab News]

## India, Bangladesh agree to support one another for non-permanent UN Security Council membership

(mk) India and Bangladesh on Wednesday agreed to extend support to each other's upcoming candidature for non-permanent membership of the UN Security Council (UN SC). The matter was discussed during Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra's visit to Bangladesh, where he called on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and asserted the continued relevance of Bangladesh as part of India's 'Neighbourhood First Policy' and its 'Act East Policy'. [mea.gov.in] [The Hindu]

Kwatra also met Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Dr. A.K. Abdul Momen, and the two held a wide-ranging discussion on strengthening bilateral cooperation in the defense, energy, trade, and security sectors. [The Print]

India is expected to begin another stint as a UN SC non-permanent member in 2028-29, whereas discussions are underway for Bangladesh to assume the position during 2030-31. [The Hindu]

## Cambodia: German President visited Southeast Asian Kingdom to meet with various local authorities

(sn) On February 15, 2023, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen met a German business delegation in the Peace Palace. The delegation expressed investment interest in automobile and construction materials and machinery industries. The Prime Minister praised the German interest and informed event attendants that Cambodia allows foreign people to own the whole share of businesses they develop within the Kingdom. He also proposed other potential investment areas, including flood crisis and green bonds.

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier made an official trip to the Kingdom of Cambodia on February 13-15. The President met with political leaders and representatives of social organizations. He also visited demining and restoration sites with investments from the European State. [Phnom Penh Post], [Office of Prime Minister of Cambodia]

## Cambodian Prime Minister visits Laos

(sn) On February 13-14, 2023, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen visited the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) on an invitation of the state Prime Minister. The meeting took place in the Presidential Palace, where the parties discussed various bilateral matters, including border affairs, trade, tourism, energy, and education.

Both sides expressed satisfaction with the growth of trade volume and agreed to organize events and seminars to enhance mutual investment and cooperation.

Governors agreed to resume direct flights and speed up the joint research progress on the history and culture of Cambodia–Lao PDR relations, particularly in

the Khmer–Lao and Lao–Khmer dictionary agenda. The two countries also agreed to increase cross-border correspondence and appreciated the progress made with the Joint Boundary Commission.

During the visit, the Treaty on Elimination of the State Border and the Action Plan for the Comprehensive and Long-standing Strategic Partnership (2023–2027) between the Kingdom of Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic were signed. [Cambodian Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation]

## US urges Cambodian government to re-license VOD

(sn) Following the revocation of the media license for the Voice of Democracy (VOD) media outlet, labor union members and human rights advocates condemned the closure of one of the last independent news publishers in the Kingdom of Cambodia.

On the same day, February 13, 2023, the US side urged the government to withdraw its decision to shut down the company. The Cambodian Minister of Information said it should be "a lesson for other media outlets."

Prime Minister Hun Sen accused the publisher of defamation through the promotion of invalid information about the actions of his son, Hun Manet, whom VOD reported signing the documents dedicated to the governor.

The US State Department explained that this decision is particularly troubling given need for the freedom of information during the July national elections. The Deputy Director of Asia at Human Rights Watch expressed concern that this decision is representative of the government's repressive political agenda. [Yahoo News], [Cambodia Daily], [Air No. 7/2023, 2]

## Cambodia and UK reinforce bilateral cooperation in trade and security sectors

(sn) The Royal Navy vehicle of the UK took a trip to Sihanoukville Autonomous Port in Cambodia for the scheduled joint exercise with the Cambodian Navy during February 13-17. The Ministry of Defence reported that the program aimed to enhance cooperation between the states and increase collaboration in the security sector. It was the 1st visit to the Sihanoukville coast by the UK Royal Navy.

The Director of the International Relations Institute at the Royal Academy of Cambodia expressed hope that the visit will also reassure the international community of the Chinese Military absence in the Kingdom. In addition, the two states agreed to switch the Generalized Scheme of Preferences to the Developing Countries Trading Scheme (DCTS) by April 2023.

The model will then regard the origins of goods exported from Cambodia to the UK and should make it easier for products partially manufactured in Cambodia to be sold in the UK. DCTS can remain active until Cambodia reaches the developed country status, as defined by the UN criteria. The Kingdom's Ministry of Commerce spokesperson announced that the scheme is expected to increase agricultural exports to the UK. [Cambodianess], [Phnom Penh Post]

## China presents concept paper of "Global Security Initiative"

(dql) China has revealed on February 21 the "Global Security Initiative (GSI)" concept paper that calls for the continued commitment of the countries of the word to six key concepts and principles, including the "the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security," "respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries," "abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter," "taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously," "peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation," and "maintaining security in both traditional and non-traditional domains."

In an apparent reference to the U.S., the paper warns against "Cold War mentality, unilateralism, bloc confrontation and hegemonism," and "[a]busing unilateral sanctions and long-arm jurisdiction."

It also highlights the role of platforms and mechanisms for global and regional peace and security in which the U.S. does not participate, such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS cooperation, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan and the China-Horn of Africa Peace, Governance and Development Conference, among others.

The U.S., the European Union, and NATO are not mentioned at all in the paper, while Europe only

appears one time in the context of cooperation on global conventional arms control.

Coming at a time when China is facing pressure from the West to exert its influence on Russia for peace talks and only days after it was announced by Wang Yi, director of the Office of the CCP Central Foreign Affairs Commission and China's top diplomat, in his speech at the Munich Security Conference, where the war in Ukraine was the top issue(see entry below), the paper only calls for support for a "political settlement of hotspot issues such as the Ukraine crisis through dialogue and negotiation," without spelling out China's contribution in this matter while reaffirming China's commitment to upholding the principle of "indivisible security", cited by Russia to insist on the obligation to not strengthen security at the expense of the security of other states. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1, China] [Reuters]

Noteworthy, the GSI concept paper was released just a day after China's official state news agency Xinhua published a lengthy article title "U.S. Hegemony and Its Perils," in which the U.S. is accused of "bringing harm to the international community," as they "pursue, maintain and abuse hegemony, advance subversion and infiltration, and willfully wage wars." Hegemony, thereby, refers to multiple fronts, including political, military, economic, technological and cultural hegemony. [Xinhua]

In another separate hit against the U.S., another report highlights the alarming state of gun violence in the US as an indication for a decline in US governance capacity. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2, China]

## Wang Yi's visits in Europe

(vp) China's top diplomat of the Communist Party and former Foreign Minister Wang Yi has been on a European tour  to France, Italy, Germany, where he delivered a speech at the Munich Security Conference 2023 (MSC) on February 18, and Hungary since last week. Russia will be the last leg of this tour that is widely seen as aimed at restoring ties with the European states, at a time of growing pressure from European states on China to condemn Russia's aggression in Ukraine and tensions between Beijing and Washington that has flared up over the shooting down of Chinese balloons over US territory. [AP] [CNN]

On February 15,  Wang met in Paris with French President Emmanuel Macron and the French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Catherine Colonna. The

issues discussed were the Russian-Ukrainian war, security, climate-related issues, and China-France bilateral projects and diplomatic consolidation.

Notably, both parties expressed their determination to promote peace talks and contribute to a ceasefire in Ukraine. Nonetheless, Wang insisted on China's "objective and impartial position," in the conflict, refusing to accept Europe's call for condemning Russia's war. [France Diplomacy] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1, China] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 2]

On February 17, Wang met in Rome with Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani and Italian President Sergio Mattarella. The agenda included the war in Ukraine and China's leverage to push for a ceasefire, as well as the renewal of the MoU on the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative between the two countries, signed in 2019.

Italy has been the only G7 country to join the Chinese global multi-billion USD infrastructure and development project. However, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni had called the MoU 'a big mistake' and, as soon as she came to power in September 2022, expressed the intention of withdrawing Italy's endorsement by the end of 2023, before its expiring date and automatic renewal in March 2024. Wang's effort was spent on reassuring the new Italian government on the strategic importance of the OBOR project.

Rome affirmed that an official decision is yet to be taken, but a prospective maneuver could be a "soft phasing out," which should not affect economic ties with Beijing. [Decode 39] [Il Foglio, in Italian] [La Repubblica, in Italian]

On February 18, at the annual Munich Security Conference, held from February 17 to 19, Wang delivered a speech in which he surprised the audience with the announcement that China would soon come up with an initiative for global peace (see entry above) that would emphasize the importance to uphold the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and the UN Charter. At the same time, he reiterated China's position on the legitimate security interests of Russia who the international community needed to respect. Wang avoided condemning the invasion, using the term "conflict" instead of "war."

Addressing especially European leaders in the audience, Wang urged Europe to "think calmly [...] about what efforts should be made to stop the warfare; what framework should there be to bring lasting peace to Europe," and how to "manifest its strategic autonomy."

However, China's call on Europe to distance itself from the US seems to have not been successful at least in the case of EU President Ursula von der Leyen who voiced skepticism towards China's announced peace proposal citing continued close trade and military cooperation between Beijing and Moscow.

Also, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Joesp Borrel warned in his meeting with Wang Yi on the sidelines of the MSC, that in the eyes of the European Union China would cross a red line if It would send arms to Russia. The readout of the Chinese Foreign Ministry of the meeting does not mention Borell's warning, but instead states that Wang stressed China's commitment to promoting peace talks and willingness to deepen communication with the European Union in this matter. [Munich Security Conference] [Politico 1] [Politico 2][The Guardian] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

In Budapest Wang met with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Peter Szijjarto. During their conversations on February 19 and 20 respectively, both sides discussed the war in Ukraine and reaffirmed their willingness to work together with "peace-loving nations" to find ways to end the conflict in Ukraine, according to Wang.

This comes as Orban stated shortly before he met Wang that NATO was "vital" to his country, but also stressed that the Hungarian government would not join other European countries in delivering arms to Ukraine and would not sever economic ties with Russia.

Meanwhile, Szijjarto has reportedly reassured Hungary's continued active participation in the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) and the Budapest–Belgrade railway project, a core BRI project for Beijing that links the China-run  port Piraeus in Greece central Europe. He also pledged to step up efforts to expand cooperation with China in various areas including economy and trade, mutual investment and agriculture.[Reuters] [China.org.cn][Global Times 2]

On February 21, Wang arrived in Moscow, the last stop of his European trip. He will meet with Russian Foreign Ministry Sergey Lavrov on February 22, while it is still not clear whether there will be a meeting with Russian President Putin. [TASS]

Wang's arrival to Moscow coincides with US President Biden surprise visit to Ukraine to show the support of the allies to Ukraine shortly ahead the anniversary of Russia's invasion. The trip coincides also with the US accusations towards China supplying weapons to

Moscow (see entry below) and with Putin announcing plans to suspend Russia's active involvement in the last remaining nuclear arms treaty with the US, such as the new START nuclear arms reduction treaty, effective since 2011. [CNN 2] [CNN 3]

China stated that Wang's visit to Russia will be an opportunity to develop their strategic partnership, considered as a "positive asset to the world", and "exchange views" on "international and regional hotspot issues of shared interest", including the war in Ukraine. [Global Times]

## Wang Yi and Antony Blinken trade warnings and accusations at Munich Security Conference

(vp) Wang Yi, director of the Office of the CCP Central Foreign Affairs Commission and China's top diplomat and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken held an informal talk on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference on February 19. The meeting came shortly after Blinken canceled a visit to China that had been scheduled for earlier this month after a Chinese balloon, considered by Washington as surveillance balloon spying U.S. sites, hovered over US airspace and was shot down [see AiR No. 6, February/2023, 1].

During the conversation, Blinken condemned the "unacceptable violation of U.S. sovereignty and international law by the PRC high-altitude surveillance balloon in U.S. territorial airspace," while warning Wang of the "implications and consequences if China provides material support to Russia or assistance with systemic sanctions evasion." Blinken, however, stressed the need for diplomatic dialogue and open lines of communication to be maintained. [Department of State, USA]

Wang, for his part, accused the U.S of "an abuse of the use of force and violation of customary international practice and the International Civil Aviation Covenant," adding that the U.S. should abstain from further escalating the balloon incident. China insists that the balloon was a civilian unmanned weather airship that went astray. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, he also made clear, that China does not "accept the US's finger-pointing or even coercion targeting China-Russia relations," adding that ties between Beijing and Moscow were based on "non-alliance, non-confrontation and non-targeting of third countries." [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China] [BBC] [CNN]

Wang's statements came shortly before he is scheduled to visit Russia this week.

## Governor of Xinjiang to cancel EU trip amid concerns over Uyghurs' human rights abuse

(vp) The Governor of Xinjiang Erkin Tuniyaz has canceled his planned trip to Paris, Brussels and the UK due to concerns on violation of human rights in the Uyghur Muslim communities' region of Xinjiang.

Uyghur activists and politicians have criticized the imminent trip of the governor, who is labeled by them as 'Beijing's puppet' and affirmed that welcoming him would be equal to condoning China's human rights abuses. Some European countries and the UK had also expressed their concerns on meeting and allowing Tuniyaz to discuss Uyghurs' treatment.

Tuniyaz defended China's policies in Xinjiang in 2021 in a video addressed to the UN where he stated the educational purposes of 're-education camps'.

China, on its part, affirms that information on the alleged violations of human rights in Xinjiang have been strategically spread to contain China. [Radio Free Asia] [Politico]

## WHO determined to continue investigation into Covid-19 origins in China

(vp) The World Health Organization (WHO) has affirmed that it will continue to conduct studies in order to shed light on Covid's origins, however the path forward seems unclear. [Health Policy Watch]

The statement, made during a briefing, came in response to criticism from the media claiming that the organization abandoned the second phase of the mission because of difficulties conducting crucial investigations in China. [Nature]

China, for its part, replied by confirming China's open, transparent and collaborative behavior and reporting that on February 15 the country welcomed a team of WHO experts with whom to cooperate and share data over the origin of Covid-19, just like it happened during the outburst of the disease in February 2020 and then in January 2021. Moreover, due to the highly politicized

nature of the issue, Beijing warned the WHO from opinions driven by anti-China forces. [South China Morning Post]

## Iranian President's visit to China

(vp) Iranian leader Ebrahim Raisi was on a  three-day visit to China, the first visit of an Iranian president since 2018, that came at a time when both countries are facing growing tensions with the US.

During a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, both sides affirmed "strong mutual support" on core issues of interests and opposition to external interference into their country's internal affairs.

Moreover, the two leaders called for the lifting of sanctions against Iran in order to push for the revival of the stalled international agreement of 2015 on Iran nuclear programme, where Iran agreed to curb its nuclear programme in return for economic sanctions relief. However, in 2018 the U.S. unilateral withdrawal from the deal under President Donald Trump that led to the subsequent reimposition of sanctions. Xi pledged that China would play an active role in talks to resume negotiations on implementing the agreement.

In the context of cooperation in trade, agriculture, food safety, industry, renewable energy and infrastructure, as many as 20 cooperation deals were signed during Raisi's visit. Efforts were also spent in planning for the implementation of the 'China-Iran 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement', signed in March 2021 and including political and security advantages for both parties. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China] [Reuters] [South China Morning Post3]

## China agrees to assist Ethiopia's rail transport service in need of spare parts

(vp) On February 14, China's Ambassador to Ethiopia Zhao Zhiyuan signed an agreement on spare parts assistance with Ethiopia's Finance Minister Ahmed Shide. The agreement involves USD 23-million-worth of spare parts which China will provide to the Chinese-financed Ethiopian light rail transport service, urgently in need of backing and spare parts.

China holds many interests in Ethiopia and other African countries, which host many major Chinese investments and around 400 Chinese manufacturing and infrastructure projects, some halted by the

internal conflict in the northern region. However, even though in January 2023 Beijing announced the partial waiver of the East African country's debt, Ethiopia is highly indebted to China, accounting to USD 13.7 billion of debts as of 2022. [South China Morning Post] [Zhao Zhiyuan, Twitter]

## Xi Jinping addresses African leaders at 36th African Union Summit

(vp) On the occasion of the 36th African Union (AU) Summit held in Addis Ababa, Chinese President Xi Jinping sent a congratulatory address to the African leaders in which he called for their contribution to the building of higher level China-Africa relations and to facilitating cooperation and development. Xi also pledged to push for the African Continental Free Trade Area. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

## China-US: Hong Kong trade offices in US targeted by new Senate bill

(vp) Following China's crackdown on opposition and activists in Hong Kong and undermining of the city's government, the US may respond by introducing a bill on February 16 aiming at Hong Kong's representative trade offices in the US. Hong Kong authorities urge the US 'to respect basic norms governing international relations and stop maliciously interfering'. [South China Morning Post] [South China Morning Post2]

## China appoints a new special envoy to the Pacific islands as tensions with the US rise in the region

(vp) On February 15, China's Ambassador to Fiji Qian Bo was appointed first special envoy of the Chinese government to Pacific Islands, where Beijing is competing with Washington for influence over the region.

To contrast China's engagement in the region implemented through the 'Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership' to establish a free trade area, Washington in May 2022 launched the 'Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity', with the latest entry being Fiji. The US initiative was criticized by China as a further attempt for economic decoupling from

China, for creating divisions and for US closeness to Taiwan. [South China Morning Post] [VOA News]

## China's largest gas importer to sign a deal with QatarEnergy

(vp) China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), China's largest gas importer, is finalizing a huge long-term import deal on liquefied natural gas (LNG), from the North Field expansion project, with QatarEnergy, the second agreement of this kind in a few months.

In November 2022, QatarEnergy signed a deal to supply LNG to Chinese state energy giant Sinopec for 27 years, one of the longest-term supply contracts in the history of the LNG industry.

In this way, China consolidates its supply of LNG, avoids exposure to volatile prices and distances itself from other two main LNG import rivals, Australia and US, with which relations are increasingly strained. [Oil Price] [Reuters]

## Foreign Minister Qin Gang to visit Indonesia from February 21 to 23

(vp) China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang is expected to visit Indonesia from February 21 to 23 in the context of the Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) between China and Indonesia and visit the ASEAN Secretariat. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

## Chinese PLA Navy to participate in naval defense and maritime security exhibition in Abu Dhabi

(vp) On February 16, it was announced that the guided-missile destroyer Nanning of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) will attend the naval defense and maritime security exhibition NAVDEX in Abu Dhabi, from February 17 to 25, to take part in seminars, sports competitions and other friendly exchange activities with UAE Navy. [Ministry of National Defense, China]

## Multinational maritime exercise AMAN-23 in Pakistan concludes

(vp) The multinational maritime exercise AMAN-23 which took place in Pakistan from February 10, concluded on February 14. It consisted of harbor and sea phases and warships, aircraft and special operations forces from more than 50 countries were involved, improving the joint response to maritime security threats. [Ministry of National Defense, China]

## India, Nepal agree to boost economic, development ties

(mk) India and Nepal agreed to further their economic and development cooperation last Monday, according to a tweet by the Indian Embassy.

On his 2 day visit to Nepal, Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra met his Nepalese counterpart Bharat Raj Paudyal, and the discussion included ways to strengthen bilateral cooperation between the two nations, with a focus on connectivity, power trade, agriculture, health and culture. [Economic Times]

According to reports, Kwatra also set the grounds for a possible visit by Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda to India as his first foreign trip as Nepal's Prime Minister. [Economic Times 2]

## Indian Prime Minister Modi meets with U.S. Congressional Delegation

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday met with a delegation from the U.S. Congress led by Senator John Corryn. Corryn, who is co-founder and co-chair of the Senate Caucus on India and Indian Americans, was accompanied by senators Michael Crapo, Thomas Tuberville and Michael Lee, and Congress members Tony Gonzales and John Kevin Elizey. (pmindia) (MEA)

The delegation discussed bilateral issues of mutual concern to both nations, such as terrorism, climate change, and critical technologies, and also talked about strengthening  cooperation in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific. In addition to this, they lauded India's management of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially owing to its large and diverse population. (NDTV)

## US lawmakers introduce bill affirming India's sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh state

(mk) A bipartisan resolution asserting the United States' recognition of the state of Arunachal Pradesh as an integral part of India was introduced in the US Senate on February 16, pushing back against Beijing's military aggression to change the status quo along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). [The Tribune]

Democratic Senator Jeff Merkley from Oregon and Republican Senator Bill Hagerty from Tennessee worked together on the bill with the intent of combatting Chinese advances in the territory, as well as highlighting the need for increased U.S.-India partnership in defense, technology, economics and people-to-people ties. [India Today]

This was in response to the recent military clashes between India and China at the LAC. The resolution condemned China's use of military force to change the status quo along the LAC, construction of villages in contested areas, and expansion of Beijing's territorial claims in Bhutan.[Economic Times]

## Iran's foreign minister cancels visit to India for Raisina Dialogue over mention of protests

(mk/lm) Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has called off his expected attendance at the Raisina Dialogue in India, reportedly because a promotional video posted by the conference organizers showcased clips of Iranian women protesting along with images of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi. According to sources, the Iranian embassy in New Delhi asked for the footage to be deleted from the video, and when this was not complied to by India, canceled the foreign minister's visit. [The Tribune] [Reuters]

India has thus far maintained silence over the protests led by the women in Iran. It also abstained from voting in the United Nations Human Rights Council for the establishment of an independent fact finding mission to investigate the human rights violation in Iran during the protests. [Hindustan Times]

The Raisina Dialogue is a multilateral conference jointly organized by the Observer Research Foundation in collaboration with the Ministry of External Affairs. It is held annually in New Delhi. [NDTV]

## Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar visits Fiji for 12th World Hindi Conference

(mk) Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar visited Fiji in order to attend the 12th World Hindi Conference, hosted jointly by the governments of India and Fiji in Nadi from February 15-17. The conference was an important exercise in cultural diplomacy by India, during which Jaishankar expressed his hope for Hindi to transform into a world language through the endeavor. [MEA] [Deccan Herald]

During this visit, Jaishankar called on the top leadership of the country, namely President of Fiji Ratu Williame Katonivere at the State House, as well as Prime Minister of Fiji Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka and senior members of the Fijian cabinet. The talks included discussions on ways to strengthen bilateral relations between both countries. The third summit of the Forum for India Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) was announced as part of the Indo-Pacific initiative. [The Hindu]

Additionally, a visa waiver agreement was signed between the countries that would allow diplomatic and official passport holders of the two nations to travel and stay in either country without holding a visa for 90 days. [MEA]

## India’s external affairs minister visits Australia

(mk/lm) Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar on February 18 visited Australia - his third visit since February last year - to meet the Australian leadership in Sydney and address the inaugural Raisina@Sydney Conference, organized by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and India’s Observer Research Foundation.

Jaishankar had visited Melbourne last year to attend the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting. He also visited Australia in October last to attend the 13th India-Australia Foreign Ministers' Framework Dialogue.

During his recent visit, Jaishankar called on Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and conveyed Prime Minister Modi’s greetings to him. Albanese is reportedly planning to visit India in early March, for what would be his first visit to the South Asian nation

since assuming the prime minister's post in May 2021. [MEA]

Meanwhile, India's high commissioner to Canberra in a recent interview said that India and Australia will take their trade, defense and diplomatic ties to unprecedented heights this year despite profound differences over Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [The Sydney Morning Herald]

## China, Indonesia to enhance collaboration in vocational training

(os) China and Indonesia have announced that they plan on stepping up their cooperation regarding vocational training and human resources. The two countries have also discussed knowledge and information exchange, workforce training, and community empowerment. Indonesian Minister of Manpower Ida Fauziyah expressed her hopes that China would help Indonesia in improving its vocational training centers. [Tempo.co]

## Rohingya refugees land again on Indonesian coast

(os) At least 69 Rohingya refugees have landed in Indonesia's western province of Aceh. Passengers have been moved to a temporary shelter. The boat allegedly departed from Bangladesh two weeks ago. A passenger claims that several people have died during the journey. [The Straits Times]

The boat was already the sixth boat carrying Rohingya refugees that landed in Indonesia since November 2022. The Rohingya are a Muslim minority group that is heavily persecuted in their origin country, Myanmar. A plethora of them are now living in refugee camps in Bangladesh, but many try to flee to other countries, such as Malaysia, Thailand, or Indonesia.

## Indonesia, Singapore talk cooperation in transportation sector

(os) Indonesia and Singapore have discussed how to enhance their cooperation in the air and ocean transportation sectors. Discussions also encompassed the development of human resources in the sectors. The meeting between the transportation ministers of

both countries was a follow-up to the Flight Information Region agreement that was signed between both countries in 2022. [Tempo.co]

## United States express concerns over Indonesia's new criminal code

(os) The United States has expressed its concern about parts of Indonesia's new criminal code. The concerns were raised during a call between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi. During the call, Blinken also reiterated the United States' support for Indonesia's 2023 ASEAN chairmanship. [U.S. Department of State] [The Straits Times]

The new criminal code was passed into law in December 2022 and replaced the old colonial-era criminal code [see AiR No. 49, December/2022, 1]. It is heavily criticized for certain provisions that for instance ban sex outside marriage. The United Nations have warned that the new code might pose a threat to media freedom, privacy, and human rights.

## Indonesian province, Norway discuss cooperation in energy transition

(os) The provincial government of Central Java and Norway are discussing cooperation in sustainable energy transition. Both parties said that Central Java plans on embarking on an energy transition and Norway boasts the knowledge and technology to cooperate with the provincial government in this transition. Possible cooperation in environmental restoration in coastal areas and in waste management was also mentioned. [Antara News]

## Indonesia, Germany establish project to address marine litter issue

(os) Indonesia and Germany set up a pilot project to tackle the issue of marine litter and to enhance waste awareness and management in Indonesia. The pilot project was launched in Manado, the provincial capital of North Sulawesi. [Antara News]

Both countries discussed how Manado could step up waste collection, recycling, and reduction of waste generation. North Sulawesi hosts one of the richest

marine biodiversity worldwide. The project is part of a joint project between ASEAN and Germany called Reduce, Reuse, Recycle to Protect the Marine Environment and Coral Reefs (3RproMar).

## Japan organizes G7 meeting at Munich Security Conference

(cc) On February 18, during the Munich Security Conference, Japan's foreign minister organized a meeting of foreign ministers of G7 nations.

In the discussion, aside from affirming their commitment to maintaining the law-based international order, they condemned the Russian aggression in Ukraine and vowed to hold those responsible accountable. They also reaffirmed their intention to uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific and denounced any unilateral attempt to change the regional status quo by force. The representative of Japan also brought up the issue of North Korea's repeated missile launch to the talk, discussing the details of the incident and announcing Japan's willingness to work with G7 countries.

The event was made in accordance with Japan's earlier plan to organize a meeting between foreign ministers of the G7 nations [See AiR No. 6, February/2023, 1]. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

## Japan and China plan to discuss the surveillance balloon issues

(cc) On February 14, according to Japanese and Chinese sources, Japan and China aimed to hold a security dialogue in February to discuss matters surrounding the relations between the two nations and the region, including the issues of the suspected Chinese surveillance balloons.

The plan for the talk came following the announcement from the Japanese Defense Ministry that it suspected that at least three unidentified flying objects detected in Japan's airspace from 2019 to 2021 were Chinese spy balloons.

Later on February 18, during their meeting in Munich, the foreign minister of Japan urged China to prevent its flying objects from intruding into Japan's territory and expressed concern over the Chinese military build-up in the region. [Japan Times] [NHK]

## Japanese government to expand defensive measures for its airspace

(cc) On February 15, the Japanese government announced its willingness to expand the use of weapons to respond to foreign drones and balloons violating Japanese airspace.

According to an explanation from the government, Article 84 of Japan's Self-Defense Forces Act will be used as a reference for the change in the defensive measures.

The move was due to the suspicion that China flew surveillance balloons over Japan. [The Mainichi]

## Japan meets the president of UNGA

(cc) On February 15, Japan's minister of foreign affairs met with the President of the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).

Furthermore, aside from stating their willingness to cooperate in reforming the UN and the UN Security Council and bolstering the role of UNGA, they discussed the partnership between the two sides in addressing global issues, ranging from the release of water from the damaged Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant to problems related to North Korea. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

## Japan and Israel hold a summit talk

(cc) On February 13, the Japanese and Israeli leaders held a summit through telephone talk. In the discussion, Japan and Israel agreed to further their bilateral relations and partnerships.

Additionally, on the issue of the Israel-Palestine conflict, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida of Japan asserted that Japan plans to assist the Palestinians in achieving a two-state solution. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

## Japan and the U.S. start a monthlong joint exercise

(cc) On February 16, the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force and U.S. Marine Corps started a monthlong joint exercise in Southwestern Japan, aimed to demonstrate military capabilities of the Japan-U.S. alliance.

With approximately 1,700 personnel participating, the drill, named 'Iron Fist', involves simulation training on defending and recapturing remote islands. The activity is expected to end on March 12.

Traditionally, the Japan-U.S. annual military exercise is held in California. But in response to China's increasing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, the military leaders of Japan and the U.S. agreed in April 2022 to change the training location to areas West of the International Date Line. [Japan Today]

## Japan joins Pakistan's AMAN23 naval exercise

(cc) Between February 9 to 14, the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force joined the Pakistani Navy in the Pakistan-hosted AMAN23 multilateral naval exercise.

Among other objectives, the training aimed to strengthen the cooperation between nations to achieve the Free and Open Indo-Pacific goal. [Ministry of Defense, Japan, Twitter]

## Malaysia, United States reaffirm commitment to strengthen bilateral ties

(pa) A meeting between the Malaysian minister of international trade and industry and the United States Trade Representative reaffirmed both parties' commitment to strengthen bilateral economic ties on both a multilateral and regional level. The two sides agreed that cooperation surrounding environmental, social and governance (ESG) in business was the way to maintain their positive relationship. [Bernama]

The US is Malaysia's current third-largest trading partner, amounting to a total of RM267.58 billion (USD 60.70 billion) in 2022 alone, with over 600 US companies operating in Malaysia [Business Today].

## Malaysia, Singapore to collaborate to boost the agricultural sector and food security

(pa) Malaysia and Singapore aim to share expertise on modern agriculture to improve food security in both nations. Singapore is to share its knowledge and technology surrounding smart agriculture and has been invited to invest in the Malaysian agricultural sector to increase its joint food supply. This comes close to a month after the Malaysian prime minister suggested to his counterpart that Singapore should invest in Malaysian food production to reduce their food import bills, which amount to nearly USD 16 million a year. [NST]

As key agricultural partners, this partnership and continued strengthening of bilateral trade work towards the common goal of being able to guarantee a sustainable food supply. [The Sun]

## Malaysian, Thai authorities jointly investigate shooting

A Malaysian man was shot in Southern Thailand last Saturday. The Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM) has since decided to conduct a joint investigation with the Thai authorities. The assailant is believed to be a Thai national, whose motive is still unknown but is of interest to Malaysian authorities [Malay Mail].

## Malaysian-Chinese bilateral trade hits record high in 2022

The Chinese Ambassador in Malaysia, Ouyang Yujing, has stated that bilateral trade between the two nations amounted to USD 206.6 billion in 2022, a record high. Both countries have experienced frequent and high-level trade, notably co-promoting the Belt and Road construction, the "Two Countries, Twin Parks" project and the East Coast Rail link. All of these projects have brought tangible profits and benefits to both countries [Bernama] [Malay Mail]

China has been Malaysia's largest trading partner for the last 14 years and has one of the best relationships with China out of all the ASEAN nations [Edge Markets]

## Australian government provides funding for Malaysian COVID-19 programs

(pa) The Australian government has provided about USD 2 million in funding towards Malaysia's COVID-19

program, which was recognized and appreciated by Health Minister Dr Zaliha Mustafa in a Facebook post on February 16. She received a call from the Australian High Commissioner to Malaysia, Dr Justin Lee, as a courtesy and discussed issues in the health sector and continued cooperation between the two nations [NST] [The Star]

## Foreign Ministers of China, Mongolia, Pakistan discuss partnership

(sw) A Chinese senior diplomat met on Friday 17 with the Foreign Ministers of Mongolia and Pakistan. He emphasized that China supports Pakistan to maintain security. Also, China wants to strengthen exchanges and cooperation with Mongolia and increase coordination on regional and international affairs. [Aki Press]

## Mongolian Banks to accept Russian payment system

(sw) Banks in Mongolia will soon accept the Russian Mir debit cards. Currently, ten countries use the Russian payment system, and more than 15 others have expressed readiness to introduce it.

The Russian financial service industry is heavily sanctioned by the West due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The US Treasury also warned last year that it might impose sanctions on institutions that support Russia circumventing sanctions through the Mir payment system. [Retail Banker International]

## Mongolia-China: Enhanced cooperation between Ulaanbaatar, Tianjin

(sw) The Mayors of the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar and the Chinese city of Tianjin have agreed to expand their cooperation in education, trade, and business. This agreement enhances the previous partnership in the areas of culture, education, and economy.

Both parties have emphasized the need to create a transportation network that connects Asia, Europe, and other continents and to reduce logistics costs. Also, they want to increase training for personnel in the education sector and expand business relations. [The UB Post]

## North Korea fires ICBM missile Japanese EEZ as warning to South Korea, US

(ge) On February 18 North Korea launched a Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) into Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) off the coast of Oshima Island, Hokkaido. North Korean state media reported the launch on February 19 and declared that the test is a warning to South Korea and the US. [NK News 1]

Both South Korean and Japanese militaries confirmed that the missile was fired from Pyongyang's Sunan area, it flew 900 kilometers and reached an altitude of 5,700 kilometers before hitting the open waters in Japan's EEZ, 200 kilometers off its west coast. The Japanese Defense Ministry said the ICBM-class weapon has the capability to reach the mainland, including the US.

On February 19 the North Korean state media declared that the launching was organized without previous notice in order to test the reliability of the weapon and the country's war preparedness. The state media also added that the test was organized to warn South Korea and the US following their recent agreement to intensify joint air drills (see AiR, 6 February/2023,1 ). In a statement issued on the same day, the leader's sister, Kim Yo-Jong condemned the US and the United Nations Security Council's "hostile" policies towards North Korea, reiterating that the US and South Korea extended deterrence measures are endangering space and stability in the region. She also added that the ICBM is not aimed at Seoul. [KCNA 1] [KCNA 2]

The Japanese Prime Minister and the Seoul Security Council condemned it as an action against the international community and for violating the UN Security Council sanctions that ban North Korea's ballistic missiles and nuclear programme.

As a response to the launch, on February 19 the US held bilateral joint air drill with South Korea and Japan to display the allies' defense readiness to North Korea's threats.

Analysts sustain that North Korea is likely to carry out more solid-fuel ICBM tests, such as the one that was detected on January 31 from satellite imagery [see AiR, No. 6, February/2023, 1]). Recently North Korea had also displayed mock ICBM missiles in the February 6 military parade [see AiR No. 7, February/2023, 2]. [Reuters] [BBC] [NK News 2] [The Japan Times]

In a latest development the US failed with its call to hold North Korea accountable for its provocations, due to the veto power exercised by China and Russia in a UNSC meeting held in New York on February 20. [Yonhap]

## North Korea-South Korea: Pyongyang sends invitation letter to members of separated families

(ge) On February 13 the South Korean Unification Minister announced during a press briefing that on February 10 a South Korean Association for the members of separated families had received a letter from Pyongyang inviting them to discuss the possibility of resuming meetings between separated family members.

The South Korean Unification Ministry is vetting the reliability of the invitation, since the North Korean agency that issued the letter is not the one known by the Ministry. The receiver of the letter, the South-North Separated Families Association, is an organization established in 2012 under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Unication to arrange contacts between the members of separated families in the North.

On February 17 the Unification Ministry, following a week-long investigation, rejected the visit request advanced by the civic group, stating that they could not verify the authenticity of the invitation. [NK News]

The Ministry of Unification has reported that successful exchanges between separated families members have been declining since 2009 and have reached an all time low during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The last meeting organized by the two Koreas was held in 2018. Due to aging the numbers of separated families has gradually decreased and South Korea has urged the North to solve the issues before the passing of the surviving separated families' members. [NK News] [Ministry of Unification, in Korean] [Kyunghyang Shinmun, Korean]

## North Korea: Chinese Defense Minister sends congratulatory message

(ge) On February 14 North Korean state media reported that China's defense minister has sent a congratulatory message to his North Korean

counterpart over the military parade held on February 8 for the People's army anniversary celebrations.

In the message the Chinese minister stated that the friendship between the two countries is solid and bilateral ties have been developing steadily. [KCNA]

## North Korea: Norway seizes record high amount of stolen cryptocurrency

(ge) On February 17 Norwegian Police said in a statement that Norway confiscated USD 5.8 billion worth of cryptocurrency stolen by North Korean hackers last year.

The cryptocurrency was stolen in March 2022 in a cyber attack on the online game “Axie Infinity” and according to US authorities, it is linked to the notorious North Korean hacking group “Lazarus”. Norway’s national crime unit stated that this is the largest cryptocurrency seizure in the history of the country. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation, which collaborated with Norway on the case, estimates that the group stole a total of USD 625 million worth of crypto currency.

North Korea’s cyber thefts have hit a record amount last year, according to a UN report set to be released this February or early March (see AiR, No. 7, February/2023, 2). [Bloomberg] [Reuters] [KBS]

## President Marcos Jr. vows no territory will be lost in the Philippines

(tjb/vp) President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. said that the Philippines “will not lose an inch” of territory as tensions between the country and China heightened in the past week. [Al Jazeera]

Marcos Jr. said that recent disputes “do not conform to our ideals of peace and threaten the security and stability of the country, of the region, and of the world.” The president’s comments came after the Philippine government summoned China’s envoy to discuss Beijing’s activities in the West Philippine Sea. The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) also filed a diplomatic protest against China after its coast guard used a military-grade laser on a Philippine Coast Guard vessel, temporarily blinding its crew. [Philippine Star]

But despite the incident, Marcos Jr. said that it was not enough to invoke the Mutual Defense Treaty the

Philippines signed with the US, its closest ally. [Reuters]

## Philippines, US eye joint coast guard watch of South China Sea

(tjb) Amid heightened tension with China, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) revealed that the likelihood of a joint patrol with the US on the South China Sea is high, stating that there is "already a clear path of possibility" for cooperation between Washington and Manila to provide maritime patrols.

Furthermore, the patrol might be launched in the South China Sea to support the freedom of navigation of the US. Meanwhile, Rommel Jude Ong, a former Philippine Navy vice commander, said that deploying the coast guard instead of the navy will prevent China from finding a pretext to further heighten tensions in the region. [South China Morning Post]

## Philippines: DFA says Philippines committed to diplomacy on the West Philippine Sea issue

(tjb) The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) has commented that the Philippines is still devoted to diplomacy to settle geopolitical issues.

DFA Secretary Enrique Manalo said that the Philippines is supporting all states "to uphold a rules-based international order and the need for all states to resolve their disputes through peaceful means and in accordance with international law." The country's top diplomat issued the comment on the sidelines during a conference with German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock at the Munich Security Conference. [PNA]

## South Korea, NATO to step up military cooperation

(ge) On February 13 and 14 the Joint Chief of Staff (JCS) and NATO held the first military staff talks to enhance the understanding of the security situation in the peninsula and step up military cooperation.

JCS press release stated that the talks were attended by the JCS directorate of strategic planning head, Maj. Gen. Kim Su-Kwang and Lt. Gen. Francesco Diella, director of NATO's cooperative security division.

The February 13 meeting focused on cooperation procedures and strategic concepts, and previous achievements, with both sides agreeing to boost military cooperation .

On February 14 the two delegations visited the Joint Security Area (JSA) to assess the security situation and reiterated their commitment to peace and stability in the peninsula.

NATO and South Korea representatives vowed to hold an annual ROK–NATO military staff dialogue in Brussels.

Experts argue that the meeting is to be understood as part of US-led NATO's intention to establish cooperation between Asia-Pacific countries to curb Chinese influence in the region. In addition, cooperation with NATO could bolster South Korea's stance against cyber and nuclear threats from North Korea and could allow South Korea to cover a preeminent role in advancing stability and security in the Indo-Pacific region, also in coordination with Europe. [Yonhap] [The Korea Herald] [ROK JCS, in Korean]

## South Korea, Mongolia sign MoU on rare earth supply

(ge) On February 15 South Korea and Mongolia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to strengthen strategic cooperation in rare earth supply chain and high tech industries.

The MoU will promote full-scale development, technical cooperation, information and personnel exchanges. According to the text of the MoU, both parties will benefit from the agreement combining South Korean technology and mineral mining expertise with Mongolia's large reserves of rare metals. This will secure a stable metal supply to South Korea.

The agreement came after a meeting was held, on the same day, between the South Korean and Mongolian Foreign Ministers Park Jin and Batmunkh Battsetseg. During the talk the ministers concurred that cooperation between the two countries is mutually beneficial in various fields, including infrastructure construction, economy and trade, rare metals and energy, defense, military information exchange, and climate change. The ministers agreed to strengthen strategic partnership and cooperation in the international arena.

Park requested Mongolia's support in countering North Korea and for the election of judges of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Seas, to be held in late March.

Battsetseg, for his part,  said that Mongolia will support South Korea's bid for the 2030 World Expo as well as its candidature to the 2024-2025 term of non-permanent members of the UN Security Council.

[Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy, Korean] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Korean] [The Korea Herald]

## South Korea, EU to strengthen bilateral cooperation

(ge) On February 14 First Vice Foreign Minister Cho Hyun-Dong and Secretary General of EU External Relations Authority(EAAS), Sannino agreed to enhance bilateral cooperation and strengthen ties during a meeting in Washington DC. Discussion concerned bilateral relations, the Indo-Pacific region and cooperation framework, and the situation in the Korean Peninsula.

The two sides agreed to seek joint cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. Cho asked for the EU's continued interest and support in security and human rights issues concerning the peninsula, requesting cooperation for the achievement of North Korea's denuclearization.

The parties also considered establishing a working-level consultation channel to address common interests. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea, in Korean] [Yonhap]

## South Korea labels North Korea as "enemy" in 2022 Defense Ministry "White Paper"

(ge) The South Korean Defense "White Paper", published on February 15, labels North Korea as "enemy" whilst referring to Japan as a "close neighbor" sharing the same values and interests.

This wording reflects President Yoon Suk-yeol's political stance of deepening ties with Japan whilst severing those with the previous government's "Moonshine policy" of rapprochement  towards North Korea.

The biennial report is the first issued under Yoon's presidency. The paper describes thoroughly North Korea's threats and violations of international agreements violence. In particular it reports that South Korean authorities suspect that North Korea is in possession of seventy kilograms of Plutonium, sufficient for producing more than ten nuclear bombs.

The paper also considers that, despite the necessity of security cooperation with Japan, the government maintains its stance on debated issues, such as the opposition to Japan's claim of sovereignty over Dokdo Island (Tsushima). [Ministry of National Defense, South Korea, Korean] [The Korea Times]

## South Korea, The Netherlands hold first strategic dialogue

(ge) On February 16 South Korea and the Netherlands held the first strategic dialogue in The Hague as a followup of the Korea-Netherlands summit agreement held in Seoul last November. South Korean foreign minister and his Dutch counterpart had talks on major regional issues and the 2030 Busan Expo.

The two parties agreed on increasing communication and strengthening cooperation on crucial sectors such as semiconductors, nuclear power, economic security, national defense, and cyber security.

The ministers acknowledged the importance of strengthening economic security amid global supply chain disruption caused by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. They also discussed the situation in the Korean peninsula and Ukraine.

South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin underscored the necessity to prevent AI misuse for military operations. He also asked for Netherlands support in the 2030 World Expo bid. [South Korean Foreign Ministry, in Korean] [The Korea Herald]

## South Korea Foreign Minister attends Munich Security Conference, has talks with Japan, Estonia, Slovenia

(ge) On February 18 South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin attended the 59th Munich Security Conference, the world's largest international security forum, and participated in the Indo-Pacific Panel

discussion. Japan, Canada and Britain also took part in the discussions.

The parties had talks on the state of security in the Indo-Pacific sharing the view that the war in Ukraine has had repercussions in the region. Park underscored that while international attention is directed towards the Ukrainian conflict, the Taiwan Strait, the South East China Sea and the Korean peninsula are witnessing an escalation in tensions. The ministers agreed on the necessity to coordinate Asian and European countries' actions to maintain security in the Indo-Pacific. [South Korean Foreign Ministry 1, in Korean]

On the same day, Park had bilateral meetings with his Estonian and Slovenian counterparts. Park and Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu exchanged views on the situation in the Korean peninsula and in other regions, as well as cooperation on the international stage. They agreed to continue cooperation in digital, cybersecurity, and defense industries, and to further develop bilateral relations. [South Korean Foreign Ministry 2, in Korean]

Meanwhile, Park and his Slovenian counterpart Tanja Fajon discussed bilateral relations and cooperation in the nuclear power energy field. They also agreed on the need to cooperate for the reconstruction of Ukraine and to strengthen cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. [South Korean Foreign Ministry 3, Korean]

On the sidelines of the Munich Conference, the South Korean and the Japanese Foreign Minister met to discuss pending issues between the two countries.The two reaffirmed the need to maintain close communication and keep healthy bilateral relations. Park urged his Japanese counterpart to take a decision over the compensation of Korean wartime forced labor victims. [Yonhap] [Reuters]

## South Korea-North Korea: South Korea imposes more sanctions on the North in response to missiles launch

(ge) On February 20 the South Koreas military reported that North Korea launched two short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) toward the East Sea. [Yonhap]

North Korean state media described the launch as a "multiple launch rocket sub-units", stating that it was carried out in response to the joint air drills held on February 19 by South Korea and the US involving B-1B strategic bombers and F-35 stealth fighters. [KCNA]

Both South Korea and Japan authorities condemned the action as an act against international peace and for violating the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions. Japan requested an emergency meeting with the UNSC whilst the South Korean military stated that the country will maintain a strong position against the threats, together with US and Japan's support. [AP News]

On the same day South Korea announced new independent sanctions against North Korea, targeting four individuals and five organizations, including two Singaporean shipping firms that contributed to the development of North Korea's missiles and nuclear arsenal. These sanctions add the independent cyber sanctions imposed on North Korea on February 10 (see AiR,No. 7, February/2023, 2 ). [South Korean Foreign Ministry, Korean] [Aljazeera]

## Sri Lankan High Commissioner meets Indian Finance, Commerce and Industry ministers prior to G20

(sn) On February 14, the High Commissioner of Sri Lanka to India met with the Finance and Corporate Affairs Minister of India and the Minister of Commerce and Industry in New Delhi. Sri Lanka thanked India for its financial support and assurance in the time of crisis and International Monetary Fund restructuring. The states discussed the mechanism of bilateral trade expansion, including the rupee trade establishment between the counterparties and the integration of the textiles and garment sector.

The visit took place prior to the first scheduled meeting of the G20 Finance Ministers in Bengaluru on February 24–25. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Sri Lanka 1], [Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Sri Lanka 2]

## Sri Lankan ambassador to UAE visits Abu Dhabi to present credentials

(sn) On February 6, the United Arab Emirates held a Credentials Presentation Ceremony to the Vice President, Prime Minister and the Dubai Ruler, Sheikh Mohammed, in the President's Palace in Abu Dhabi. 16 Ambassadors, including state representatives of Sri Lanka, France, Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar, presented their credentials to the Dubai governor during the event.

Sri Lankan Ambassador, Udaya Indrarathna, passed the greetings from President Ranil Wickremesinghe to Sheikh Mohammed, expressing commitment to strengthening bilateral cooperation, particularly in the trade, politics, and investment sectors. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Sri Lanka]

## German MP urges Sri Lanka to support UN resolution against Russia's invasion of Ukraine

(sn) During an official visit to Sri Lanka, German lawmaker Peter Ramsauer discussed the matter of the United Nations resolution plan against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, urging President Ranil Wickremesinghe to support the resolution with a vote in the upcoming UN General Assembly. [Peter Ramsauer, in German]

Since the war started in February 2022, 193 member-states were required to vote 4 times to express their stand on the ongoing armed conflict. Indeed, on the scale from "in favor of the resolution" to "against the resolution" Sri Lankan consistently voted to abstain from expressing their support or condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. [Al Jazeera]

Ramsauer also met with senior government officials, the Board of Investment, social organizations and opposition representatives during his Colombo visit. Germany raised concerns over the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) usage and warned of its increasing risk of Sri Lanka losing Europe's Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus concession. He also urged the South Asian Kingdom to lift the import ban policy and warned the authorities of concerns potential investors might encounter with the Sri Lankan economy. [Mena FN], [Daily Mirror]

Ramsauer is Rapporteur for Sri Lanka and the Maldives in the Foreign Affairs Committee of the German

## China sanctions weapons manufacturers for arms sales to Taiwan

(sw) China has sanctioned two United States (US) weapons manufacturers, Lockheed Martin and Raytheon, for selling weapons to Taiwan and, thus, potentially harming Chinese sovereignty, security, or development interests.. The companies will be banned from importing goods into China and investing in

China. Moreover, China imposed fines that are twice the value of their contracts related to their arms sales.

Currently, the US is the main supplier of military equipment to Taiwan. Raytheon Technologies upgraded the Taiwanese military radar and Lockheed Martin supplied it with helicopters, radar and air traffic control equipment, contributing to Taiwan's development of its own fighter jets and navy frigates.

According to Beijing, the activities of the companies are restricted because they p With the sanctions, China increases its efforts to isolate Taiwan. [AP News] [Big News Network]

## Chinese officials visit Taiwan after three years

(sw) On Saturday 18, Chinese officials from the Shanghai branch of China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) arrived in Taiwan for the first time after the pandemic began to attend the Lantern Festival. On their arrival, pro-Independence supporters protested and a small group of pro-China supporters welcomed them.

Legislators of the ruling Democratic Peace Party (DPP) accused the Taipei City Government of a lack of transparency because the itinerary of the visit had changed spontaneously, with the attendance of the Lantern Festival substantially shortened, prompting speculations that the Taipei Mayor of the Kuomintang secretly met with the Chinese officials.

The visit occurs amid rising tensions between China and Taiwan in which China carries out military activities around Taiwan almost on a daily basis. Beijing also refuses to communicate with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen who is considered a secessionist. [Reuters] [Taiwan News]

## China's balloons give Japan, Taiwan a reason to share intelligence, says lawmaker

(sw) A defense policymaker of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party suggests that due to the suspected Chinese surveillance balloons, Japan and Taiwan need to share critical intelligence about potential common aerial threats. They could do that by sharing information via the United States.

The two countries do not have official diplomatic relations but are geographically in close proximity. Therefore, Japan worries that China could endanger its national security if it gains control over Taiwan. [Reuters]

## Crashed weather balloon on Taiwanese island

(sw) Taiwan's military found the remains of a Chinese crashed weather balloon on a remote island near the Chinese coast on February 15. Since the balloon was not equipped with audio or video recording capabilities, the Ministry of National Defense stated that it is a radiosonde.

This occurs amid a dispute in which the United States claims that China uses balloons for spying. However, China denies this. [Channel News Asia] [Focus Taiwan 1] [AiR No.7 February/2023, 2] [Focus Taiwan 2]

## Dutch parliament hosts Taiwanese legislators for first time

(sw) Taiwanese and Dutch lawmakers met for the first time in history in the Dutch parliament on February 14. They discussed, among others, the implications of the war in Ukraine for Taiwan, cross-Taiwan Strait relations, and potentials for cooperation in the areas of technology and semiconductor.

The Taiwanese legislators from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party emphasized the need to enhance its defense capabilities and thanked the Dutch parliament for expressing support for Taiwan. In December 2022, the Netherlands passed two pro-Taiwan resolutions that called for the Dutch government to increase the partnership between the two countries. The second resolution demanded expanded support for Taiwan by all diplomatic possibilities. [Focus Taiwan] [Taiwan News]

## US Indiana State Senate passes resolution to support Taiwan

(sw) The United States (US) Indiana State Senate passed a resolution to strengthen the relationship between Indiana and Taiwan. The resolution reaffirms support for the Taiwan Relations Act and trade

agreements between Taiwan and the US. It also promotes Taiwan's participation in international organizations, and the strengethenimg of education corporations with Taiwan.

Moreover, the resolution demands Indiana companies to use the name "Taiwan" to avoid misunderstandings or influence from external pressure. The resolution was passed after a Senator of Indiana visited Taiwan in January. [Taiwan News] [Focus Taiwan]

## International women's empowerment forum in Taiwan

(sw) On February 15, the "Empower Women Empower Latin America and the Caribbean Forum" took place in Taipei to promote economic empowerment for women in the post-pandemic era.

Representatives of nine Latin American countries participated to address gender-related issues. Through the International Cooperation and Development Fund, Taiwan provides women in Latin America with vocational training and support to build their own businesses and to become economically independent.

Paraguay's President Mario Abdo Benitez said that because of Taiwan's funding, his country can provide a safer working environment for women and build 100 vocational training centers. [Taiwan Today] [Focus Taiwan]

## Chinese military around Taiwan

(sw) Since February 15, 85 aircraft and 26 vessels of the Chinese army were detected around Taiwan. 23 of the aircrafts crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait and entered Taiwan's southwest air defense identification zone. Taiwan's military monitors the situation and responds with aircraft, Navy vessels, and land-based missile systems. [Ministry of National Defense, Taiwan]

## US legislators visit Taiwan

(sw) A bipartisan American congressional delegation is visiting Taiwan to meet with President Tsai Ing-wen and other senior government officials to discuss possibilities to expand security cooperation and the economic and trade relationship.

The degelagtion arrived on February 19 for a five-day visit. [Focus Taiwan]

## Taiwan undersea cable cuts linked to Chinese vessels

(sw) Two undersea data cables that link Taiwan with the outlying Matsu islands were accidentally cut by a Chinese fishing vessel, according to Taiwan's National Communications Commission (NCC).

In the past five years, more than 20 broken cables between Taiwan and Matsu have been reported. To achieve internet resilience, two more cables are being built, which will be completed by 2024 and 2025. [Focus Taiwan] [Taiwan News]

## Korea's aerobatic team makes refueling stop in Taiwan

(sw) The South Korean air force's "Black Eagles" aerobatic team stopped at Taiwan's Kaohsiung airport to refuel on February 15. The ten planes were on their way to an Australian International Airshow. [Focus Taiwan]

## Thai Cabinet gives green light to negotiations on FTA with European Union

(aj/lm) Thailand's Cabinet gave the green light on February 14 to begin formal talks with the European Union on a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), a deal that is delayed by almost a decade in the wake of the Southeast Asian nation's military coup in 2014. [The Nation Thailand]

Thailand will now inform Valdis Dombrovskis, Executive Vice President of the European Commission for An Economy that Works for People, of the decision. Formal negotiations will be allowed to take place only when the proposal receives approval from all 27 EU member states. Bangkok hopes to start the negotiation process in the first quarter this year. [Pattaya Mail]

Negotiations for an EU-Thailand FTA were launched in March 2013 but put on hold following the military coup in Thailand in May 2014, after which bilateral relations

remained frosty for several years. Last May, then, the two sides sealed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) - more limited than a full FTA - which sought to improve bilateral ties on a range of issues, from human rights to counterterrorism. The Thai-EU PCA was officially signed on the sidelines of the ASEAN-EU Commemorative Summit in Brussels last December [see AiR No. 51, December/2022, 3].

The FTA is considered a mutually beneficial deal. Thailand is conscious of the need to diversify trade links away from the United States and China, two of its main partners. An FTA with the EU would move Bangkok from having 14 FTAs with 18 countries to 15 FTAs with 45 countries. The EU, for its part, seeks to diversity from China as geopolitical risks rise and as Brussels increasingly views Beijing as a competitor. At present, the EU has FTAs with two ASEAN states - Singapore and Vietnam.

## China's top diplomat Wang Yi meets with Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai in Beijing

(aj/lm) Wang Yi, director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, met on February 13 with visiting Thai Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai in Beijing to discuss plans to enhance bilateral relations. Both sides agreed to promote more high-level state visits, trade, investment, tourism, and infrastructure to lay down the foundations for connectivity to advance plans for an economic corridor that runs through China, Laos, and Thailand. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

The meeting was a continuation of talks held last November between Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha and President Xi Jinping on Thai and Chinese shared plans for economic prosperity.

## Mongolia, Thailand reaffirm commitments to expand bilateral ties

(aj) The Thai Deputy Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Busadee Santipitaks, and Mongolia's envoy to Bangkok, Ambassador Tumur Amarsanaa, signed a Protocol on Revision to the Memorandum of Understanding on February 15, with the aim of making the convening of future meetings more flexible. During their meeting, the two sides discussed ways to

strengthen bilateral cooperation between the two nations in the areas of trade, tourism, and high-level state visits per the MoU's aims. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

## United States to send record 6,000 troops to 'Cobra Gold' exercises in Thailand

(aj) From February 27 to March 10, nearly 7,400 troops from 30 countries will participate in Cobra Gold, an annual joint military exercise co-sponsored by the United States and Thailand, as either exercise partners or observers. This year's war games will take place in the Thai provinces of Chanthaburi, Lopburi, Rayong, and Sa Kaeo. Besides the command post drills and disaster response preparation, there is the new addition of exercises in space operations.

This year's iteration will feature Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and the US as full participants, while Australia, China and India will take part in the humanitarian aid practice. Brazil, Cambodia, Germany, Greece, Kuwait, Laos, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Sweden and Vietnam will only observe the training exercises. [Bangkok Post]

Although Myanmar was invited to the games in previous years, Thai army Chief-of-Staff General Thitichai Thienthong stated on February 14 that Myanmar could not be invited because there was "a limited number of seats." This marks the third consecutive year that Myanmar has been absent from Cobra Gold. Observers of the region say the country's continued absence is due to Washington's disapproval of the February 2021 coup in Myanmar [see AiR No. 8, February/2022, 4]. [Radio Free Asia]

The US is returning to its usual numbers of military personnel at Cobra Gold by sending 6,000 troops to the military exercise this year — troop numbers that have not been seen at the series of exercises in a decade. In light of this, some analysts note that although relations between Bangkok and Washington are improving, the partnership is not near the levels it was prior to the 2014 Thai military coup and before Thailand deepened its economic ties with neighboring China. [The Diplomat]

## Thai Navy Chief meets with high-level Japanese defense officials in Tokyo

(aj) Royal Thai Navy Chief Admiral Choengchai Chomchoengpaet made an official visit to the Japanese capital Tokyo from February 12-16, where his Japanese counterpart, Admiral Sakai Ryo, led Admiral Choengchai and his accompanying military officers on a tour around two Japanese naval bases and Japan's Ministry of Defense. At the Ministry, Admiral Choengchai met with Japan's Vice Minister of Defense Ino Toshiro and Deputy Army Chief Suzuki Yazuhiko to a terms of reference, reaffirming Thai and Japanese navy-to-navy relations in collaboration and intelligence-sharing. [Bangkok Post]

## Vietnam-Cambodia: Defense ministers agree to boost cross-border security cooperation

(dql) Cambodian Defence Minister General Tea Banh met with his Vietnamese counterpart General Phan Van Giang on Febraury 19 in Hanoi to discuss ways to deepen security cooperation.

Both ministers reached agreement on extending the cooperation begun last year and on developing a cooperative plan for this year to strengthen border security. A focus of the discussion was on increased information sharing and joint patrols to prevent cross-border criminal activities. [Khmer Times]

## Vietnam: Cambodian and Vietnamese party leaders hold high-level meeting

(ih) On February 18 Hun Sen, Cambodian Prime Minister and President of the Cambodian People's Party, and Nguyen Phu Trong, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, co-chaired a high-level meeting between the two parties. The two leaders briefed each other on the current situation of their respective parties and states, and discussed ongoing and potential future opportunities for cooperation. [Vietnam+]

## Vietnam, Thailand sign MoU on illegal fishing

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) on illegal, under-reported and unregulated (IUU) fishing has been signed by Departments of Fisher of the Thai Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives and the Vietnamese

Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. The MoU covers information exchange on the movements of shipments of aquatic lifeforms and of illegal fishing vessels, and capacity building for enforcement activities. [The Star]

## Vietnam suggests more South Korean investments in the country

(dql) During a meeting with a delegation of the South Korean parliament on February 20, Nguyen Duc Hai, Vice Chairman of the Vietnamese National Assembly proposed that the Republic of Korea (RoK)–Vietnam Friendship Parliamentarians' Group steps up its contributions to the bilateral legislative ties.

He ask the group to of South Korean legislators to continue supporting the expansion of investments in Vietnamm by South Korean companies, highlighting especially investments in digital technology, renewable energy, support industries, semi-conductor industry and high-quality agriculture. [Vietnam+]

## Vietnam-China: Important land border port resumes passenger customs clearance service after three years

(dql) Youyi Port, an important land passageway between Vietnam and China's southern Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, resumed passenger customs clearance service on February 20. This comes after a pandemic-caused hiatus of three years.

Between 2011 and 2022, the number of international road transport lines confirmed by China and Vietnam in Guangxi has increased from 20 to 30.

## Vietnam-India: Vietjet to increase flights to and from India

(dql) Do Xuan Quang, Vice President of Vietjet, Vietnam's low-cost airline, has stated in an interview that India has become the main market for Vietnam, confirming plans to fly more flights to and from India and increasing the number of destinations in India from three to 18.

The statement reflects growing economic relations between QUAD member India and Vietnam which is also stepping up its stance towards China. [Financial Express]

## Vietnam-Japan: Joint naval exercise

(dql) Vietnam and Japan carried out a joint naval training exercise involving ships of the Vietnam Coast Guard and the Japan Coast Guard.

The six-day session began on February 13 and focused on implementing plans on search and rescue and fire prevention and fighting at sea. [Vietnam+]

## Vietnam-UAE: Political Consultation Meeting held

(dql) On February 15 the second round of the UAE-Vietnam Political Consultation Meeting took place in Abu Dhabi.

The talks included a review and exploration of ways of boosting bilateral relations, as well as a discussion on current regional and international developments and areas of common interest.

The two sides affirmed their commitment to further deepen cooperation and to reinforcing climate action.

The UAE will host the 28th session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28), to be held in November in Duba. [Emirates News Agency]

## Vietnam-EU: Trade and investments links to be strengthened

(dql) During a meeting with a delegation of the EU-ASEAN Business Council (EU-ABC) and the European Chamber of Commerce in Viet Nam (EuroCham) in Hanoi on February 15, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son reassured that Vietnamese ministries are actively working together other sectors to promote bilateral trade and investment links.

The minister called on the EU-ABC and EuroCham to continue their support in the implementation of the EU-Viet Nam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA) that was

signed in 2019 as well in the promotion of the ratification of the EU-Viet Nam Investment Protection Agreement (EVIPA) by the Eu member states.

The The EU-ABC and EuroCham, for their part, pledged to promote ASEAN-EU and Viet Nam-EU economic cooperation priorities. They also reaffirmed that they will encourage increased investments of European companies in Vietnam. [Ministry if Foreign Affairs, Vietnam]

### Vietnam-UK: Cooperation in education to be strengthened

(dql) At a seminar jointly held by the Vietnamese Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs and the British Embassy in Vietnam on February 21 in Hanoi, both sides agreed to promote bilateral cooperation in vocational education.

The UK pledged to provide assistance in policies at the macro level through sharing lessons on promoting business participation in vocational education, in promoting digital technology in online training as well as in developing skills required in the fourth industrial revolution, and quality assurance and accreditation of vocational education. [Vietnam+]

## Announcements

### Upcoming Events

**27 February – 8 March 2023, CPG in cooperation with Hanns Seidel Foundation and Asian Governance Foundation, Thailand**

## CPG Online Academy on “German Public Law and the German Political and Constitutional System”

This online academy is an eight teaching-day certificate intensive course that introduces multiple topics and perspectives on German public law and its enforcement in state and society in Germany, such as the German Constitution’s foundation & fundaments, the design, powers, & performance of the Constitutional Court, basic rights, mechanisms & challenges of representative democracy, the rule of law, federalism and local (self-)governance, and legal methodology, court organization & case management.

See [CPG] to learn more about the event.

**22 February 2023 @ 3:00-4:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), USA**

## Book Launch: Information in War - Military Innovation, Battle Networks, and the Future of Artificial Intelligence

This online event will introduce to the book “Information in War - Military Innovation, Battle Networks, and the Future of Artificial Intelligence,” that offers a deeper understanding of the AI revolution by exploring the relationship between information, organizational dynamics, and military power.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

**22 February 2023 @ 9:30-11:30 a.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), USA**

## Promise and Peril: Migration Management Technologies in West Africa and Central America

This webinar will explore migration management technology in North Africa where the U.S. and Europe have increased their engagement with migration origin and transit countries, that include providing and supporting the deployment of sophisticated technology to understand, monitor, and influence the movement of people across borders.

Find more event details at [CSIS].

**22 February 2023 @ 9:15-10:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), USA**

### The Capital Cable #65: South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy

This online event will feature a conversation on South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy with Dr. Andrew Yeo, senior fellow and the SK-Korea Foundation Chair at the Brookings Institution's Center for East Asia Policy Studies.

More about the event at [CSIS].

**22 February 2023 @ 1:30-2:35 p.m. (GMT-5), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA**

### The Economic Costs of Russia's War Against Ukraine: Views from Kyiv's Expert Community

At this hybrid event, prominent economic experts from Kyiv will discuss economic effects of the war in Ukraine.

For more information, follow [Carnegie Endowment].

**22 February 2023 @ 3:00-4:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA**

### Can the World Bank Address Global Challenges?

This webinar will explore the prospect of reforms to the World Bank and its implications for development cooperation as cross-border challenges such as climate change, pandemic disease, and food and energy insecurity have put the World Bank under stress to reconceive how it can continue to pursue its twin goals of eradicating poverty and promoting shared prosperity.

Find more about the event at [Carnegie Endowment].

**24 February 2023 @ 11:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. (GMT-5), The Brookings Institution, USA**

## Meeting the Russia challenge: Lessons from the foreign policy transition from Bush to Obama

This hybrid event will feature a discussion on how the U.S. can be better prepared to meet the challenges posed by Russia, including an assessment of the history of bilateral U.S.-Russia relations and U.S. policy toward Russia going forward.

If you are interested, see [Brookings]

**27 February 2023 @ 10:00-11:30 a.m. (GMT+8), ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore**

## Two Years and Counting: What's Next for Myanmar in 2023?

This webinar will analyze the broader impacts of the ongoing crisis in Myanmar on the people, addressing the following questions: How much does Myanmar matter to the region and the world?; What are some ramifications of the continuing conflict to watch out for in 2023?; an whether 2023 may bring any change of course by the different stakeholders.

More events details are available at [ISEAS].

**28 February 2023 @ 1:00-3:00 p.m. (GMT-5), The Brookings Institution, USA**

## USMCA: Building more integrated, resilient, and secure North American supply chains

This webcast will provide insights into the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) that has an important role to play in realizing new funding to investments in developing semiconductors, electric vehicles, critical material, and clean energy across North America that have been provided with passage of the U.S. Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill, CHIPS and Science Act, and Inflation Reduction Act.

Visit [Brookings] to learn more about the event.

**22 February 2023 @ 11:00 a.m. - 12:30 p.m. (GMT), Chatham House, UK**

### How can Venezuela take advantage of its gold resources?

This online event will discuss ways how – in the wake of political evolutions in Venezuela – multi-stakeholder collective action can be initiated to bring the gold sector of the country in line with international standards and counter criminal exploitation of the country's gold supply chain.

More events details can be found at [Chatham House].

## Recent Book Releases

**Michael Genovese**, ***The Modern Presidency: Six Debates That Define the Institution***, Columbia University Press, 176 pages, published on September 20, 2022. For a review, see [LSE].

**Judith Beyer**, ***Rethinking Community in Myanmar: Practices of We-Formation among Muslims and Hindus in Urban Yangon***, NIAS Press, 368 pages, published on November 30, 2022, reviewed in [Asian Review of Books].

## Calls for Papers

The 6th edition of the **"Migration, Adaptation and Memory" International Interdisciplinary Conference**, to be held on June 15, 2023, invites paper proposals to be submitted by April 30, 2023. For more information, see [In Mind Support].

The **International Centre for Studies of Arts and Humanities (ICSAH)** invites paper proposals for its ***5th International Conference on Arts and Humanities*** to be held on May 8-9, 2023. The conference theme is "Women in religion: from spiritual leadership to female empowerment". Deadline for abstract submission is March 30, 2023. Find more details at [ICSAH].

## Jobs and positions

The **United Nations Development Programme** seeks a **Human Resource Associate** to be based in Kyrgyzstan. Core responsibility is to ensure effective administration of human resources and administer organization's HR strategy. Applications are accepted

until 7 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme** seeks a **Humanitarian Affairs Officer** to be based in Yemen. Core responsibility is to monitor, analyze, and report humanitarian development in the region. Applications are accepted until 7 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme** seeks an **Operations Assistant** to be based in Kyrgyzstan. Core responsibility is to ensure implementations of operations activities and contact with visitors and staff. Applications are accepted until 7 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme** seeks an **Office Assistant** to be based in Mali. Core responsibility is to provide administrative support to the organization. Applications are accepted until 7 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme** seeks a **Programme Analyst** to be based in Yemen. Core responsibility is to participate in the formulation of programmes and projects for the country. Applications are accepted until 5 march 2023. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **World Food Programme** seeks an **International Programme Policy Consultant** to be based in Sudan. Core responsibility is to develop fund proposals, concept notes, and position papers and act as a focal point in document-related matters. Applications are accepted until 7 march 2023. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme** seeks a **Programme Policy Officer** to be based in Jordan. Core responsibility is to lead the organization's work on social protection and provide technical assistance to stakeholders. Applications are accepted until 4 March 2023. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme** seeks a **Business Support Assistant** to be based in South Korea. Core responsibility is to coordinate, maintain, and manage director's schedule and contacts and draft and review related documents. Applications are accepted until 5 march 2023. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme** seeks a **Programme Policy Officer** to be based in Italy. Core responsibility is to lead the collaborative engagement with project management team and other colleagues. Applications

are accepted until 3 March 2023. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme** seeks a **Learning and Development Lead Consultant** to be based in Italy. Core responsibility is to contribute to the development and deployment of organization's framework and design evaluation metrics. Applications are accepted until 3 March 2023. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Health Organization** seeks a **Career Service Support Consultant** to be based in Denmark. Core responsibility is to conduct seminar and needs analysis for the organization. Applications are accepted until 7 March 2023. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **World Health Organization** seeks a **Biosecurity and Health Security Consultant**. Core responsibility is to attend and facilitate related meetings and contribute to the organization's management structure. Applications are accepted until 7 March 2023. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **World Health Organization** seeks a **Resource Mobilization Consultant**. Core responsibility is to review potential donors and create mapping analyses. Applications are accepted until 7 March 2023. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **World Health Organization** seeks a **Health Security Architecture Consultant** to be based in Denmark. Core responsibility is to support internal reporting system and contribute to the development of information-sharing system. Applications are accepted until 4 March 2023. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **World Health Organization** seeks a **Hub Coordinator**. Core responsibility is to lead and direct all aspects of sub-regional work in emergencies. Applications are accepted until 7 March 2023. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **United Nations Children's Fund** seeks a **Marketing Officer** to be based in Switzerland. Core responsibility is to develop and manage a yearly marketing plan. Applications are accepted until 6 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund** seeks a **Resource Mobilization Consultant**. Core responsibility is to participate in the writing of reports and contribute to managing the documents.

Applications are accepted until 1 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund** seeks a **Reports and Documentation Consultant** to be based in Bangladesh. Core responsibility is to producing documents and reports on related activities. Applications are accepted until 5 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund** seeks a **Programme Deputy Representative** to be based in Jamaica. Core responsibility is to contribute to the development and planning of programme and monitor the quality of related activities. Applications are accepted until 7 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund** seeks a **Risks and Compliance Specialist** to be based in Mali. Core responsibility is to leaf the office peer reviews process and oversee the office systems. Applications are accepted until 2 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Secretariat** seeks an **Associate Finance and Budget Officer**. Core responsibility is to review and analyze the finalization of cost estimates and budget proposals. Applications are accepted until 21 March 2023. More information is provided at [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariat** seeks a **Public Information Intern** to be based in the United States. Core responsibility is to support communication and outreach activities and assist the planning and organizing events. Applications are accepted until 24 March 2023. More information is provided at [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariat** seeks a **Political Affairs Intern** to be based in the United States. Core responsibility is to monitor and analyze key political and security developments in West Africa and Sahel. Applications are accepted until 3 March 2023. More information is provided at [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariat** seeks a **Political Affairs Officer** to be based in the United States. Core responsibility is to formulate recommendations for strategic guidance and draft documents and reports related to the organization’s field of work. Applications are accepted until 2 April 2023. More information is provided at [UN].

The **United Nations Secretariat** seeks a **Political Affairs Officer** to be based in Gabon. Core responsibility is to develop and maintain collaborative

relationship with related partners and support the operationalization of the regional working network. Applications are accepted until 2 March 2023. More information is provided at [UN].

The **International Rescue Committee** seeks a **Senior Integrated Protection Coordinator** to be based in Jordan. Core responsibility is to provide strategic direction and leadership for the programme and ensure effective partnership with partners. Applications are accepted until 20 March 2023. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee** seeks a **Research and Measurement Advisor** to be based in the United States. Core responsibility is to strengthen organizational data excellence and develop technical assistance resources. Applications are accepted until 17 April 2023. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee** seeks a **Social Adjustment Service Case Worker** to be based in the United States. Core responsibility is to develop service plans and assist clients with public benefit applications. Applications are accepted until 17 April 2023. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee** seeks a **Communications and Advocacy Coordinator** to be based in the United States. Core responsibility is to design and drive annual communications plan and provide topic analysis to leadership. Applications are accepted until 16 April 2023. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee** seeks a **Financial Coach** to be based in the United States. Core responsibility is to develop action plans and provide tools to help clients reach their goals. Applications are accepted until 16 April 2023. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **World Bank** seeks a **External Affairs Associate** to be based in Lebanon. Core responsibility is to develop create products and maintain an up-to-date media contacts. Applications are accepted until 20 March 2023. More information is provided at [WBG].

The **World Bank** seeks a **Communication Consultant** to be based in the Republic of Congo. Core responsibility is to support the country office to implement effective communications and outreach strategies. Applications are accepted until 13 March 2023. More information is provided at [WBG].

The **World Bank** seeks a **Senior IT Assistant** to be based in India. Core responsibility is to provide support for the managed services hardware and maintain hardware inventory of all PCs. Applications are accepted until 3 March 2023. More information is provided at [WBG].

The **World Bank** seeks a **Senior Accounting Assistant** to be based in India. Core responsibility is to conduct reviews of the World Bank group's administrative and capital expense transactions. Applications are accepted until 3 March 2023. More information is provided at [WBG].

The **World Bank** seeks a **Environmental Specialist** to be based in Nigeria. Core responsibility is to assess the project's potential environmental footprint and provide expert guidance and support for the related projects. Applications are accepted until 10 March 2023. More information is provided at [WBG].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization** seeks a **Legal Consultant**. Core responsibility is to plan, organize, and capture information from meetings and undertake further research on related matters. Applications are accepted until 14 March 2023. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization** seeks a **Economist** to be based in United Arab Emirates and India. Core responsibility is to review existing policies and strategies and provide technical inputs to the design of investment programmes. Applications are accepted until 4 march 2023. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization** seeks a **Senior Data Protection Officer** to be based in Italy. Core responsibility is to promote data protection culture in the organization. Applications are accepted until 10 March 2023. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization** seeks a **Senior Communication Officer** to be based in Italy. Core responsibility is to supervise staff and develop consultation training programmes. Applications are accepted until 10 March 2023. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization** seeks an **Engineer** to be based in Italy. Core responsibility is to assist the development, review, and approval of construction plans and manage engineering installations. Applications are accepted until 10 March 2023. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **Danish Refugee Council** seeks a **Support Services Manager** to be based in Turkey. Core responsibility is to ensure that planning for support services is done and ensure that they are fit for purpose. Applications are accepted until 5 March 2023. More information is provided at [DRC].

The **Danish Refugee Council** seeks a **Protection Specialist** to be based in Turkey. Core responsibility is to maintain up-to-date knowledge on related issues and lead on protection inputs in proposal development. Applications are accepted until 5 March 2023. More information is provided at [DRC].

The **Danish Refugee Council** seeks a **Protection Manager** to be based in Afghanistan. Core responsibility is to oversee the implementation of projects and ensure the implementation of protection guidance. Applications are accepted until 6 March 2023. More information is provided at [DRC].

The **Danish Refugee Council** seeks a **HR and Administrative Specialist** to be based in Turkey. Core responsibility is to support the recruitment process and lead the people well-being initiatives. Applications are accepted until 5 March 2023. More information is provided at [DRC].

The **Danish Refugee Council** seeks a **Head of Support Services** to be based in Yemen. Core responsibility is to lead and manage the support managers and ensure support for annual planning and review processes. Applications are accepted until 11 March 2023. More information is provided at [DRC].

The **International Organization for Migration** seeks a **Global Coordinator** to be based in Germany. Core responsibility is to lead the exploration and acquisition of data sources and coordinate the design and development of presentation products. Applications are accepted until 31 March 2023. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration** seeks a **Human Resource Officer** to be based in Libya. Core responsibility is to supervise and monitor the work of HR staff and maintain personnel files and attendance records. Applications are accepted until 1 March 2023. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration** seeks a **Policy and Legal Officer** to be based in Switzerland. Core responsibility is to produce accurate and comprehensive relevant documents and suggest changes to policies and tools to improve the organization's management. Applications are accepted

until 1 March 2023. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration** seeks a **HQ Security Advisor** to be based in Switzerland. Core responsibility is to assess security budget requirement and advise on security related elements. Applications are accepted until 1 March 2023. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration** seeks a **Regional Change Management** to be based in South Africa. Core responsibility is to facilitate on-going update and discussion with all stakeholders in the region report any risks and significant resistance to the operations. Applications are accepted until 2 March 2023. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services** seeks a **Programme Management Office Specialist** to be based in the Phillipines. Core responsibility is to provide programmatic management and administrative support to the organization. Applications are accepted until 6 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services** seeks a **Integrated Practice Advice and Support Manager** to be based in Denmark. Core responsibility is to support the operations of the country office and contribute to research on related issues. Applications are accepted until 13 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services** seeks a **Health, Safety, and Environmental and Social Safeguards Specialist** to be based in Yemen. Core responsibility is to supervise the work of the risk management officer. Applications are accepted until 6 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services** seeks a **Country Office Director** to be based in Honduras. Core responsibility is to contribute to the alliance building process and oversee the administration of the country office. Applications are accepted until 19 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services** seeks a **ICT Manager** to be based in the United States. Core responsibility is to create the roadmap of data and AI products and guide the design of cloud-based data access and processing platform. Applications are accepted until 3 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **United Nations Environment Programme** seeks a **Regional Coordinator** to be based in Lebanon. Core responsibility is to participate in the development, implementation, and evaluation of the related programmes. Applications are accepted until 5 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNEP].

The **United Nations Environment Programme** seeks a **Associate Programme Management Officer** to be based in Kenya. Core responsibility is to work with key clients in facilitating development of related programmes. Applications are accepted until 21 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNEP].

The **United Nations Environment Programme** seeks a **Special Administrative Assistant** to be based in Kenya. Core responsibility is to systematize organization's planning process and oversee the policy development. Applications are accepted until 3 April 2023. More information is provided at [UNEP].

The **United Nations Environment Programme** seeks an **Expert in Biodiversity and Heavy metal Pollution** to be based in Switzerland. Core responsibility is to review relevant documents and finalize report on the basis required by the Secretariat. Applications are accepted until 5 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNEP].

The **United Nations Environment Programme** seeks a **Administrative Assistant** to be based in Switzerland. Core responsibility is to initiate, process, monitor, review, and follow-up on actions related to the organization's HR department. Applications are accepted until 17 March 2023. More information is provided at [UNEP].

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**Team:**

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