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Asia in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to this week's issue of the Asia in Review (AIR) covering 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 Moldova's, Ukraine's and Uruguay's Independence Day this week.

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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Main Sections

- Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in East Asia
- Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in South Asia
- Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in Southeast Asia
- International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia
- Announcements

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

China: Suspension of youth unemployment reporting

(ms) In its monthly economic report, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) announced an indefinite suspension of the publication of youth unemployment statistics, which, together with the generally disappointing economic figures, paints a rather discouraging outlook for the hoped-for recovery of the Chinese economy.

Youth unemployment is one of the major challenges of the Chinese economy, which at 21.3 percent in June reported the highest figures since the beginning of data measurement [see AiR No. 29, July/2023, 3]. The announced suspension of publication youth unemployment data is indicative of the challenges continuing to grow.

The NBS justified the move with the fact that the measuring methods would need to be "further

improved and optimized", but this is seen as an attempt to hide the continuing downward trend. Not only is the high youth unemployment rate accompanied by the obvious problem of a lack of job opportunities for the 16-24 demographic stratum, but it also signals a lack of ability to absorb new labor, indicating an oversaturation or weakening of the Chinese economy. [South China Morning Post 1]

However, even apart from youth unemployment, the economic report for July is rather disappointing. As in previous months, the Chinese economy again lags behind expectations in almost all key economic data. Retail sales rose only 2.5 percent in July compared to the same month last year, far below expectations of a 4.5 percent increase. Industrial production rose 3.7 percent in July year-on-year, also below analysts' expectations of a 4.4 percent increase, which could be a reaction to U.S. and European central banks raising interest rates to cool inflation. Additionally, exports fell 14.5 percent year-over-year in July, following a 12.4 percent decline in June. [Associated Press] [National Bureau of Statistics of China] [South China Morning Post 2]

In response, several investment banks lowered China's economic growth forecasts for both this year and next. JPMorgan's lowered its 2023 GDP growth forecast to 4.8 percent year-on-year from 6.4 percent. Barclays Plc even lowered it to 4.5 percent from its previous expected 4.9 percent. [Bloomberg]

China: Premier Li Qiang commits to economic targets, despite disappointing performance

(ms) In the context of renewed weak economic figures (see entry above), China's Premier Li Qiang again committed to the economic targets set at the beginning of the year, above all to an economic growth of "around 5 percent", and implied further political measures to achieve these targets, without, however, going into more detail.

Li's announcements stemmed from the State Council meeting held on August 16, the first at least public meeting after the Beidaihe leadership retreat, the annual summer break of high-ranking party officials in the eponymous resort in Beidaihe, where, in addition to vacations, the goals and tactics for the rest of the year but also already for the next year are discussed [see AiR No. 32, August/2023, 2].

To reach the economic goals Li put the focus on the strengthening of the national consumer behavior, as well as the strengthening of foreign investments, which is rather restrained due to the missing rebound of the Chinese economy after three years of Zero-COVID. In addition, Li announced a new series of reforms to support state-owned enterprises, but also the "development environment" for the private sector of the country is to be promoted more strongly. However, precise details of the planned measures were not provided. [South China Morning Post 1] [Xinhua]

Almost simultaneously with the meeting, a speech by President Xi Jinping from February of this year was published, in which he pleads for "patience" in the face of the weak economic figures. In addition, Xi notes in the speech, one must always consider the size of the Chinese population when considering and evaluating the Chinese economy: "A super big population can provide sufficient manpower and a super big domestic market, but it also brings about a series of difficulties and challenges" Xi says in the speech.

Even if the speech is already about half a year old, the publication of such speeches is a recurring tool of the Chinese government to underpin current developments or to justify them in the context of weak economic figures. Like Li's statements, Xi remains very vague and restricts himself to very general objectives from which no concrete policies can be derived when formulating possible solutions. [South China Morning Post 2]

China: Security agency announces arrests of two suspected of spying for CIA

(ms) The Ministry of State Security (MSS), China's top anti-espionage body, announced on August 21 the second arrest of an alleged spy working for the U.S. foreign intelligence agency CIA, after the first case was reported on August 10 [see AiR No. 33, August/2023, 3]

Until then, such arrests were kept under wraps by China and were not disclosed to the public, but two public disclosures in such short succession indicate that there has been a change of thinking within the Chinese strategy in this regard.

The starting point for this could be China's new anti-espionage law, which came into force at the beginning of July and significantly expanded the competence of the security authorities but also the scope of the criminal offense of espionage (see AiR No. 23, June/2023, 1; AiR No. 18, May/2023, 1). Based on this,

the MSS launched a new high-profile anti-espionage offensive, which in early August attempted to mobilize the population to support it in the fight against espionage by encouraging them to report suspicious behavior of their fellow citizens (see AiR No. 32, August/2023, 2).

Little is known about the two individuals arrested on suspicion of espionage. The person arrested on August 10 is said to be an employee of a Chinese defense company who was recruited by the CIA in the course of completing training in Italy in return for payment and support him and his family to immigrate to the U.S. He was said to have passed on military secrets to the US. [Financial Times] [Reuters]

In the second case, the individual is alleged to have been recruited during training in Japan. After returning to China and being employed by an undefined Chinese government agency, the individual allegedly passed sensitive information to the US. [South China Morning Post]

China: Xi calls for acceleration of post-flood reconstruction process

(ms) During his first appearance after the two-week summer break, President Xi Jinping praised the post-flood reconstruction efforts that have taken place so far during a meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee on August 17, but also called for a further acceleration of the processes.

The record flooding that hit large parts of the northeast of the country in the wake of Typhoon Doksuri, claiming the lives of more than 30 people, has caused great damage to the infrastructure of the affected provinces.

With the coming winter in mind, Xi stressed the importance of quickly restoring infrastructure to ensure the well-being of affected citizens with the onset of cold weather. In addition to infrastructure, Xi also stressed the importance of restoring the affected agricultural land to continue to ensure the important goal of food security.

To achieve these goals, XI urged local governments to make good use of the disaster relief funds provided. The extent to which the latter is actually carried out is, however, doubted by the Chinese population. They fear that, as in the 2021 flood disaster in Henan, there could again be misuse of the funds by local governments, a problem and concern, which was not

further addressed by the Chinese government. [South China Morning Post 1] [South China Morning Post 2]

China: All app providers are required to disclose business information

(ms) The Chinese Ministry of Industry Information Technology has recently imposed new regulations requiring all apps operating within its borders to disclose extensive business information, including ownership, funding sources, data handling practices, and user protections. Aims to bolster oversight and data security in the country's tech sector.

However, these regulations have triggered concerns especially among smaller, independent app developers in China. They fear that the demanding registration process could obstruct local innovation and potentially benefit larger tech corporations with greater resources. The registration requirements could pose financial and logistical challenges that might disproportionately affect smaller developers, potentially leading to an industry landscape skewed towards established players. There are also apprehensions that the intricate regulatory environment might discourage international investment in China's tech sector. [Reuters] [South China Morning Post]

China: 'Huge breakthrough' in laser technology

(ms) According to scientists from the National University of Defense Technology in Changsha, located in the eastern province of Hunan, a technological breakthrough has been achieved that enables high-performance lasers to operate “indefinitely.”

Responsible for this breakthrough is a new cooling system that can counteract the heat generated during the use of such lasers, which previously allowed only short activations of such lasers to prevent overheating. According to the scientists, this cooling system would significantly expand the laser's range of applications, including military purposes. The improved cooling would not only allow for longer and more flexible usage but also considerably increase the range of laser weapons due to extended activation periods." [Bejing Times] [The Defense Post]

Japan: Shinzo Abe's LDP faction appoints new leader

(ed) The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)'s largest faction, once headed by the assassinated Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, appointed a new leader on August 17.

The faction unanimously chose a senior lawmaker, Ryu Shionoya, to serve as the faction's new chairman, more than a year after Shinzo Abe was assassinated in 2022. The Seiwakai faction rushed to fill the vacant position amid rumors of the Prime Minister Fumio Kishida carrying out a cabinet reshuffle in September. The faction also agreed to set up a new executive body.

During the long period in which the LDP has dominated Japan's politics, the Seiwakai faction has played an important role in decision making processes and making appointments to roles. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Kishida announces Fukushima wastewater release will begin August 24

(ed) Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has announced that his government will begin the release of treated radioactive wastewater from Fukushima nuclear power plant into the Pacific Ocean on August 24.

On August 20, Kishida visited Fukushima to inspect preparations for the imminent water release of diluted wastewater. At a government meeting on August 22, Kishida instructed the release to go ahead, promising that the "the government will take full responsibility [for the release], even if it takes decades". [NHK] [Kyodo News]

The Fukushima nuclear power plant was crippled by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Disposal of the 1.3 million tons of wastewater currently being stored in the site is necessary before the plant can be decommissioned.

The plan to release the wastewater has been harshly criticized in Japan and in neighboring countries, particularly China and South Korea. Local fishermen also remain stalwartly opposed to the release, fearing for the project's safety and the consequent reputational damage.

However, observers including the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have approved the safety of the plan. The radioactive wastewater has been diluted to

1/40th of the concentration of radionuclides permitted under Japanese safety standards, which scientists and authorities say will have a minimal effect on human and environmental health.

On August 21, Prime Minister Kishida met with representatives of the fishing industry to pledge the government's support to protecting the industry's domestic and international reputation until the end of the release. However, the head of the National Federation of Fisheries Cooperatives maintained his group's opposition to the release, despite welcoming the government's support. [AP] [Reuters]

Japan: Government approval rating falls to 33 percent

(ed) According to a poll by Asahi Shimbun, the approval rating of the Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's cabinet declined for the third consecutive month, reaching its second-lowest level of 33 percent. Meanwhile, the government's disapproval rating rose to 54 percent.

Despite the government's declining popularity, the approval rate for the wider ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) remained constant at 28 percent.

The government and LDP have been beset by multiple scandals and mishaps over the past few months. 79 percent of respondents believed that Kishida had not shown leadership over the mishandling of the new My Number identification system, which had caused concerns about the safety of members of the public's private information due to multiple incorrectly assigned IDs. Moreover, allegations of bribery have emerged between an LDP lawmaker and a wind farm company, further souring the public mood. [Asahi Shimbun]

Mongolia: Increase in tax revenue from the tourism sector, country prepares for winter tourism

(tb) In the first half of 2023, the tax revenue from the tourism sector increased compared to the same period of the last three years. Additionally, the Prime Minister Mr. Oyun Erdene Luvsannamsrai assigned the necessary task to the National Committee on Development on Tourism to prepare the concepts and strategies for winter tourism.

The authorities have designated the tourism industry as a key focus of the economy and declared the period from 2023 to 2025 as the designated "Visit Mongolia Years." During this timeframe, the goal is to attract a substantial number of tourists, specifically aiming for a count of "one million" visitors. To date, over 390,000 tourists have already journeyed to Mongolia this year.

The Prime Minister, along with heading the National Committee on Tourism Development, has instructed officials to undertake assessments to resolve the matter of sanitation facilities comprehensively. This directive also includes conducting research into well-regarded international consulting firms specializing in the tourism industry.

Additionally, the importance of gradual growth within the tourism sector was emphasized, achieved through collaborations between the public and private sectors. [Montsame 1][Montsame 2]

Mongolia: Cabinet Decisions

(tb) In a regular session on August 16, the cabinet decided about land possession, the head of a national committee, and an update on the “Glass” operation was given.

No decision regarding land possession or utilization in Ulaanbaatar will be made until the legal framework is revised. The Government approved a resolution outlining actions related to disaster prevention, relief, urban planning, and land management in Ulaanbaatar. The resolution includes developing drafts for the Land Package Law and related legislation to ensure a balance between safety, public interests, environment, and development in Ulaanbaatar. These drafts will be submitted for discussion in the 2023 Autumn Session of the State Great Khural, the Mongolian parliament.

The National Committee for Urban and Rural Revitalization, Regional Development, Urban Planning, and Land Management will be led by the Prime Minister. The Cabinet has decided to form the National Committee with the aim of addressing issues related to buildings and structures that do not align with the standards of urban-rural revitalization, regional development, and urban planning outlined in the "New Revival Policy." [Aki Press] [Montsame]

The “New Revival Policy” was ratified by the parliament in 2021 and seeks to ensure post-Covid political and macroeconomic stability, accelerate public-private partnerships, create a favorable business environment,

further open up the state to foreign and domestic investment, and implement fiscal reforms.

North Korea: Advanced secure communication device tested

(tms) North Korea is reportedly conducting tests on a novel secure communication device with advanced signal-altering capabilities at the Fourth Corps, a military unit situated along the border adjacent to South Korea.

An anonymous source of the North Korean military disclosed that teams from various departments have been present at the Fourth Corps since July 10 and engaged in trial communications for the purpose of deploying the domestically developed '1030' secure communication devices, including wireless gadgets designed to encrypt transmission signals, rendering messages incomprehensible to unauthorized interceptors.

The ongoing tests of the 1030 device at the Fourth Corps reveal enhanced frequency hopping capabilities compared to the earlier 1018 and 1028 models, enabling more efficient alteration of transmission signals.

After two months of testing, the General Staff Department plans to deploy the 1030 device in major communication networks at the Fourth Corps' headquarters, including those used by the Supreme Command, General Staff Department, and corps' staff department. [Daily NK]

North Korea: Recipients of newly built homes face labor camp threat

(tms) Residents of newly constructed rural homes in North Hwanghae Province are being warned by the provincial committee to move into their homes by early September or face the threat of being sent to disciplinary labor centers.

Many of these homes remain unoccupied due to inadequate sewage facilities, and residents are being forced to move in before necessary repairs are completed.

The rush to meet a deadline set for the 75th Day of the Foundation of the Republic is reportedly causing

discontent among residents who are being compelled to move into substandard living conditions. [Daily NK]

North Korea: Increasing hardships drive North Koreans to revive ancestral rites as source of hope

(tms) Amidst mounting psychological distress caused by severe challenges, including the ongoing pandemic, North Koreans are turning to ancestral rites in growing numbers, according to sources.

Recent reports reveal that people are seeking solace and protection from misfortune through these traditional practices, even if it means sacrificing meals. The revival of ancestral rites is driven by a range of difficulties, such as facing security interrogations, enduring criticism from neighborhood leaders, and grappling with harsh labor sentences.

Shamans are being consulted for fortune-telling, while individuals are making earnest efforts to reconnect with their ancestral practices, believing that honoring their forebears can bring prosperity and relief from adversity. [Daily NK]

North Korea enhances quarantine measures at China borders

(tms) The North Korean authorities have intensified quarantine measures and restrictions on local residents amid a rise in cases of fever and respiratory distress in border regions near China.

Sources in North Pyongan Province and Chagang Province have revealed that the State Emergency Epidemic Prevention Headquarters ordered enhanced quarantine efforts starting August 1.

The North Korean government reinstated mask mandates and shortened market operating hours towards the end of July in preparation for the Victory Day holiday on July 27. Subsequently, even stricter quarantine measures were implemented, including home quarantines for entire households if one member develops fever symptoms.

The authorities have also established temporary quarantine checkpoints for monitoring mask compliance and conducting temperature checks. [Daily NK]

South Korea: President Yoon stresses unity and international cooperation in Liberation Day address

(tms) President Yoon Suk Yeol reflected on the nation's journey toward freedom, unity, and global responsibility in his speech on South Korea's 78th Liberation Day.

Paying tribute to those who sacrificed for independence, Yoon emphasized the significance of a nation grounded in democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

Yoon underscored the universal and just nature of South Korea's independence movement, emphasizing the values of freedom and democratic governance and encouraged the proper remembrance of those who defended these principles.

Drawing parallels between South Korea's remarkable progress and North Korea's continued totalitarian rule, Yoon urged vigilance against forces promoting communist totalitarianism.

Highlighting partnerships that uphold universal values, Yoon stressed the significance of the ROK-US alliance and cooperative ties with Japan. He envisioned South Korea and Japan as partners sharing common interests and contributing to global peace and prosperity through security and economic cooperation (see separate article in the IR section of this edition).

On the education front, Yoon expressed the importance of discipline in classrooms and the respect for educators' authority, advocating for a well-rounded education system.

In closing, Yoon urged fellow Koreans to embrace their historic mandate of contributing to global freedom, peace, and prosperity. [Office of the President. South Korea] [Yonhap]

South Korea: Government introduces five-year strategy to attract international students

(tms) The Ministry of Education has introduced a comprehensive five-year strategy aimed at enticing 300,000 international students to counteract the country's declining school-age population and to

bolster the competitiveness of local universities facing enrollment challenges.

To draw more foreign students to Korean universities, the plan involves revising the International Education Quality Assurance System's requirements related to language proficiency. The initiative will collaborate with the Culture Ministry to meet the growing demand for Korean language instruction.

The plan will be facilitated through the fully funded Global Korea Scholarship program, which will offer financial support to international students pursuing science and engineering studies. A fast-track visa system will be created to ease entry for science and tech experts, with options for quicker residency or citizenship.

The plan also emphasizes strengthening trilateral cooperation among South Korea, the US, and Japan to facilitate diverse youth exchanges and study abroad programs. [Korea Herald]

South Korea: Government to streamline handling of foreigners' personal information

(tms) The South Korean government is taking steps to address disparities in the management of personal information for foreigners, including overseas Koreans, across various government departments.

The proposed revision to the Immigration Act, recently approved at a Cabinet meeting, is expected to facilitate smoother administrative processes related to foreign residents, encompassing areas such as law enforcement, taxation, disease control, and welfare assistance.

The Ministry of Justice noted that the lack of standardized guidelines for recording personal information, including names, gender, date of birth, nationality, and passport numbers, led to administrative challenges. Inconsistencies in how government entities structured foreigner names – such as surname and given name order, language choices, and spacing – caused confusion and errors in official records.

Likewise, variations in the arrangement of foreigners' birthdates, based on different countries of origin and registering government agencies, also contributed to discrepancies.

The Ministry of Justice plans to introduce unified guidelines aligned with the International Civil Aviation Organization's standards for registering foreigners' personal information.

Since March, the Ministry has been developing a comprehensive cross-governmental system to manage foreigners' personal information, aiming for completion by November. Following Cabinet approval, the revised bill will move to the National Assembly for consideration, with specific advancement dates yet to be disclosed by the Justice Ministry. [Korea Herald]

South Korea: Government, ruling party align to revise anti-graft law

(tms) The government and the ruling People Power Party (PPP) have reached an agreement to pursue amendments to an anti-corruption law, aiming to relax restrictions on the value of gifts and meals that can be offered to public officials and certain professionals.

Enacted in 2016, the Improper Solicitation and Graft Act, popularly known as the Kim Young-ran law after a former Supreme Court justice, currently imposes limitations on the acceptance of meals and gifts beyond specific price thresholds by public officials, educators, journalists, and others in designated roles.

The proposed revisions entail several changes, as explained by Rep. Park Dae-chul, the PPP's chief policy maker. The cap on agricultural and livestock products' value will be raised from the existing 100,000 won (approximately USD 75) to 200,000 won. Additionally, the upper limit for gifts during significant holiday seasons, such as the upcoming Chuseok holiday, will be elevated from 200,000 won to 300,000 won.

The Anti-Corruption & Civil Rights Commission, tasked with supervising this matter, is anticipated to announce the adjusted price limits ahead of the late September holiday season.

Both parties also reached consensus on adding mobile gift vouchers and concert tickets to the list of banned gifts under the law. [Yonhap 1]

However, the government and the PPP did not address the potential adjustment of the current KRW 30,000 (approx. 22 USD) limit on food prices, which might range from KRW 50,000 to 100,000. [Yonhap 2]

South Korea: Police raid defense agency for corruption allegations

(tms) Authorities conducted a search at the headquarters of the Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) as part of an investigation into potential corruption linked to the selection of Hyundai Heavy Industries Co. as the preferred bidder for a native Aegis-equipped destroyer development project in 2020.

The search targeted the DAPA division responsible for the Korea Destroyer Next Generation (KDDX) project, an initiative to construct the next-generation 6,000 ton-class destroyer.

During the operation, documents pertaining to the KDDX bidding process were reportedly seized. The suspicion centers on allegations that a senior DAPA official altered bidding-related regulations in favor of Hyundai Heavy.

Hyundai Heavy won the competitive bidding with a slim 0.056-point lead over rival Daewoo Shipbuilding & Marine Engineering. Investigators believe a DAPA official might have eliminated a regulation penalizing bidders linked to security breaches. Hyundai Heavy's past involvement in a KDDX secret leak case adds to suspicions."

The DAPA had previously refuted these allegations, asserting that the specific bidding regulation in question had not been eliminated. [Yonhap]

South Korea: Former special counsel Park indicted for bribery scandal

(tms) Former special counsel Park Young-soo has been indicted on bribery charges related to a high-profile property development scandal.

The charges stem from allegations that Park received a total of KRW 1.9 billion (approx. USD 1.4 million) from private developers in exchange for his assistance in securing the Daejang-dong project, including KRW 800 million he purportedly accepted during his tenure as the chair of the Woori Bank board of directors between 2014 and 2015.

The Daejang-dong project involved the transformation of a district in Seongnam into apartment complexes, generating substantial profits for the private developers' company, Hwacheon Daeyu.

Additionally, prosecutors suspect that Park received an additional KRW 1.1 billion from 2019 to 2021 in the form of a loan to his daughter. This loan was allegedly offered as part of a promise of KRW 20 billion in total, intended to influence Park's actions in favor of the developers.

Woori Bank initially contemplated investing in the private developers' consortium for the project but withdrew. Instead, the bank issued a letter of intent to provide a loan to the developers.

The Seoul Central District Prosecutors Office has brought charges of bribery and graft against Park and has indicted him under physical detention. He is also among the figures associated with the "5 billion club," allegedly promised KRW 5 billion each by asset management firm Hwacheon Daeyu alongside former ruling party lawmaker Kwak Sang-do and former Prosecutor General Kim Soo-nam. [Yonhap]

South Korea: President Yoon to replace industry minister

(tms) President Yoon Suk Yeol is reportedly planning to replace the current Minister of Trade, Industry, and Energy, Lee Chang-yang, with Bang Moon-kyu, the current Minister of Government Policy Coordination.

Bang Moon-kyu, a seasoned career public servant, brings a wealth of experience in various domains including finance, agriculture, and health ministries. Notably, he previously led the state-owned Export-Import Bank of Korea from 2019 to 2022.

Among the potential candidates for the newly vacated position of Minister of Government Policy Coordination, Bang Ki-sun, the First Vice Finance Minister, is reportedly considered one of the leading contenders. [Yonhap]

South Korea announces new unmanned aircraft and submarine upgrades

(cx) On August 18, South Korea’s defense authorities confirmed plans to mass produce medium-altitude unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) through 2028 to bolster the Air Force's surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities.

According to the Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA), this plan is part of South

Korea's USD 732 million development project for unmanned aircraft, which first began in 2006. DAPA expects the aircraft will allow South Korea to perform reconnaissance missions and gather intelligence deep inside North Korea.

The Defense Project Promotion Committee also approved performance upgrades for the Navy's 1,800-ton KSS-II submarines by replacing their aging combat and sonar systems with the latest homegrown equipment. The project is set to run from 2025 to 2036 and will enhance the submarines' survivability and deterrence capabilities against potential threats. [Yonhap]

South Korea begins four-day Ulchi civil defense drill nationwide on Monday

(cx) The annual Ulchi civil defense exercise kicked off on August 21 for a four-day run nationwide. It coincides with a joint military exercise between South Korea and the US.

The Ulchi exercise was launched in 1969 following a raid by North Korean commandos on the presidential residence in Seoul, it assesses the countries readiness through a national total war exercise. This year, around 580,000 officials from about 4,000 city, county, ward governments and public institutions will participate in the exercise to assess and enhance their readiness for war and other contingencies.

This year's exercise includes drills to respond to North Korean nuclear, drone, and cyber threats. The drills will also include emergency call-ups of civil servants, transitions to wartime administrative modes, exercises to counter terror threats against major national institutions, and training to counter "soft terror" targeting civilians such as cyberthreats.

On Wednesday, an anti-air raid civil defense drill will be conducted nationwide for the time since 2017. The 20-minute drill is set for 2 p.m. The drill will consist of civil evacuation training and traffic restrictions in an air raid attack scenario. [Yonhap][Ministry of the Interior and Safety, South Korea]

Taiwan: Presidential frontrunner rules out changing country's official name

(ed) Taiwan's vice president and current frontrunner in the upcoming presidential election, Lai Ching-te, has

ruled out changing the country's formal name from the Republic of China to Taiwan.

In previous comments, Lai has called himself a "practical worker for Taiwan independence". However, in an interview on August 15, Lai stated that "Taiwan is already a sovereign, independent country called the Republic of China. It is not part of the People's Republic of China".

According to Lai, the constitutional name of the country is the Republic of China, and he drew on current President Tsai Ing-wen's frequent use of the name of the Republic of China (Taiwan) to emphasize how the name can be compatible with Taiwan as a sovereign, already-independent country.

Although Lai has indicated he supports Taiwanese independence, any move towards independence is a red line for China, which claims Taiwan as its own territory and views it as a renegade province. [Reuters]

Taiwan: KMT presidential candidate returns to second place in election polling, DPP stays in lead

(ed) The Kuomintang (KMT) presidential candidate Hou You-yi has overtaken the Taiwan People Party (TPP) candidate Ko Wen-je to take second place in the polling for the upcoming election. The ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Lai Ching-te remains in first place.

According to a poll released on August 17, Lai remains the clear favorite to win the election, with his support remaining stable at 35.7 percent. Hou's support rose from 19.9 percent to 21.9 percent. Meanwhile, Ko Wen-je's support declined from 24 percent to 21.7 percent.

While Lai leads polling in all localities, support for the two other candidates varies regionally. Hou's support was 11 percent higher in New Taipei City, where he currently serves as mayor, and was also high in Kaohsiung and Pingtung. However, Ko had higher support in surrounding localities than Hou.

Demographically, young people's support for Ko Wen-je was the highest, with Lai in second place and Hou in last. Frontrunner Lai received the most support from older voters, with a support rate of around 45 percent. [My Formosa] [Taiwan News]

During the presidential election, a first-past-the-post system is used, whereby a candidate wins with only a

simple majority. The opposition fears that the DPP cannot be unseated with the pan-blue vote split between multiple candidates.

Moreover, business tycoon Terry Gou is viewed as a potential independent candidate for the presidency and has not yet ruled out a run. On August 18, Gou called on the two main opposition candidates to cooperate with him in order to defeat the DPP and push for Taiwan's democratic development.

Gou stated that the DPP is out of touch with mainstream political opinion, which favors cross-strait peace, economic prosperity and clean politics. Gou and other opposition candidates believe that the DPP pushes for independence and inflames tensions with neighboring China. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Two charged with forming spy ring for China

(ed) On August 18, two men were indicted on charges of corruption and offences to national security by accepting money from China to form an espionage ring in Taiwan.

The two men included a businessman and a retired army staff sergeant. They have been accused of working with Chinese security services to recruit serving members of Taiwan's armed forces to pass on intelligence to China.

Prosecutors allege that the retired army sergeant established contact with the Chinese People's Armed Police, who then recruited the businessman, who was also vice president of the Taipei Special Amusement Activities Workers Union, which represents nightclubs and other adult entertainment. The businessman exploited his relations with members of the military to arrange confidential meetings.

The two men allegedly arranged a meeting with a major general of the Army's Kinmen Defense Command, taking a photo with him to prove to Chinese authorities that they had links with high-ranking military officers. In 2019, they offered money to a major within the Penghu Defense Command in exchange for classified military intelligence. Later, the retired sergeant tried to recruit a Taiwanese businessman in Vietnam to spy for China.

The two men form part of the growing list of people associated with the Taiwanese military who have been

charged on suspicion of spying for China. [Focus Taiwan] [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Government proposes largest ever military budget

(ed) The government of Taiwan has proposed increasing 2024's annual military budget to a record NTD 606.8 billion (USD 19 billion), an increase of 3.65 percent.

The proposed budget increase was presented to President Tsai Ing-wen by the cabinet, which would increase government spending by 7 percent to NTD 2.822 trillion (USD 88.36 billion). According to the president, the budget will mainly go to covering social welfare, with NTD 120.1 billion (USD 3.76 billion) going towards combating Taiwan's low birth rate.

The increased military budget would bring military spending to 2.5 percent of the country's GDP. This large increase comes as China announced a similarly large 7.2 percent increase in its defense spending for next year's budget.

The 2024 budget will be the last of Tsai Ing-wen's presidency and must be first approved by the Cabinet and the Legislature. [Focus Taiwan]

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

Bangladesh: Jatiya Party faces potential split ahead of upcoming elections

(tms/lm) The Jatiya Party, the largest opposition party in Bangladesh's Parliament, is facing a potential split ahead of the country's upcoming national elections due to differing viewpoints among party leaders regarding participation in the election. [Daily Sun]

According to party insiders, a faction led by Jatiya Party Chairman GM Quader aims to boycott the election under the current Awami League government and initiate an anti-government movement. On the other hand, another faction led by party chief patron Raushon Ershad seeks to contest the election within the existing government.

Notably, Ershad visited Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at her official residence on August 19 to discuss the current political situation and the upcoming general elections. The prime minister expressed gratitude for Jatiya Party's positive contribution to parliamentary democracy, and the responsible role of other opposition parties in strengthening constitutional government was also a point of conversation. [Dhaka Tribune]

The relationship between the Jatiya Party and the Awami League has been complex, influenced by political dynamics, alliances, and the evolving interests of the parties involved. A month after the elections in December 2018, the Jatiya Party announced its decision to join the Awami League-led "Grand Alliance" after having been in opposition for the previous parliamentary term. However, the party backtracked shortly thereafter and announced that it intended to remain part of the opposition.

Bangladesh: Call for restoration of caretaker government "illegal and unconstitutional", international election observer says

(tms/lm) Terry L Easley, a US citizen that visited Bangladesh in July as part of a six-member delegation to observe the pre-election situation in the country, has declared the demand for the restoration of the caretaker government system as "illegal and unconstitutional." Easley noted that challenges exist in reviving the caretaker government system, citing the absence of a legal framework, lack of political will, a short timeline, and the potential for election results to

be overturned. He also said that calls by some for a United Nations intervention to administer the South Asian nation's upcoming national election is "realistically not feasible." [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Foreign Minister guides diplomatic missions to counter pre-election propaganda

(tms) Bangladesh's Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen has instructed the country's diplomatic missions to proactively address and counteract any propaganda against the South Asian nations and its government leading up to the upcoming national election. [UNB]

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs aims to take measures against misinformation and disinformation by working closely with host countries, particularly focusing on key locations such as London, Brussels, and Washington, D.C. A committee composed of the Information, Law, and Foreign Affairs ministries is collaborating on this effort.

Additionally, a specialized cell has been established to facilitate foreign observers for the forthcoming parliamentary election.

Bangladesh: Hundreds injured after police clash with opposition BNP activists

(tms/lm) Clashes in northeastern Bangladesh between law enforcement authorities and supporters of the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led to approximately 300 individuals sustaining injuries, including gunshot wounds, amidst an ongoing political disagreement concerning the entity responsible for overseeing the upcoming election. [Al Jazeera]

Police attempted to control the situation using batons and tear gas after opposition activists allegedly attacked them while attempting to break through a police barricade. [The Daily Star] [UNB]

Bangladesh: 1 killed, 100 injured as police clash with religious party supporters

(lm) In multiple locations throughout Bangladesh on August 15, clashes between police and activists from

Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat), the country's largest Islamist political party, resulted in the death of at least one activist and injuries to more than 100 others. The protests had erupted after law enforcement authorities intervened to prevent a funeral prayer in absentia for the party's late vice president, Delawar Hossain Sayedee. [Anadolu Ajansı 1]

Police in Bangladesh's capital Dhaka lodged cases against more than 5,000 Jamaat supporters, including the son of late Sayedee and three other central Jamaat leaders, on charges of attacking police and disrupting law and order. [Anadolu Ajansı 2]

Sayedee, who was convicted of war crimes and was in jail for the last 13 years, died in custody at a hospital last week after suffering from cardiac arrest [see AiR No. 33, August/2023, 3]. His party later alleged that he died due to lack of medical treatment in jail – charges that were denied by the hospital.

Bangladesh: At least 28 leaders of ruling party's youth wing expelled for mourning death of Jamaat leader

(lm) At least 28 leaders of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, the youth wing of the country's ruling Awami League, have been expelled from the organization due to their social media condolences for the death of Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, the vice president of the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party who had passed away earlier this month after suffering from cardiac arrest [see AiR No. 33, August/2023, 3]. [Dhaka Tribune]

In 2013, the International Crimes Tribunal, a domestic war crimes tribunal in Bangladesh set up in 2009, found Sayeedi guilty of charges including murder, rape and torture during the war of independence in 1971.

Bangladesh: Five sentenced to seven years in plot to kill prime minister's son in United States

(tms) A court in Bangladesh has handed down convictions and seven-year prison sentences to five individuals, including a well-known journalist and a former energy advisor to two-times prime minister Khaleda Zia, in a case pertaining to the planned abduction and assassination of Sajeeb Wazed, the son of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. All convicts have also

been fined approx. USD 90; failing to pay the fine will result in an additional month of imprisonment. [The Daily Star]

As per the complaint, Mamun and several high-ranking members of Bangladesh's main opposition BNP party and its affiliates held meetings in various countries to plan the abduction and murder of Joy before September 2012.

The case was initiated in August 2015, after a complaint was filed by the Detective Branch (DB) of the police at Paltan Police Station. The prosecution concluded its arguments and the court recorded statements from 12 prosecution witnesses, including Wazed. Shafik Rehman and Mahmudur Rahman were granted bail by higher courts at different times during the case's proceedings, but they chose to leave the country to evade trial.

Bangladesh: Supreme Court dismisses Nobel laureate's appeal against labor court verdict

(tms) The Appellate Division of Bangladesh's Supreme Court has rejected a leave to appeal petition filed by Muhammad Yunus, a social entrepreneur and Nobel laureate, challenging a High Court ruling that had dismissed his petition against a labor court's indictment order. [Daily Sun]

The case revolves around charges filed by the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) against Yunus and three others for violations of labor laws, including not regularizing staff and failing to establish a welfare fund for laborers.

Bangladesh: Election Commission to provide smart national IDs to expats in UK, Saudi Arabia

(tms) Following a successful launch of smart national identity (NID) cards for Bangladeshi expatriates in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Election Commission has announced plans to extend the same service to Bangladeshi expatriates in the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia. [Dhaka Tribune]

The initiative to offer NID cards to expatriates began in the UAE on July 10 and is part of a larger plan to extend

the service to 15 countries with significant Bangladeshi expatriate populations. This move follows demands made about 15 years ago for voting rights and NID cards for Bangladeshi expatriates residing abroad.

Bangladesh: Human rights organization accuses police of abusing Rohingya refugees

(lm) An inquiry conducted by the human rights organization *Fortify Rights* has unveiled that Rohingya refugees residing in camps in Bangladesh's district of Cox's Bazar are facing unjustified imprisonment, physical assault, and cruel treatment at the hands of the Armed Police Battalion (APBn). [Deutsche Welle] [Fortify Rights]

The APBn, a specialized force of the Bangladesh Police, has been tasked with upholding security within the refugee camps starting from July 2020. Earlier this year, another international organization, *Human Rights Watch*, also accused the force of committing extortion, arbitrary arrests and harassment of Rohingya refugees. Both watchdogs said their reports were based on interviews with Rohingya living in the camps.

Bangladesh: Prime Minister Hasina launches universal pension scheme to cover all citizens

(tms) Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has introduced the long-awaited Universal Pension Scheme, aiming to encompass all citizens above the age of 18. Four initial packages, including Pragati, Surokkha, Samata, and Prabashi, were introduced to provide lifelong pension benefits to participants based on their employment status and circumstances. Citizens over 18 can join, making periodic contributions until the age of 60 to secure retirement benefits. [The Daily Star 1] [The Daily Star 2]

India: Prime Minister Modi addresses nation on 77th Independence Day

(lf) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the nation for the tenth consecutive time on August 15 on the occasion of India's 77th Independence Day. [Press Information Bureau]

The recurrent themes of the Modi's speech were naarishakti (women power), samajik nyay (social justice), yuva shakti (youth power), pariwarvaad (dynastry-led politics), brashtachar (corruption), tushtikaran (appeasement). Furthermore, the use of adhunikta (modernity - in terms of use of technology and infrastructure) was noticeable as Modi used it repeatedly to present his governance model that was a confluence of traditional ideals and the modern era. [NDTV]

Lauding India's journey over the decades, Modi said the South Asian nation's economy will be among the top three in the world within five years, reflecting similar forecasts made last year by S&P Global and Morgan Stanley. He also highlighted India's rise on the global stage, calling it the "voice of the Global South", and suggested that a new world order was emerging after the COVID-19 pandemic. [Associated Press]

Notably, Modi also reiterated his calls for peace in the country's northeastern state of Manipur, which has been engulfed in a near civil war for several months, resulting in the loss of over 150 lives and the displacement of over 50,000. He emphasized that the nation stands in solidarity with the people of Manipur and underscored that a resolution can only be achieved through peaceful means.

During his address, Modi announced the launch of the 'Vishwakarma Yojana' as an initiative to demonstrate his administration's dedication to utilizing India's extensive traditional knowledge. Modi proclaimed that the "Vishwakarma Yojana" will be an important step towards identifying and elevating skilled workers and craftsmen throughout the country. The plan aims to assist workers including blacksmiths, barbers, and tanners. The project is expected to use conventional skills to achieve economic growth and social advancement. [ABP Live] [The Hindu]

India: Chief Justice announces plan to expand Supreme Court building

(hp/lm) India's Chief Justice DY Chandrachud Singh on August 15 announced plans to expand the Supreme Court building and improve the existing infrastructure with 27 additional courts and 51 judges' chambers. The chief justice expressed that the new building would mirror the "constitutional aspirations, beliefs, and priorities of the Indian people". [The Times of India] [The Hindu]

The announcement comes as a response to the mounting workload and backlog of cases faced by the court. Currently, the Supreme Court has a sanctioned strength of 34 judges, including the Chief Justice. However, due to vacancies, the court is operating with just 28 judges. The proposal aims to increase the number of judges to a total of 45, which would aid in expediting the judicial process and reducing the pendency of cases.

Apart from increasing the infrastructural capacity the CJI emphasized the digitalization of judiciary. He stated that technology is the most effective tool that must be used to address the inefficiency and lack of transparency in judicial processes. The Supreme Court is now implementing Phase three of the e-Courts project, which aims to revolutionize the functioning of courts in India by connecting courts nationwide. This includes establishing paperless courts, digitizing court records, and setting up advanced e-sewa kendras in all court complexes. The goal is to create a more accessible, cost-effective, and affordable judicial system for everyone seeking justice. [India Today]

India: Supreme Court asserts judicial review limited to constitutional violations in Article 370 case

(lm) India's Supreme Court said on August 17 – the seventh day of hearings in case challenging the removal of Article 370 – it would confine its review to constitutional transgressions. The five-judge bench underscored the need to avoid probing the intentions of the federal government in examining Article 370, a provision that previously granted special autonomous status to the Muslim-majority region of Kashmir. [JURIST]

2019's constitutional changes divided the Kashmir region into two union territories, Ladakh and Jammu-Kashmir, both ruled directly by the central government without a legislature of their own. Administrative measures introduced after the abrogation of the special status and statehood have allowed non-locals to settle and vote in the region, raising fears of attempts to engineer demographic change.

Earlier this month, the Supreme Court began hearing petitions against the move filed over the past four years [see AiR No. 32, August/2023, 2]. The key question at the heart of the hearing is if the removal of Article 370, which did not come about through a referendum but instead through parliamentary activity, stripped the citizens of the region of their right

to self-determination, which has been the subject of a multitude of UN resolutions and was the crucial point of the constitutional provision from its commencement.

The court is still scheduled to hear another 15 petitions regarding Article 370. The next hearing is scheduled for August 22.

India: Supreme Court lists gender stereotypes to be avoided in documents

(lm) India's Supreme Court has issued a glossary of "gender-unjust terms" it wants the legal community to avoid when preparing pleas, orders and judgments. The apex court said its *Handbook on Combating Gender Stereotypes* was aimed at ensuring that "legal reasoning and writing is free of harmful notions about women". [Reuters] [The Guardian]

Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023 to change the landscape of India's privacy

(hp) India's privacy will be going under a complete transformation with the enactment of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023. The new law will impact businesses which involve processing and using personal data including Technological giants such as Google, Meta (the parent company of Facebook and Instagram), X (formerly known as Twitter), and so on. Companies handling substantial amounts of personal data will be categorized as 'significant data fiduciaries.

The companies lying under this category Will be given additional responsibilities to ensure safe and secure use of personal data. First and foremost, the duty of the company will be to appoint a data protection officer. Furthermore, they will need to appoint an independent data auditor to check the quality of data, as well as conduct data protection impact assessments to judge risks arising out of processing the information. These duties will be accompanied by further responsibilities stipulated by the passed legislation.

Another important element of the act will be protection of consumers lying in the age group of children and young adults, who constitute a major chunk of the tech firms' including social media's audience. The act states that these companies will have to get consent from the parent or guardian to use personal data of children under the age of 18 years.

With flexibility built in, the government will be able to monitor and curb the use of data which will be harmful to the children and allow which is deemed as safe.

The Digital Personal Data Protection Bill 2023 was approved by the Indian Parliament and given assent by the President of India. The landmark legislation was introduced six years after the Supreme Court of India recognized privacy as a fundamental right. [Firstpost]

India: Two police officers killed in encounter with Maoist paramilitary in Jharkhand

(lf) Two members of the Jharkhand Jaguar Force, a unit of the state police of Jharkhand, lost their lives during a confrontation with a local Maoist paramilitary force. The confrontation took place in the West Singhbhum district in the south of the state on August 14 and was part of a combing operation currently underway within the area to pick-out local separatist militias and end the ongoing presence of Maoist paramilitaries. [The Indian Express]

The Naxalite-Maoist insurgency has maintained a presence within India since 1967, when the armed paramilitary split from the traditional Communist Party of India. Authorities maintain that they have made significant progress in locating, arresting or in some cases killing Naxalite troops across the country. The current target of the ongoing combing operation is top Maoist leader Misir Besra, who is one India's most wanted men. It is difficult to provide figures on how many Maoist soldiers there are in the region, with estimations hovering around 7000 cadres. [Mint]

There is evidence that the efforts of the local police forces and the central government are effective. In the neighboring state of Chhattisgarh, local forces and the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) raised the national flag during Independence Day celebrations on August 15 in a number of Maoist impacted villages, a sign that the grip of the movement within the area is weakening. Chhattisgarh is affected by the Indian Communist Party's insurgent movement, as opposed to the Naxalites in Jharkhand.

Maldives: Nasheed expresses concerns over potential consequences if Muizzu were to be elected president

(na) Mohamed Nasheed, the current House Speaker and former President of the Maldives, has expressed concerns over the potential consequences if Mohamed Muizzu, who is the presidential candidate representing the People's National Congress (PNC) and Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM), were to be elected as the country's president. [Avas]

Nasheed warned that under Muizzu's leadership, the nation's affairs might take an extreme and dangerous turn, possibly even resulting in the loss of the country for its citizens. However, Nasheed did not provide further details or clarification about the specific nature of these allegations.

Maldives: Government publishes final list of eligible voters for presidential election

(lm) As the presidential election in the Maldives draws nearer, the final list of eligible voters has been unveiled. According to a recent announcement by the Elections Commission, a total of 282,395 individuals have been declared eligible to cast their votes in the upcoming election, scheduled to take place in September. [Raajje]

Maldives: Election Commission confirms resolution of internal conflicts

(na) The Elections Commission (EC) has resolved internal conflicts among its members, ensuring collaboration for the upcoming presidential election on September 9.

Earlier, disagreements arose due to statements made by EC President Fuad Thaufeeq during the formation of a political party. As a result, some members initiated a no-confidence motion, leading Fuad to delegate responsibilities to EC Vice President Ismail Habeeb.

Following discussions among members, including Fuad, mediated by the Secretary-General, disputes were resolved, and meetings are now proceeding as planned. [Edition]

Maldives: EU delegation denies request to seek house arrest transfer for former President Yameen

(na) A visiting European Union (EU) delegation, currently in the Maldives to observe the upcoming presidential election, has declined to seek the transfer of former President Yameen to house arrest.

Parliament Speaker Mohamed Nasheed had appealed to the delegation to facilitate Yameen's transfer for a fair presidential election. Against this backdrop, the EU delegation, led by European Parliament Member Nacho Sánchez Amor, clarified that the delegation's focus remains on non-interference in ongoing court cases. [Avas]

In December of the previous year, Yameen was sentenced to an 11-year prison term along with a USD 5 million fine for money laundering and bribery convictions. Following this, he appealed to the High Court for a suspension of his prison sentence and fine execution. However, the High Court declined his request to suspend the prison sentence but temporarily halted actions regarding the fine. [AiR No. 33, August/2023, 3]

Nepal: Janamat Party rejoins government after four months hiatus

(na) On August 11, after a four-month hiatus, the Janamat Party rejoined the government as President Ramchandra Paudel administered the oath of office to the Minister for Federal Affairs and General Administration. [My Republica 1]

Earlier in April, the Janmat Party left the ruling coalition after feeling betrayed by alliance parties Nepali Congress, Maoist Center, and CPN (Unified Socialist Party) during the by-elections where support shifted to Janata Samajwadi Party's candidate. Abdul Khan, Minister of Water Supply and Janamat Party leader resigned due to the alliance's refusal to grant the Ministry of Industry, as per the Janamat Party's consistent demand. [My Republica 2]

Originally known as the Alliance for Independent Madhesh, the Janamat Party was established by former secessionist figure C. K. Raut. This followed an 11-point accord with the Nepalese government, effectively concluding his separatist activities alongside KP Oli. The party's creation dates to 2019, and it ranks as the 8th largest political party in Nepal.

Nepal: Ex-Premier warns of fresh conflict if courts handle conflict-era cases

(na/lm) Baburam Bhattarai, widely seen as the second most powerful person in Nepal's Maoist insurgency, has warned about the possibility of new conflict if regular courts delve into cases from the country's civil war, which ended with the signing of a peace accord in 2006. [The Kathmandu Post]

In response to a case involving the use of child soldiers during the insurgency, Bhattarai emphasized that regular court processes are inadequate for ensuring transitional justice and suggested that all conflict-related cases should be exclusively handled through the transitional justice mechanism.

The case in question involves former child combatants who were disqualified for integration into the Nepal Army during a 2007 UN verification process. They filed a petition seeking compensation and accountability for their use as child combatants, targeting both Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who led the rebels against Nepal's security forces during the 10-year insurgency, and Bhattarai. [AiR No. 31, August/2023, 1].

Writing a response on the same petition last month, Prime Minister Dahal had refuted allegations that he used child combatants during the insurgency. Dahal claimed that the petitioners have accepted that the United Nations Missions in Nepal termed them "minors" and not "child soldiers", adding that no document related to the peace process accepts the use of child combatants. [AiR No. 31, August/2023, 1]

Nepal: Supreme Court invalidates president's pardon of former lawmaker in criminal case

(na/lm) Nepal's Supreme Court has declared that granting a political pardon in criminal cases for political reasons is unconstitutional and contrary to the the principles of law and justice. The ruling effectively upheld the conviction of Resham Lal Chaudhary, a former lawmaker, for his role in the so-called 2015 Tikapur incident during which seven police personnel and a toddler were killed. [The Kathmandu Post] [My Republica]

The Tikapur incident refers to a violent clash that occurred in August 2015, in Tikapur, a town in the Kailali District of Nepal. During the protest, the Tharu demonstrators defied prohibitory orders issued by the

local administration, leading to confrontations between the protesters and the police. The situation escalated into violent clashes, resulting in multiple deaths and injuries.

In response to the incident, the police filed murder charges against several individuals, including Resham Lal Chaudhary, a former lawmaker and a key figure among the Tharu community, who was accused of masterminding the violence during the protest.

After legal proceedings, including lower court trials, Chaudhary was ultimately convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for his role in the Tikapur incident. The Supreme Court of Nepal upheld the decisions of the lower courts, confirming his conviction and sentence. However, President Paudel, acting on the government's recommendation, reduced Chaudhary's life imprisonment sentence.

Legal experts view this ruling as setting a precedent against the misuse of political authority for pardons related to criminal offenses. The decision is expected to impact the ongoing efforts by the government to pass a law allowing amnesty or pardon for cases of a political nature.

Nepal: Koshi chief minister expands cabinet

(na) The chief minister of Nepal's Koshi province, Thapa, has expanded his cabinet by appointing Gayanand Mandal from the Nepali Congress party as Minister of State for Industries, Agriculture, and Cooperatives. Other ministers appointed include the minister for Drinking Water, Irrigation, and Energy, Economic Affairs and Planning, Physical Infrastructure and Urban Development, and Health. [My Republica]

Pakistan: Elections could be delayed as polls agency needs until mid-December to draw new constituencies

(lm) Pakistan's Election Commission (EC) said on August 17 that parliamentary elections originally due in November must be delayed because it needs until December 14 to redraw electoral boundaries to reflect data from the latest national census. The polls agency said it will set an election date after the new constituencies have been drawn. [PBS]

According to the constitution of Pakistan, elections must be held within 60 days after national and provincial assemblies have been dissolved after completing their full term, or within 90 days if the dissolution takes place earlier. Former Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's government was dissolved on August 9 – a few days before it completed its full term – meaning elections should be held in November at the latest [see AiR No. 33, August/2023, 3]. However, the law also mandates that elections can take place only according to constituency delimitations which will be drawn based on the latest census figures.

Against this backdrop, major political parties in the country, including the main opposition PTI and the ruling coalition Pakistan Peoples Party have publicly demanded the commission hold the polls within the stipulated period. The country's top body of lawyers, the Supreme Court Bar Association, also sought the apex court's intervention this week for national polls to be held within the constitutionally mandated period. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Caretaker cabinet headed by former lawmaker Kakar takes oath

(lm) Pakistan's president swore in a caretaker cabinet under interim Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar on August 17, tasking it with running the administration's day-to-day affairs until fresh elections, which may possible be delayed until February next year. [TIME]

Kakar, who had been representing Baluchistan province in Parliament's upper house since 2018, had quit as the head of his small Baluchistan Awami Party on August 13 and resigned as a senator after being named by outgoing Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and opposition leader Raza Riaz as caretaker prime minister.

The caretaker government says its top priority is economic stabilization, with the South Asian nation's economy on a narrow recovery path after sealing a USD 3 billion bailout deal with the International Monetary Fund to avert a sovereign debt default. [Reuters]

Former central bank chief Shamshad Akhtar was appointed finance minister, and Pakistan's former ambassador to the United States, Jalil Abbas Jilani, was named foreign minister. Other names in the cabinet included former provincial minister Sarfaraz Bugti as interior minister and Mishaal Malik, the wife of jailed Kashmiri leader Yaseen Malik, as minister for human

rights. Longtime journalist Murtaza Solangi was appointed information minister. [Arab News]

Pakistan: President says he did not sign new national security laws, suggests that staff might have forged signature

(lm) Pakistan's President Arif Alvi said on August 20 that one of his staff officers might have forged his signature to sign into law two bills that critics say would undermine dissent and give authorities more power to prosecute people for acts against the state and military. In response to Alvi's comments, the law ministry disputed his assertions and accused him of "purposely" delaying the approval of the bills. [The Straits Times]

Both houses of Pakistan's Parliament had passed the bills – the Official Secrets Amendment Bill 2023 and Pakistan Army Amendment Bill 2023 – just before it was dissolved on August 9. But President Alvi, a member of former Prime Minister Imran Khan's opposition PTI party, refused to sign the two bills into law. According to the Constitution, if the president does not sign a draft Bill or return it with his observations or objections within ten days after it has already been through the two Houses, it will become law.

The bills in question make it a criminal offense to reveal information detrimental to the security and interests of Pakistan or its armed forces. They also empower intelligence agencies to conduct raids and detain civilians even based on suspicion of legal breaches. [AiR No. 32, August/2023, 2]

Pakistan: Police arrest vice-chair of main opposition PTI party in 'cypher' case

(lm) The vice chair of Pakistan's main opposition PTI party, Shah Mehmood Qureshi was detained on August 19.

The PTI said the specific reason for the detention of Qureshi, who served twice as Pakistan's foreign minister, was not immediately clear.

However, *Dawn* newspaper reported that the PTI heavyweight was arrested under the Official Secrets Act in connection with a case of a missing diplomatic cable that former Prime Minister Imran Khran had

previously said was part of a conspiracy to remove him from office. Earlier this month, *The Intercept*, a US-based media organisation, published the content of the "cypher", which suggests Washington wanted to remove the former prime minister from power last April [see AiR No. 33, August/2023, 3]. [Dawn]

Notably, Qureshi's arrest came hours after he held a news conference, announcing that the PTI would challenge any delay to the country's election in the courts and demanded a "level playing field" for the party in the country's upcoming general elections. [Deutsche Welle] [The Guardian] [Al Jazeera]

Pakistan: Muslim mobs attach churches in country's east after accusing Christians of desecrating Quran

(kr/lm) Thousands of Muslims burned churches and vandalized in a city on eastern Punjab province on August 16 over allegations that two Christian men had desecrated the Quran. [Associated Press] [BBC]

The two men accused of damaging Islam's holy book have been arrested and are being investigated for blasphemy, which is punishable by death in the South Asian nation. More than 2,000 people have been accused of blasphemy in Pakistan since 1987, according to data provided by the Centre for Social Justice, an independent organization that fights for the rights of minorities. At least 88 people have been killed as a result of these accusations.

Meanwhile, a Muslim cleric is among a dozen people being investigated for using mosque loudspeakers to order protests against the alleged blasphemy, while more than 125 people have been arrested linked to the vandalism that followed. [Bangkok Post]

Pakistan: Ex-minister's daughter, former lawmaker arrested after pro-Pashtun rally in Islamabad

(lm) Authorities in Pakistan on August 20 arrested a prominent human rights activist and a former lawmaker "for investigation" two days after the two addressed a rally organized by the Pashtun Protection Movement (PPM), a Pashtun ethnic rights movement, in the capital Islamabad.

One of the arrested is Imaan Mazari-Hazir, the daughter of Pakistan's former minister for human rights and opposition PTI heavyweight Shireen Mazari. Videos widely circulating on social media showed Mazari-Hazir addressing the PTM rally on August 18 and criticizing the Pakistani military over enforced abductions, which the army denies being involved in. Ali Wazir, a former lawmaker and co-founder of the PPM rights group was also arrested by police in Islamabad. [Al Jazeera] [Dawn]

Against this backdrop, Pakistan's Human Rights Commission said on August 20 the latest arrests pointed "to a larger, more worrying pattern of state-sanctioned violence against people exercising their right to freedom of expression and assembly." [Arab News]

Pakistan: Prominent local journalist killed in southern Sindh province

(lm) Jan Mohammad Mahar, bureau chief of the Sindhi-language cable television network *KTN News*, was shot dead on August 13 in Pakistan's Sindh province. The motive for the killing is unclear and authorities are still investigating. [Voice of America]

Mahar's killing came a week after unknown assailants shot and killed another journalist, Ghulam Asghar Khand, at his guest house near the village of Khaipur in Sindh.

Pakistan: 11 laborers killed in bomb attack near border with Afghanistan

(lm) At least 11 laborers who had been working at an under-construction post for the Army were killed in a suspected improvised explosive device attack in North Waziristan's Shawal Valley. [The Straits Times] [Al Jazeera]

Sri Lanka: Main opposition party pledges to support government if it works towards stronger nation

(lf) Sri Lanka's main opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) party has pledged that it will support the government in its efforts to help the nation recover from the economic crisis and further struggles so long

as President Wickremesinghe's cabinet stops engaging in "political games" and actively works towards bettering the nation.

The SJB's move to support the government comes shortly after the announcement of the dates for an IMF review set take place during September 14-27, suggesting that bi-partisan efforts could be made to ensure Sri Lanka meets as much of the organization's requirements as possible during the few remaining weeks left until the reviewers arrive.

The SJB, a big tent political alliance, is set to run against President Wickremesinghe's UNP during presidential elections set to occur during 2024, suggesting that this alliance is likely a short-term approach towards quickly implementing necessary political programs and fixing lingering issues. [Daily Mirror] [Daily FT]

Sri Lanka: Data suggests the status of 15 percent of Sri Lanka's IMF commitments is unknown

(lf) Ahead of an International Monetary Fund (IMF) review set for September 14-27, new research suggests that the status of 15 percent of Sri Lanka's economic commitments is currently unknown due to a lack of visibility on behalf of the government as pertains to IMF commitments. [Daily Mirror]

Although the lack of data does not necessarily indicate that the requirements in question will not be met, there is certainly a level of security and secretiveness about the government's policies regarding these areas potentially highlighting gridlock in the negotiating process to undertake change, or potentially a lack of thought overall within these areas.

Of 100 IMF requirements, Verité Research cites 15 areas as having no data and thus cannot be accurately tracked. Amongst these requirements are decreasing social spending to). 2 percent of Sri Lanka's GDP (USD 21.6 million), replenishing net international reserves to USD 2.8 billion, increasing tax revenue to 4.3 percent of GDP and developing a roadmap to strengthen the banking system.

Sri Lanka: President Wickremesinghe announces national security review

(lf) In a speech given on August 18, Sri Lanka's President Ranil Wickremesinghe announced the nation will undertake a comprehensive national security review in order to create more targeted and comprehensive national security policies.

The review comes amidst the increasing relevancy of Sri Lanka's geographical position in the Indian Ocean, which has seen increasing moves from India, China and other regional actors to cement a presence within the area. The President noted "the Indian Ocean hosts the world's pivotal trade routes, making Sri Lanka an integral player at this stage", and utilized maritime metaphors to maintain Sri Lanka has to "chart a course devoid of entanglement in these international rivalries, maintaining an impartial stance", emphasizing the country's traditional non-alignment policy.

The president intends for the review to provide a formal blueprint for the National Security Council to use when drafting appropriate policies to defend Sri Lanka's sovereignty and protect its neutrality. The review will be headed by Major General (Rtd) Channa Gunatillake and undertaken by the Defense 2030 program, which aims to strengthen the defense forces of Sri Lanka. There was no indication of a timeline for the commencement of the review, although it is expected that the team will begin shortly having been already appointed to their tasks. [Economy Next]

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

Cambodia: Parliament approves new Cabinet led by Hun Sen's son

(dql) Marking the final step of the power transition from father to son, the Cambodian parliament approved on August 22 the new Council of Ministers, with Hun Manet, the son of Hun Sen who rule the country for 38 years, as the new Prime Minister.

Hun Manet was officially appointed on August 7 as new Cambodian prime minister by King Norodom Sihamoni [see AiR No. 32, August/2023, 2]. The appointment came shortly after the ruling Cambodian People's Party had won 120 out 125 parliamentary seats in the July 23 general election [see AiR No. 32, August/2023, 2].

The Cabinet of the 7th legislature includes ten deputy prime ministers, as well as 40 other senior ministers and ministers.

Analysts have cautioned against too high expectations of broad changes in the country citing the fact that although 75 percent of the Cabinet members are new faces, most of them are children or otherwise related to those they are replacing. [Khmer Times] [ABC News]

In an earlier move on August 21, all 125 lawmakers-elect were officially sworn after the National Assembly approved their validity during the inaugural session of its 7th legislative term under the auspices of King Norodom Sihamoni. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: Labor ministry rejects accusations of poor performance

(dql) The Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training has dismissed criticism brought forward by the Centre for Alliance of Labour and Human Rights (CENTRAL), a local non-governmental organization supporting Cambodian working people through legal aid and other means to demand transparent and accountable governance for labor and human rights.

In a report published last week, CENTRAl blamed the ministry for closing nearly 1,100 garment factories in the first months of this year, a slowing down of exports in the garment, footwear and travel product sectors, and failing to enforce laws defining proper conditions for workers, among others.

The ministry rejected the criticism, calling the report of the “Western-backed organisation [...] unscientific, full of vague statistics, misleading,” that “creates a political bias that distorts public opinion and incites anger in Cambodian society.” [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Talks on minimum monthly wage started

(dql) The National Council on Minimum Wage (NCMW) kicked off negotiations on the annual rise of the monthly minimum wage for the garment, footwear and travel goods industry for 2024.

While the Council provided updates on statistics on the socioeconomic criteria to serve the basis for the 2024 minimum wage talks at the meeting on August 16, the representatives of employers and employees did suggest their respective specific figures for the negotiations, citing the need for further internal deliberations.

The parties agreed on the dates of the next meetings, namely August 28 and September 4, 11, 18 and 25.

The current monthly minimum wage for the sector is USD 200, an increase from USD 194 in 2022. In addition, workers have received fringe benefits such as a transport and housing allowance of USD 7 and a regular attendance bonus of USD 10 per month.

The garment, footwear and travel goods sector is Cambodia's largest foreign currency earner. Some 1,100 factories and branches employing around 750,000 workers are involved. [Khmer Times]

Exports of products of the sector stood at USD 6.36 billion during the January-July period this year, marking a decrease of 20.4 per cent from USD 7.99 billion compared with the same period last year.

Cambodia: More than 1,000 foreign nationals deported in first half of the year

(dql) The General Department of Immigration (GDI) has disclosed that in the first six months of this year, more than 1,000 foreign nationals living illegally in Cambodia have been deported.

The deportees come from 26 countries, among them were 549 Chinese, 169 Indonesians, 129 Vietnamese, 26 Thais, 25 Malaysians and others. Visa inspection have been conducted with 300,000 foreign nationals residing in Cambodia, with 280,000 non-immigrant visas for temporary stay having been issued.

In 2022, 1,612 foreigners of 45 nationalities were imprisoned in Cambodia, the most common being

citizens of Vietnam, China and Thailand. 5,825 foreigners of 42 nationalities stay illegally or flew from foreign law in Cambodia. [Khmer Times]

Indonesia: President tables 2024 budget

President Joko Widodo tabled in parlement budget proposal of IDR 3,304.1 trillion rupiah (USD 216.24 billion) for 2024, his final year in office. The budget proposal increases around 6 percent from this year budget with the assumption of 5.2 percent economic growth next year. The president offered no specific fiscal policy for 2024, but he promised to guard the economy against global challenges and keep food prices stable. Some critics have said that the budget assumption is too ambitious considering the global growth is expected to remain weak next year. The parliament will further debate the 2024 budget, likely for several months. [Reuters]

Indonesia: PDI-P lawmaker arrested for fraud

(ys) The Attorney General's Office (AGO) arrested Ismail Thomas, a lawmaker from the ruling Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) and a former regent of West Kutai, East Kalimantan, for allegedly forging permits for a coal mine in East Kalimantan.

Ismail is suspected of falsifying a document claiming that the company PT Sendawar Jaya is the owner of a 5,350-hectare coal mine in West Kutai, East Kalimantan. The coal mine was previously confiscated by the AGO and sold at an auction to PT Indobara Utama Mandiri to recover the state's losses.

But PT Sendawar then filed a lawsuit claiming to own the mine since 2008. If found guilty, Ismail will be sentenced to five years in prison and a fine of IDR 250 million (USD 16,258). [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: PDI-P changes mind over Prabowo-led food estate project

(ys) The ruling Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) is criticizing the food estate project under President Joko Widodo's administration, which is led by Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto.

The project that started in 2020 is an effort to ensure Indonesia's food security by turning forests into regions such as Kalimantan into a food estate. The PDI-P has been calling the project harmful to the environment after previously lauding the project.

The party also said that the program has been maladministered and questioned the integrity of the project as the company that runs the project belongs to the defense minister. An investigation by *The Gecko Project* and *Tempo* published in 2021 found evidence that Prabowo made efforts to help PT Agrinas obtain contracts for the development of the food estate project, potentially worth billions of dollars, despite the company having no records of developing agricultural plantations.

The defense minister's party, Gerindra, has been denying the accusations, stating that Prabowo was merely carrying out the program of the presidential administration. President Joko Widodo also highlighted that the project is overseen by several ministries, not just the defense ministry, and that it will require hard work to manage.

The criticism from the PDI-P came on the heels of speculations that the President (PDI-P) favors Prabowo to take his place next year rather than the candidate from his own party, Ganjar Pranowo, right after the Golkar Party and the National Mandate Party (PAN) declared their supports to back Prabowo as President. [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: PDI-P politician breaks away from the party line to support Prabowo

(ys) PDI-P politician Budiman Sudjatmoko, a former pro-democracy activist who opposed former President Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime (1966-1998), declared his support for Prabowo Subianto as president for the next year's election.

Budiman expressed hope that his party would want to join hands with Prabowo. He also established a group of supporters called Prabowo-Budiman United (Prabu) in Semarang, Central Java, that will work across the provinces to help the Gerindra chairman win the election. He was reprimanded by his party after a private meeting with Prabowo last month.

The retired general Prabowo is known for his role as general commander of the special force (Kopassus) during the New Order era, the special force which was later convicted for the enforced disappearance of pro-

democracy activists, including Budiman himself. The history of Prabowo as general and the son-in-law of the late New Order ruler Suharto was always used as a card against his candidacy as president.

The move made by Budiman is a significant move in favor of Prabowo. Budiman hopes that if Prabowo is elected, the latter would advance public welfare by developing village-owned enterprise (BUMDes) cooperatives, increase security and improve education in the country. [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Police officers link to an IS loyalist arrested

(ys) Following the arrest of an IS loyalist identified as DE in Bekasi, West Java, the anti-terror squad Densus 88 arrested three police officers, suspected of arms dealing with DE.

Police were baffled by the number of firearms found in DE's possession and ever since have been investigating the origin of those firearms as Indonesia only grants selected individuals license to carry weapons.

The three officers allegedly acted as intermediaries between arms supplier and DE, offering different types of firearms, from handguns to long-barreled weapons. [Detik News, in Bahasa Indonesia]

Indonesia: Post drought-induced famine in Central Papua

(ys) The Indonesian government reported that the situation in Puncak regency, Central Papua, is returning to normalcy following the distribution of tonnes of food aid from Timika, Papua. The head of the National Disaster Mitigation (BNPB) Agency Surharyanto oversees the delivery personally in Central Papua. The government at first had difficulties in sending aid as the region is where the Free Papua Movement (OPM) operates and often kidnaps and murder people but managed to involve all stakeholders to ensure safe passage to the region.

The BNPB also managed to overcome bad weather last week and sent 5,2 tonnes of food aid and emergency kits, including 515 packets of basic commodities, 475 mattresses, 100 blankets, seven electricity generators and 60 tons. The government is also planning to build food warehouses in Agandugume, Central Papua, to prevent food shortages. [The Jakarta Post]

The Puncak regency of Papua was previously facing crop failure due to drought and cold weather, causing several deaths. [see AiR No. 31, August/2023, 1]

Indonesia: Four more regions agree on low-carbon development

(ys) The provincial regions of North Sumatra, Maluku, Bengkulu and West Nusa Tenggara have agreed to cooperate with the National Development Planning Agency (Bappenas) to help design climate-resilient policies and transition to a green economy.

Bappenas has been trying to invite all provinces to help reduce carbon emissions and curb the impact of climate change. Since 2019, there have been seven provinces which agreed on the deal. With the latest four, a total of 11 provinces out of 38 provinces in Indonesia have joint hands with the agency. [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Government calls for remote working to curb pollution

(ys) As Jakarta's air quality consecutively ranks among the top 10 worst air quality in the world, its residents have been reporting cases of upper respiratory diseases.

The government has decided to impose remote working for city employees and remote learning for students, in a bid to curb pollution. The plan will be implemented starting this week until October 21, demanding at least 50 percent of workers stay at home who don't serve the public directly.

The policy will then be expanded to 75 percent of city officials whose workplaces are in the vicinity of the ASEAN Summit venue, which will be held in early September. To further help curb pollution, the Jakarta administration is planning to inspect the carbon emission test on vehicles in the city and will impose the test to obtain a vehicle registration license. [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Health Ministry reprimands teaching hospitals over bullying reports

(ys) The Health Ministry issued an official warning to three teaching hospitals after reports of bullying.

The three government-owned teaching hospitals are Cipto Mangunkusumo General Hospital (RSCM) in Jakarta, Hasan Sadikin Hospital in Bandung, West Java, and Haji Adam Malik Hospital in Medan, South Sumatra.

The residents of these hospitals reported cases of harassment, ranging from demanding residents pay for items that were unrelated to their education to subjecting residents to grueling work hours.

Since the warning has been issued, the ministry has received 91 reports of bullying, of which 44 came from residents of a number of teaching hospitals under the ministry.

The government has been trying to address the issues to increase the number of specialists in the country. Many doctors are reluctant to undergo medical specialty training due to high tuition costs, difficult admission tests, and long training times. On top of that, doctors earn no salary during their residency.

The ministry is demanding that the warned hospitals take necessary measures. Those found guilty of bullying will face punishments ranging from a warning to expulsion, depending on the severity of the case. [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Boeing fighter jets acquired

(ys) The Indonesian Defense Ministry has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with U.S. planemaker Boeing (BA.N) on the sale of 24 units of F-15EX fighter jets. F-15EX is the most advanced version of F-15. Indonesia has been trying to modernize its aging fleet and the deal marks another milestone of the efforts after previously sign the second tranche with France Dassault for Rafale fighter jets.

The Defense Minister himself overseen the signing ceremony in Missouri, U.S.A, and stated that Boing will give codename F-15IDN for the Indonesian sale. Boeing underlined that the agreement is subject to U.S. government approval though laste year U.S. Senate have approved the sale of F-15ID to Indonesia.

Both parties have not disclosed the total amount of the acquisition. [Reuters]

Lao PDR: Government issues loan policy to boost economy

(ws) The Laotian government has introduced a credit policy amounting to around LAK 2.5 trillion (equivalent to USD 128 million), aimed at bolstering specific industries, fostering economic growth, and encouraging the utilization of domestic goods within the nation. This policy will be implemented from 2023 to 2025.

Several enterprises in the agricultural and forestry sectors engaged in crop cultivation, livestock farming, animal feed production, as well as the manufacturing of food, beverages, cleaning items, packaging materials, and handicrafts are eligible to apply for loans through this program.

Additionally, the credit policy extends to enterprises operating within the tourism sector. This encompasses small and medium-sized hotels, providers of tourism-related agency services, and local eateries catering to substantial groups of tourists.

Earlier in July, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce (MTC) disclosed its plan to facilitate low-interest loans and offer technical support to domestic Micro, Small, and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs). This move aims to aid these businesses in elevating their production standards and expanding their productive capacity. [Laotian Times]

Malaysia: By-Elections to follow state elections

(ic) Last week, Malaysians in the states of Selangor, Kelantan, Terengganu, Negeri Sembilan, Kedah and Penang went to the polls that saw a tenuous victory for the ruling unity government [see AiR No. 33, August/2023, 3]

In the aftermath of these state elections, major parties across Malaysia are gathering to discuss their performance and how to move forward in the lead-up to the Simpang Jeram (a seat for the Johor State Legislative Assembly) and Pulai (a federal parliamentary seat) by-elections on September 9. [The Star 1]

Both seats were previously held by the late Datuk Seri Salahuddin bin Ayub, who served as the Minister of Domestic Trade and Cost of Living up until his death by brain hemorrhage on July 23. [MalaysiaNow]

As candidate nominations begin on August 26, parties have been discussing their performance for the state elections and their candidates of choice. While Perikatan Nasional (PN) leader and former Prime Minister (PM) Muhyiddin Yassin expressed that he will indicate the candidate representing PN next week, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), and more broadly Barisan Nasional (BN), cite as one of the reasons for their poor electoral performance a misunderstanding from voters on their reasons for joining PM Anwar Ibrahim's unity government, and will pursue this while focusing on obtaining a good result for the by-elections. [Bernama 1] [Bernama 2] [Bernama 3]

At the same time, there have been probes of reported identity theft and fraud issues in the state elections, with 94 voters reporting that their MyKad identity cards had been fraudulently used to vote on their behalf. [The Star 2]

Malaysia: Tensions over Merdeka Day celebrations

(ic) Malaysia celebrates Merdeka (Independence) Day on August 31 to commemorate the Malayan Declaration of Independence of 31 August 1957. It is defined in Article 160 of the Constitution of Malaysia.

Perikatan Nasional (PN) youth chairman Ahmad Fadhli Shaari proposed on TikTok that the four states currently held by PN could consider using alternative themes and logos, provoking widespread ire across the political aisle and even from his own party leadership. Many argued that he was "politicizing" a national holiday. [Bernama] [Malay Mail]

Supporters of alternative logos argued that there is precedent for this, both in Selangor for 2022 and by PM Anwar in 2012 when he was leader of the opposition party Pakatan Rakyat (PR). [Scoop] [The Rakyat Post]

Malaysia: Prime Minister Anwar weighs suing Goldman Sachs over 1MDB scandal, report claims

(lm) Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has indicated that his administration might pursue a lawsuit against US investment bank Goldman Sachs for its role in the financial scandal involving the Southeast

Asian nation's state development fund 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB).

In an interview with *CNBC*, the Malaysian leader said his government is weighing multiple options beyond just negotiations with the Wall Street firm, adding that so far, the bank has "not been too forthcoming".

The 1MDB scandal rocked the global financial community, leading to investigations and legal actions against individuals and entities involved. Malaysian and US authorities estimate some USD 4.5 billion were stolen from 1MDB between 2009 and 2014, in a globe-spanning scheme that implicated high-level government and banking officials in Malaysia and elsewhere.

In a deal reached during the administration of Anwar's predecessor, Muhyiddin Yassin, Goldman Sachs agreed to repay Malaysia USD 3.9 billion in exchange for withdrawing criminal charges and waiving future charges against the bank. However, Prime Minister Anwar in April said the agreement his predecessors hammered out with the US investment bank was "too light" and he was re-evaluating the matter.

Both sides disagree on whether the Malaysian government has recovered at least USD 500 million as of August last year, and whether an interim payment was due. It remains to be seen what would come out of the standoff, considering that the investment bank is obliged to return Malaysia at least USD 1.4 billion in recovered assets by August 2025. [CNBC] [The Straits Times]

Malaysia: 15 police officers, two public prosecutors arrested in entertainment outlet raid

(lm) A Malaysian police officer, along with 14 police personnel and two deputy public prosecutors, were detained in a drug raid conducted by the Bukit Aman Integrity and Standard Compliance Department (JIPS) at an entertainment outlet in Malaysia's Negeri Sembilan state.

According to reports, 14 of the police personnel and the two deputy public prosecutors tested positive for substances including ketamine, amphetamine, and methamphetamine. [The Straits Times]

Malaysia: ‘Don’t let 3R issues go unchecked’

(ic) Sultan of Perak, Sultan Nazrin Shah, noted on August 20 at the 172nd Perak Dewan Negara meeting at Istana Iskandariah that 3R issues – race, religion, royalty – were quickly becoming sensational issues that divide the nation and, if politicization of these issues continued, could result in a less stable and less developed Malaysia. [The Star]

Myanmar: Pharmaceutical companies cease sales due to significant increase in USD prices

(wn) Myanmar’s medical market saw some companies stop selling certain imported medicines due to their cost being over 3,800 MMKyats per USD.

Last month, some medicine prices raised by 10-20 percent, causing a week-long sale closure.

Drugs related to liver disease are no longer available for sale, with reports claiming that certain companies were controlling and selling them based on the type of medication. [Irrawaddy, in Burmese]

Myanmar: Central Bank announces measures against unauthorized possession of foreign currency

(wn) The Military Council's Central Bank announced on August 21st that possessing foreign currency without a license would result in legal action taken under the Foreign Exchange Management Law.

The move is seen as an attempt to counter black market exchangers as the Burmse kyat has tumbled to one-third of its value against the U.S. dollar since the coup. On August 18, USD 1 spiked to record high 3,900 kyats, up 300 percent from 1,300 in January 2021, a month before the coup.

According to Article 15 of the 2014 Foreign Exchange Management Regulations issued by the Central Bank, a local resident can hold foreign currency of up to USD 10,000 or the equivakent in another foreign currency for six months after receiving the amount. Foreign currencies not used within these six months must be sold, exchanged at market price, or added to foreign exchange business licensees' bank accounts. In

addition, only foreign currency trading business license holders are allowed to trade foreign currency cash and traveller's checks.

Operating a foreign exchange business without a license may result in imprisonment for over three years or a fine or both, and evidence must be kept as a public treasure. [Mizzima Burmese] [The Global New Light of Myanmar]

Myanmar: Military junta army suffers from battles with KNU

(ha) The military junta army suffered losses last week as it was trying to recapture an outpost that was seized by the Karen National Union (KNU) near Myawaddy in Karen State on 21 July.

Two soldiers of the military junta army surrendered and many of their weapons and other equipment were seized, KNU announced. On the KNU side, two people were killed and five were injured. [The Irrawaddy]

Singapore: Approval of three of six candidates for the upcoming presidential election

(tb) The Elections Department (ELD) revealed that Ng Kok Song, the former chief investment officer of GIC, Tan Kin Lian, the former chief executive of NTUC Income, and Tharman Shanmugaratnam, the former Senior Minister, have been officially recognized as qualified candidates for Singapore's Presidential Election.

However, businessman George Goh's bid for a certificate of eligibility was unsuccessful. ELD conveyed that a total of six applications for the certificate of eligibility were received by the Presidential Elections Committee (PEC) before the Thursday deadline.

The reason provided by the (ELD) for Mr. Goh's ineligibility to participate in the Presidential Election is that his experience and competence in overseeing five smaller companies were not considered equivalent to the requisites set by the Constitution for managing a "very large" company.

The presidential election is announced to be held on September 1. [CNA 1] [CNA 2] [Time]

Singapore: Anti-money laundering raids

(dql) Singapore police have seized luxury items with a total worth of USD 735 million during raids on August 15 as part of one of the country's biggest anti-money laundering investigations.

Among the seized items were luxury homes, cars, and watches as well as gold bars.

Ten people, holding passport from China, Cambodia, Turkey and Vanuatu, were arrested. They are suspected of money laundering and forgery offences. [BBC]

Thailand: Joint sitting of Parliament elects Pheu Thai Party candidate Srettha Thavisin as prime minister

(lm) A joint sitting of Parliament on August 22 elected Srettha Thavisin of the Pheu Thai Party (PTP) as the new prime minister of Thailand, in a vote that took place exactly 100 days after the May election. [Bangkok Post] [CNBC]

Srettha, a real estate mogul who entered the Thai political landscape just months ago, required 375 votes to become premier. He secured 482, of which 330 came from lawmakers and 152 from senators. Almost all of the votes against Srettha came from the progressive Move Forward Party, which won the May election but could not get its leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, approved by Parliament.

Prior to the vote, the PTP on August 21 announced it had formed an 11-party alliance spanning 314 votes in Parliament's lower house to form a government. Controversially, the coalition includes two military-linked parties: the Palang Pracharath Party, led by hitherto Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan, and the United Thai Nation party of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha. [Nikkei Asia]

The Democrat Party, which holds 25 seats in the lower house, declared its party resolution to abstain from voting for Srettha. [Standard, in Thai]

In this coalition, the PTP will secure eight ministerial posts and nine vice-ministerial posts, including key economic portfolios. These positions are expected to drive the implementation of campaign promises, such as the universal digital handout of 10,000 THB (approx.

USD 283). The two military-linked parties will each hold two ministerial posts and two vice-ministerial posts.

Key policy agreements within the coalition include a 600-baht minimum wage by 2027, a minimum monthly salary of 25,000 baht for university graduates, voluntary military service, crop price guarantees, and the legalization of medical marijuana – a hallmark of the Bhumjaithai Party's platform. With 71 seats in the House, the Bhumjaithai Party is the second-largest party in the coalition, holding eight cabinet positions, including four ministers and four vice ministers.

Thailand: Pheu Thai leader confirms resignation amid coalition formation

(nk) Pheu Thai Party leader Cholnan Srikaew has reaffirmed his intention to resign as party leader, adhering to a pre-election promise, once the coalition's Cabinet receives royal endorsement.

Despite campaigning on the commitment that his party wouldn't join a coalition involving the "two uncle's parties" led by General Prawit Wongsuwon and General Prayut Chan-o-cha, Cholnan formally announced their inclusion in Pheu Thai's 11-party coalition government.

He justified this move as necessary to secure the support of senators, many of whom were appointed by Prayut and Prawit. Cholnan stated he would fulfill his promise and officially resign once the Cabinet list is submitted for royal endorsement, marking a significant development in Thailand's evolving political landscape. [The Nation]

Thailand: Ex-Premier Thaksin Shinawatra jailed for eight years after return from exile

(lm) Thailand’s former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was jailed for eight years on August 22 after the former leader returned to the country after 15 years in exile, just hours before a joint sitting of Parliament was set to decide if his Pheu Thai Party candidate would become prime minister (see article above). [South China Morning Post] [BBC]

Three distinct cases were heard in absentia, involving abuse of power, malfeasance, an illicit order for a

state-run bank to issue a foreign loan, and the improper holding of shares via nominees.

Crucially, however, it has been speculated that Thaksin will seek a royal pardon – a step that experts consider crucial to resolving the longstanding political divide between the Shinawatra family and the royalist military establishment.

At the airport, Thaksin prostrated himself before a portrait of Thailand's king and queen and left a flower wreath. He spent a moment greeting supporters and the media waiting in front of the terminal but did not speak. [Associated Press]

Thailand: Supreme Court upholds acquittal of ex-Deputy Prime Minister Suthep

(dql) On August 22, Thailand's Supreme Court confirmed the acquittal verdict for former Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban and five other defendants who were charged of malfeasance in the context of a 5.8-billion-baht project to build police stations and residential buildings.

The six defendants were accused by the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) of abusing their authority to award the 5.80-billion-baht project to build 396 police stations and flat buildings nationwide without first seeking approval of the Cabinet. The charges were filed after the contractor failed to build most of the stations and flat buildings, leaving deserted construction sites for some 10 years.

The Supreme Court's Criminal Division for Holders of Political Office in September last year acquitted Suthep and other defendants. The NACC appealed against the verdict.

In its decision, the Supreme Court argued that Suthep possessed the authority to approve the project without prior approval from the Cabinet. [The Nation]

Thailand: Constitutional Court rejects Move Forward Party petition challenging parliamentary vote

(ws/lm) Thailand's Constitutional Court on August 16 rejected a petition by the progressive Move Forward Party (MFP) challenging Parliament's refusal to allow its

leader and prime ministerial candidate Pita Limjaroenrat to be renominated. [Al Jazeera] [South Cina Morning Post]

After Parliament rejected the renomination of Pita, the Office of the Ombudsman filed a request for the Constitutional Court to invalidate the parliamentary resolution that hindered Pita's renomination. Additionally, the Ombudsman also sought the Court's intervention to postpone the upcoming prime ministerial voting session until a verdict was reached on the presented petition. [AiR, No. 30, July/2023, 4]

However, the Court in its decision said it declined to accept the case because it was lodged by a group of more than 20 individuals that did not include Pita himself. In response, Pita said that he would not file another petition to the Constitutional Court as he believed that the emerging issue should be resolved in the parliament. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2] [ThaiPBSWorld]

Thus, the Constitutional Court's decision effectively killed off any hope of the progressive MFP to lead Thailand's next government, with Parliament slated to hold a vote on another candidate for prime minister later this week.

Thailand: Three parties to contest Rayong by-elections

(lm) Three political parties – the progressive Move Forward Party, the Democrat Party, and the Nation Building Labour Party – will be fielding candidates in the upcoming by-election scheduled for September 10 in a constituency in Thailand's Rayong province. [Bangkok Post]

The by-election was necessitated by the resignation of Move Forward lawmaker Nakornchai Khunnarong earlier this month, after it was revealed that he had served an 18-month prison sentence for a theft conviction approximately 24 years ago.

Thailand: Co-leader of red shirt movement steps down from role in Pheu Thai Party amid coalition controversy

(lm) Nattawut Saikuar, a prominent figure in Thailand's Red Shirt political movement and secretary-general of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship,

has announced his decision to resign from his position as director of the Pheu Thai Family, citing the party's decision to include the Palang Pracharath and United Thai Nation parties in their proposed coalition government. [Bangkok Post]

Nattawut's resignation carries significant symbolic weight, given his role as a co-leader of the Red-Shirt movement formed following the 2006 coup d'état which deposed then-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. His departure from the position of Pheu Thai Family director signals his discontent with the party's direction and casts a spotlight on the internal dynamics at play.

Thailand: Deputy house speaker criticized for spending allowance on barbecue 'meeting'

(lm) Padipat Suntiphada, a member of the progressive Move Forward Party and the Deputy House speaker, has come under fire after spending his parliamentarian allowance on treating 370 janitors who work in Parliament to an all-you-can-eat buffet on August 18. Political activist Srisuwan Janya announced he would file a petition against Padipat with the National Anti-Corruption Commission, accusing him of an ethics violation. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Chuwit makes second allegation on Sansiri's misconduct

(ws) Property developer Sansiri has denied claims of using nominees after being accused by Chuwit Kamolvisit, stating that its land acquisition procedures met the legal requirements. The series of accusations by Chuwit of the company's misconduct under its former CEO Srettha Thavisin, the newly elected Prime Minister, came after Pheu Thai Party's breakaway from the coalition party led by Move Forward Party (MFP).

On August 15, Chuvit Kamolvisit made a second allegation, claiming that Sansiri had nominated a housekeeper and three male security guards to secure a 1-billion-baht loan from a subsidiary. The purpose of the loan was supposedly to acquire land in Bangkok's Thong Lor area.

Chuvit also posed a pertinent question regarding the suitability of Srettha as a candidate for the prime ministerial role, if his administration was seemingly

reliant on nominees. Later, he also submitted evidence to Deputy National Police Chief Pol Gen Surachate Hakparn to materialize his allegations against Sansiri, demanding an official investigation. [Bangkok Post 1]

In response, Sansiri swiftly refuted the accusations, emphasizing that its land acquisition procedures adhere strictly to legal requirements. The company insisted that it maintains a transparent and accountable approach at every stage of the process. [Bangkok Post 2]

This allegation follows a previous claim by Chuwit that Sansiri under Srettha conducted tax evasion. Srettha has denied these allegations and initiated legal action against Chuvit.

The property developer has sought THB 500 million in damages, citing defamation stemming from Chuvit's claims concerning a prior land acquisition by Sansiri. [See AiR, No. 32, August/2023, 2]

Thailand: Election Commission suggested by investigation committee to drop iTV charge against Pita

(ws) The investigation committee has recommended the Election Commission (EC) to drop the charge brought against Pita Limjaroenrat, the leader of the Move Forward Party (MFP). Recently, he has been accused of violating election regulations due to alleged shareholding in a media company during his candidacy.

An informed source at the EC disclosed that the committee's investigation revealed insufficient concrete evidence to establish that iTV, the media company in question, was actively operating, and generating income at the time when Pita submitted his election candidacy in early April. Therefore, the findings and recommendation have been forwarded to the secretary-general of the EC, which will be further deliberated by a sub-committee.

Reports indicated that Pita had possessed 42,000 shares in iTV, an inheritance from his late father in the last seventeen years. Later in June, these shares were transferred to his relatives. [ThaiPBSWorld]

Thailand: Government defends new elderly allowance plan amidst public

criticisms

(ws) The implementation of the new regulation, which requires elderly individuals to provide proof of their financial need in order to receive a monthly allowance, has led to widespread criticism across the country.

Although government officials have justified that this measure is necessary to control government expenditures and allocate resources more effectively, criticisms debunked this regulation for backtracking the universal welfare system.

Before the new regulation, it was mandatory for local administration organizations to provide a universal monthly allowance of 600-1,000 baht to all elderly people. However, a new regulation, effective since August 12, specifies that only elderly individuals without any income or with insufficient income to cover their living expenses are eligible to receive a monthly allowance from the state. [Bangkok Post 1]

Although the new eligibility criteria do not apply to individuals who had already registered for the allowance with local authorities before August 12, the introduction of this new regulation has sparked widespread criticism across the nation.

Many critics argue that this change undermines the effort to establish a universal welfare system, particularly the reliability of the state-welfare cardholders' database, which could leave a considerable number of people without assistance due to its poor identification of those in need. Furthermore, the regulation is accused of being unconstitutional and contradicting international human rights principles, potentially leading to further issues. [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3]

Despite public backlash, the government is standing by its decision to implement the new requirements for receiving the elderly allowance. This new approach replaces the previous universal welfare payments, as the government contends that the financial burden of these payments was becoming unsustainable due to Thailand's increasingly aging population. [Bangkok Post 4]

Thailand: Out-of-court settlements ‘save billions of baht,’ government says

(lm) The implementation of a law facilitating out-of-court settlements in Thailand has yielded impressive results, with a total of 53,030 civil and 353 criminal

cases resolved without the need for court involvement since the legislation took effect in May 2019. [Bangkok Post]

According to the government, the out-of-court settlements of civil cases alone have resulted in an estimated savings of approximately USD 192 million in court fees. Similarly, out-of-court settlements in criminal cases have contributed significantly to state savings, amounting to up to USD 756 million.

The success of out-of-court settlements is underscored by the statistics from the 2022 fiscal year, during which 44,735 out of 45,958 dispute cases, worth a total of USD 180 million, were resolved through negotiations. This yielded savings of around USD 162 million in associated costs.

The range of cases settled through out-of-court negotiations is diverse, including outstanding debts owed to institutions such as the Student Loan Fund, car hire purchases, credit cards, and personal loans.

Thailand: Household debt at 90.6 percent of GDP

(lm) According to the Bank of Thailand, household debts in the first quarter of 2023 increased by more than USD 21.7 billion, bringing total household debt in the Southeast Asian nation to USD 453.6 billion, or 90.6 percent of the GDP. Crucially, the issue of high household debt in Thailand is expected to become even more challenging to address with the new government, which includes parties advocating for populist policies, taking office.

Statistics from the Bank of Thailand reveal that around 60 percent of debtors owe amounts exceeding approx. USD 2,800, with 14 percent carrying debts of approximately USD 28,000. The quality of these debts is classified as "not very good," with a sizable portion stemming from discretionary spending on tourism and non-essential items, including electronic gadgets.

The number of debtors has risen from 30 percent of the population in 2017 to 37 percent in the previous year. A concerning statistic is that approximately 30 percent of debtors have struggled to repay their personal loans or credit card debts. On average, each debtor holds more than four credit card accounts, with the combined credit ceiling for these cards often exceeding 10-25 times their monthly salaries, surpassing the international standard for offering

credit lines, which typically ranges from five to 12 times the monthly income. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Thai student activist sentenced to prison for royal defamation during 2021 protest

(nk) Student activist Thanatorn Vitayabenjang has been sentenced to one year and six months in prison on a royal defamation charge stemming from his participation in an August 2021 protest.

Thanatorn, a Chiang Mai University graduate, was initially charged with one count of royal defamation for his speech at the Three Kings Monument during a protest caravan. However, he was later indicted on a second count for a statement he read in front of the Provincial Police Region 5 headquarters.

Despite confessing to giving a speech, Thanatorn maintained that his statement did not defame the King and that the protest did not violate Covid-19 measures.

The Chiang Mai Provincial Court reduced his sentence due to his confession and also sentenced him to one month in prison for violating the Emergency Decree, bringing his total sentence to one year and seven months.

Thanatorn has been granted bail to file an appeal, posting 150,000 baht as security. [Prachatai]

Thailand: Digital Minister threatens to seek court shutdown of Facebook over scams

(nk) Thailand's Minister of Digital Economy and Society, Chaiwut Thanakamanusorn, has announced plans to petition the court for the closure of Meta Platforms' Facebook in the country unless the platform takes immediate action to address scams affecting more than 200,000 individuals.

The ministry had previously requested the removal of identified scam advertisements from Facebook without success. Officials are now gathering evidence of wrongdoing by the platform to present before the court. The scams involve enticing users to invest in fake companies, posing as government entities like the

Securities and Exchange Commission, and engaging in digital currency trading. [Reuters]

Vietnam: Reform of social insurance law underway

(km) A government proposal on the revised draft Law on Social Insurance was submitted on August 17 to the National Assembly Standing Committee which held its 25th session from Aug 14-18 in Hanoi.

The proposal makes significant amendments to the Social Insurance Law, resulting in a multi-tiered social insurance system. The changes include the addition of social pension benefits to the existing system.

The revised law was proposed to achieve the government's goal to increase the coverage of social pension benefits, pensions, and monthly social insurance to approximately 60 percent of people after retirement age by 2030.

It will apply to citizens aged 75 and above, who without existing pension or monthly social insurance allowances will be eligible for social pension benefits funded by the budget.

The minimum number of years of social insurance contributions required to qualify for a monthly pension will be reduced from 20 years to 15 years. [thanhnien.vn, in Vietnamese]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

ASEAN countries to begin talks on USD 2 trillion digital economy pact by year's end

(lm) During the 55th ASEAN Economic Ministers' meeting held in Semarang, Indonesia, the region's endorsed a study on the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), paving the way for negotiations among the bloc's ten member nations.

The DEFA, a region-wide pact aimed at fostering digital economic cooperation, is projected to be officially launched during the 23rd ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) council meeting. This is set to be followed by recognition from ASEAN leaders at the 43rd Asean Summit in Jakarta in September.

The gathering also marked the completion of the ASEAN Services Facilitation Framework, designed to foster transparency and predictability for cross-border trade in services. Several mutual recognition arrangements were also signed, reducing trade impediments and the costs of retesting, inspection, and certification. [The Straits Times]

China hosts Asian countries in Belt and Road-focused expo

(ga) From August 16-20 China hosted the joint 7th China-South Asia Expo and 27th Kunming Import and Export Fair in the Chinese city of Kunming.

The Expo was focused on further developing ties with South Asian countries and promoting China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Chinese sources estimated that there were "representatives and guests from 85 countries and regions". [Xinhua 1] [Xinhua 2] [Belt and Road Initiative] [South China Morning Post 1]

In the Expo's opening ceremony, Wang Yi spoke about the achievements of the BRI and "made suggestions on cooperation in four areas: deepening strategic mutual trust, deepening connectivity, deepening economic and trade cooperation, and deepening people-to-people exchanges". [Xinhua 1]

Notable guests of the Expo included Sri Lankan Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena, Lao Vice President Pany Yathotou, Nepalese Vice President Ram Sahay Prasad Yadav, and Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister Tran Luu Quang.

In bilateral statements with participants, China emphasized a desire for deeper connections and stronger relations with South Asian countries. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke about a Chinese willingness to help Sri Lanka with its ongoing sovereign debt problems, while he and Ramsahay Yadav agreed to continue the development of the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network, a component of the BRI which involves the development of transport links such as roads, rail, and airports. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 1, in Chinese] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 2, in Chinese] [South China Morning Post 2]

In this meeting with Lao Lao Vice President Yathotou, Wang reaffirmed China's commitment to expanding the "all-round and all-field cooperation" between the two socialist countries. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 3, in Chinese]

The Expo comes in the wake of recent tensions in the South China Sea between China and other claimants to the area, notably the Philippines, whose vessels Chinese Coast Guard ships shot with water cannons, and Vietnam [see AiR No. 33, August/2023, 3].

In a meeting with Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Tran, Wang urged Vietnam to "jointly uphold the ideals and beliefs of the [Communist] Party and its socialist directions", emphasizing a need to work together in the region to promote stability and prevent foreign interference. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 4, in Chinese]

Wang also professed China's desire to work in concert with ASEAN countries "to oppose provocative interference by extraterritorial forces and maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea and the region".

These remarks come before China and ASEAN are expected to continue the development of a South China Sea code of conduct in Manila this week. [South China Morning Post 2]

Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu visits Russia, Belarus

(ga) Chinese Minister of Defense Li Shangfu visited Russia and Belarus last week on a trip from August 14-19.

Li's visit to Russia included participation in the Moscow Conference on International Security (MCIS), where he

spoke about China's international security ambitions and met with Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu, as well as other countries' defense representatives. In Belarus, Li met with Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and visited Belarusian military departments, agreeing with Lukashenka to upgrade Sino-Belarusian relations to "an all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership". [Ministry of National Defense, China 1] [Reuters] [CNN] [Xinhua 1]

Speaking at the MCIS, Li emphasized China's Global Security Initiative (GSI), launched by Xi Jinping in February, aimed at using diplomatic pressure and dialogue to solve international issues while presenting Beijing as an international peace-making force. The GSI is widely seen as an attempt to cast Western foreign policy, particularly sanctions, in a negative light. [Radio Free Europe] [South China Morning Post 1]

In his speech, Li further noted that China was willing to participate in more joint military exercises and to hold those exercises in more domains, claiming that "Chinese armed forces remain steadfast in safeguarding world peace". [Radio Free Europe] [Xinhua 2]

Li's speech also addressed the Taiwan dispute, making veiled warnings towards the United States that "attempts to 'use Taiwan to contain China,' would 'surely end in failure,'", and warning against "playing with fire". [CNN]

While in Moscow, Li met with Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu and discussed Sino-Russian military cooperation, reiterating the two countries' partnership. [CNN] [South China Morning Post]

Li also had bilateral meetings with defense representatives from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kazakhstan, Vietnam, Israel, and other countries at the conference. This marked Li's second trip to Russia this year, having met Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow in April [see AiR No. 16, April/2023, 3]. [CNN] [Radio Free Europe] [Reuters]

China's ties with Russia and Belarus have come under scrutiny in the wake of the Russian war against Ukraine. China claims to be a neutral party to the conflict and has denied providing military assistance to Russia, but the US has reported that Beijing has sent lots of dual-use technology for Moscow to use. [Yahoo! News]

During his visit to Belarus and meeting with President Lukashenka, Li agreed to further Sino-Belarusian

military cooperation but did not specify what that cooperation would be beyond holding joint military exercises in 2024. Lukashenka said that any Chinese military aid would not be used against other countries, most likely a reference to the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine in order to keep Beijing's appearance of neutrality in the conflict, in which Belarus has supported Russia. [Ministry of National Defense, China 2, in Chinese] [PBS]

China prepares for the BRICS Summit

(ic) The 15th BRICS Summit, which will see Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa gathered together, will meet from August 22-24 in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Russian President Vladimir Putin will not attend this summit in person, as South Africa is bound in principle to arrest him under an arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court; in his stead, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov will attend the summit. [Associated Press 1]

Nevertheless, BRICS nations appear to be bound by their status in opposition to what they perceive as a Western-led global order and have received 23 formal applications to join the bloc. [Channel News Asia] One of these aspirants is Indonesian President Joko Widodo, who will also be attending the summit. [South China Morning Post]

The purpose and outcome of this expansion is unclear. While China has expressed a desire to push BRICS to become a full rival to the G7 (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States), South Africa appears to be emphasizing that any BRICS expansion should not be interpreted as an anti-West move. [Financial Times]

Nevertheless, in the lead-up to the summit, China and India have pledged to keep the peace for this duration. The agreement suggests that they will seek to avoid clashes at the moment and also pursue intensified diplomatic negotiations to resolve their border issues. [Associated Press 2] [Ministry of Defense, China]

China responds to Trilateral Leaders' Summit at Camp David

(ic) In response to the Trilateral Leaders' Summit between Japan, South Korea and the US on August 18

(see article in this edition), China's foreign ministry has called the meeting an attempt to create a 'mini-NATO' in Asia, referring to it as contradictory to the objective of a free and open Indo-Pacific region. The ministry accused "the parties concerned," of "cobbling together exclusionary groupings," and of using "the Korean Peninsula issues as a pretext to strengthen military cooperation and seek selfish geopolitical gains." [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

Six hours after the conclusion of the summit, China would launch renewed military drills near Taiwan in what analysts are calling a show of force. [Reuters] [The Korea Times]

G20 Health Ministers' Meeting ends without Joint Statement due to objections from Russia, China

(ic) The G20 Health Ministers' Meeting took place during August 18-19. Similar to other G20 meetings in 2023, this meeting ended without an official statement being released, as China and Russia objected to clauses in the document which condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Their respective delegations noted that this was the sole issue causing them to withhold their support for the statement, which is otherwise nothing out of the ordinary. [The Wire]

Japan scrambles fighter jets in response to Chinese and Russian naval patrol

(ed) On August 18, Japan scrambled its fighter jets in response to a joint Chinese and Russian naval patrol being conducted in between the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. Two Russian information-gathering aircraft were also spotted in the drills.

According to Japan's defense ministry, the Chinese and Russian drills included anti-submarine exercises, defending against a simulated air raid, rescue training and helicopter takeoff training. [Reuters]

On the day before, on August 17, a total of 11 Chinese and Russian ships sailed through Japanese waters in the southern Okinawa Prefecture. The ships sailed in between the main island of Okinawa and Miyako Island, heading towards the East China Sea.

Japan criticized the incursion, expressing its “grave concerns” over the show of force. The defense ministry stated it had addressed its concerns through diplomatic channels. [Kyodo News]

Japan, USA and Australia considering joint naval drill in the Philippines

(ed) Japan, the US and Australia are supposedly considering sending naval vessels to the Philippines to conduct a joint naval drill in the South China Sea next week.

The trilateral exercise is designed to show how the three countries are committed to upholding freedom of navigation in the South China Sea region. The Philippines will not join in the drill since its warships are too small for the other nations’ aircraft to land on, but commanders from the four countries may gather in Manila to send a “strong message”.

The Philippines has been deepening its cooperation with the US, Japan and Australia in the face of China’s growing assertiveness in the region. Tensions have been rising over the two countries’ overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea. Earlier this month a Chinese coast guard vessel fired a water cannon at a Philippine military-chartered boat near the Philippine-controlled Second Thomas Shoal. [Kyodo News]

Multilateral humanitarian exercise in Mongolia

(tb) On August 21-25, the 16th multilateral humanitarian ‘Angel’ exercise is being held in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

Among others, countries like the United States, Nepal, and Thailand participate. The endeavor will encompass medical initiatives, dental initiatives, and optometry initiatives. This will also involve exchanges of subject-matter experts, as well as programs for civic and engineering assistance.

The operation conducted in the previous year occurred in Malaysia between August 15 and 19. It engaged the air forces of the United States, Malaysia, and Australia, in addition to non-governmental organizations and observers from Mongolia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. [Star and Stripes]

Asia-Pacific Parliamentary Forum on Global Health in Mongolia

(tb) The 7th Session of the Asia-Pacific Parliamentarian Forum on Global Health, themed "Envisioning the Future of Primary Healthcare," is being held in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia on August 21-23.

More than 70 delegates, including 15 parliamentarians, speakers, and Health Ministers from various countries such as the Republic of Vanuatu, Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Kingdom of Cambodia, as well as representatives from the World Health Organization, are participating in the event.

The goals of the meeting are the following: Firstly, to offer contemporary, evidence-driven approaches to enhance Primary Health Care (PHC) policies for the future that is drawing from the Regional Framework on the Future of Primary Health Care in the Western Pacific. Secondly, extend invitations and facilitate the exchange of insights from parliamentarians' respective countries to endorse and bolster PHC reform via their fundamental roles, capitalizing on local prospects. Thirdly, to showcase and exchange pioneering strategies for advancing PHC, encompassing technological advancements, novel financing models, and collaborations that tackle PHC-related challenges. Lastly, to explore and disseminate prospects for parliamentarians to advocate for PHC beyond the health domain, including fostering partnerships on a global, regional, national, and local scale.

Established in 2015 with WHO support, the Asia-Pacific Parliamentarian Forum on Global Health fosters collaboration among parliamentarians from 30 countries in the WHO Western Pacific Region and ASEAN. It facilitates idea exchange, builds political will, and strengthens the capacity for sustainable health action, with the WHO Western Pacific Region Office serving as the secretariat. [Montsame] [WHO]

North Korean leader Kin Jong-un oversees strategic cruise missiles test amidst South Korea-US military drills

(tms) North Korean leader Kim Jong-un personally supervised a test of strategic cruise missiles, according to the state news agency KCNA.

The test took place aboard a warship on the east coast, aimed at verifying the ship's combat capabilities and missile system features. The missile reportedly hit its intended target.

Coinciding with this missile test, South Korea and the United States commenced their annual Ulchi Freedom Shield summer exercises, designed to improve joint responses to North Korea's nuclear and missile threats. North Korea has consistently condemned these drills as a rehearsal for nuclear warfare.

Choi Il, an expert in naval power, explained that the tested missiles can cover distances exceeding 1,000 kilometers (621 miles) and can hit land-based targets.

During the test, Kim pledged to bolster the navy's combat efficiency and modernize its offensive and defensive capabilities both on the surface and underwater. [Reuters]

Yoon, Biden, Kishida hold summit at Camp David

(cx/eg) South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, US President Joe Biden, and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida held a trilateral summit at the Camp David presidential retreat in Maryland on August 18. The meeting – the first standalone meeting between the three nations – is widely seen as marking a new chapter in trilateral cooperation, as the three countries established an institutional basis to cement trilateral cooperation.

The summit produced a series of documents that solidified three-way cooperation, underscoring their deepening solidarity in the face of intensifying security challenges posed by North Korea, China, and Russia.

The documents adopted in this summit include “Commitment to Consult,” an agreement for all three countries to consult with one another in the event of a common threat and to coordinate their responses to regional challenges. They pledged to establish a three-way hotline to communicate during moments of crisis and uncertainty, strengthening their common security platform.

In their joint statement “Spirit of Camp David,” the three countries outlined their joint vision for a new era of trilateral partnership in advancing security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. They agreed to operate a real-time sharing of missile warning data on North Korea by the end of this year

and agreed to hold high level trilateral talks and "annual, named, multi-domain trilateral exercises" to enhance their coordinated defense capabilities against North Korean threats.

Biden reaffirmed US extended deterrence commitments to South Korea and Japan and the three leaders called for the “complete denuclearization” of North Korea and announced the creation of a trilateral working group to combat the North’s cyber threats and their cyber-enabled sanctions evasion. The leaders also stated their commitment to upholding the status quo in the waters of the Indo-Pacific, noting aggressive action by China in advancing unlawful maritime claims.

The three leaders further agreed to cooperate in economic security and technology spheres, prioritizing supply chain resilience for semiconductors and batteries. Notably, during the summit, the three countries agreed to launch a new “Supply Chain Early Warning System Pilot” which will alert each other of supply chain disruptions of critical materials or goods. The leaders also pledged to collaborate in sectors such as clean energy and energy security, biotechnology, critical minerals, pharmaceuticals, artificial intelligence, quantum computing and scientific research.

Additionally, in the “Camp David Principles,” the three countries affirmed their shared vision for their partnership and the Indo-Pacific region, grounded in their shared norms, common values, respect for international law and robust collaboration with ASEAN and Pacific Island countries. This document also mentioned the importance of peace across the Taiwan Strait and called for peaceful resolution to the region’s disputes.

Moreover, the leaders pledged to establish the South Korea-US-Japan Indo-Pacific dialogue and agreed create a consultative body for development policy coordination to build cooperation framework in sectors such as global health and female empowerment.

The three leaders also met bilaterally on the sidelines of the gathering. Yoon and Biden agreed to cooperate on strengthening extended deterrence, while Yoon and Kishida welcomed the “rapid normalization” of cooperation between the two countries. Kishida and Biden agreed to proceed with a project between Japan and the USA to jointly develop a new type of missile capable of intercepting hypersonic weapons. The two countries will formalize the agreement next year, aiming to produce the missile interceptor by the 2030s. The agreement comes as China, North Korea and

Russia have all strengthened their hypersonic arsenals.

While this summit established a stronger foundation for trilateral relations, officials have denied that the three countries are on course towards a formal alliance commitment. Notably, there remain constraints in South Korean-Japanese relations due to long-standing historical and territorial disputes. The recent thawing of relations came after Yoon's decision to resolve Japan's wartime forced labor issue and North Korea's increasing nuclear and missile threat. [Reuters] [Yonhap 1] [Yonhap 2] [Yonhap 3] [Yonhap 4] [Korea JoongAng Daily] [The White House] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea 1] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea 2] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea 3] [Kyodo News]

Reactions to the summit have been negative in China, whose state-run media accused the agreement of being an "anti-China pantomime" and a "mini NATO" in East Asia. [Global Times]

South Korea-US: Ulchi Freedom Shield exercise bolsters readiness amid tensions

(cx) South Korea and the US launched the Ulchi Freedom Shield (UFS) exercise on August 21 to strengthen their joint readiness posture in the face of escalating tensions stemming from North Korea's missile tests and escalating rhetoric.

The annual UFS exercise will run for 11 days and is based on an all-out war scenario. Participants will engage in contingency drills, including computer simulation-based command post exercises, concurrent field training, and Ulchi civil defense drills. Notably, this year's exercises also simulate rapid transitions into wartime conditions and responses to potential misinformation campaigns by North Korea during wartimes.

In tandem with the UFS exercise, the South Korean Navy's 3rd Fleet Command carried out integrated maritime traffic control and protection training. This involved civilian, government, military, and police vessels collaborating to ensure the safety of ships during maritime threats and maintain smooth military operations. These exercises reinforce overall maritime readiness.

The Air Force and Marine Corps also joined the preparations through anti-terrorism drills. Their exercises encompassed scenarios involving explosive

drone attacks and vehicle ambushes. These drills aim to improve comprehensive countermeasures against simultaneous attacks.

Furthermore, the South Korean Air Force executed air defense drills across 12 units using 20 aircraft to enhance combat readiness. These drills focused on tracking and intercepting enemy aircraft, as well as practicing missile defense using surface-to-air systems.

According to a Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) official, around 30 allied field training events are planned to take place during the entire exercise period, an increase from this year's springtime Freedom Shield exercise and last year's UFS exercise.

Aside from South Korean and US participants, personnel from nine member countries of the UN Command (UNC) will join the exercise, namely, Australia, Canada, France, Britain, Greece, Italy, New Zealand, the Philippines and Thailand. Additionally, the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission will also attend the drills, including representatives from Sweden and Switzerland.

This year's exercise began as North Korean state media reported that the country's leader Kim Jong-un oversaw cruise missile tests from a warship in an apparent protest against the drills. North Korea has previously accused the allied drills of being precursors to an invasion (see article in this edition).

While presiding over the National Security Council meeting President Yoon Seok-yeol emphasized the crucial role of the UFS exercise in safeguarding national security by demonstrating overwhelming military capabilities.

As the UFS exercise unfolds, the South Korean military is heightening its readiness against potential provocations by Pyongyang. Notably, South Korea's spy agency told lawmakers on August 17 during a closed-door briefing that the North is preparing various provocations in time for the combined drills, including an intercontinental ballistic missile launch. [Yonhap 1] [Yonhap 2] [Ministry of National Defense, South Korea 1] [Ministry of National Defense, South Korea 2] [Office of the President, South Korea]

South Korean Navy to join multinational Indo-Pacific humanitarian exercise

(cx) The South Korean Navy will participate in an annual multinational humanitarian assistance exercise in the Indo-Pacific this month to bolster its operational capabilities.

The annual exercise is led by the US Pacific Fleet and involves additional personnel from Australia, Britain, Japan and New Zealand. It was launched in 2004 to overcome devastation caused by a tsunami that hit South and Southeast Asia.

Since 2007, South Korea has primarily sent medical staff to the exercise, but this year plans to send a warship, engineering personnel, marines, and civilian experts to bolster disaster response and humanitarian aid capabilities as well as enhance military cooperation with participating countries.

The navy is expected to send The Cheonjabong landing ship and 180 personnel to participate in the exercise, which began on August 9 and will run through November 21. The South Korean contingent is set to join parts of the exercise in the Philippines and Malaysia from August 21 to September 16.

From August 21-31, South Korean personnel will join drills in the vicinity of San Fernando in the Philippines. It will help construct a local school and engage in drills on treating and transporting patients and responding to infectious animal diseases.

From September 5-16, the contingent will conduct drills in Malaysia on establishing a field hospital, responding to disaster and combat casualties, and aid in building a new school. [Yonhap] [Ministry of National Defense, South Korea]

South Korea welcomes first UN meeting on North Korea's human rights in six years

(cx) South Korea's Foreign Ministry welcomed a rare public meeting by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on North Korea's human rights on August 17.

The meeting discussed North Korea's human rights situation and international security as requested by Albania, Japan and the US. The meeting marked the first open meeting of the UNSC on Pyongyang's human rights violations since 2017.

South Korea participated in the meeting as a country involved in the issue and urged the UNSC to address the rights violations in North Korea. The ministry

pledged to continue discussion on the issue at the UNSC when it serves as a non-permanent member from 2024-2025. [Yonhap] [Ministry of Foreign Ministry, South Korea]

South Korea attends APEC's Senior Officials' Meeting

(cx) South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Director of International Economic Affairs Ahn Se-ryung attended the 3rd Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM3) of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) held in Seattle, from August 16-17.

This Senior Officials' Meeting consisted of reviewing discussions and initiatives within APEC, assessing the progress of ongoing projects, and planning for the upcoming November Summit and Ministerial Meetings.

During the meeting, Director Ahn presented South Korea's efforts toward achieving carbon neutrality and green growth, aligning with APEC's vision and action plan. She also expressed South Korea's support for a rules-based multilateral trading system and regional economic integration efforts. South Korea also pledged contributions to advancing the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) and shared plans for its 2023 and 2024 APEC projects.

Additionally, in preparation for South Korea's chairmanship of APEC in 2025, discussions were held with China, Japan, APEC's senior officials, and APEC's Secretariat, Rebecca Fatima. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea]

Taiwanese vice president attends Paraguayan president's inauguration, makes second stop off in USA

(ed) On August 15, Taiwan's Vice President Lai Ching-te and frontrunner for the upcoming presidential election attended Santiago Peña's inauguration as Paraguay's new president.

Paraguay is one of only 13 countries to maintain official diplomatic relations with Taiwan. The new Paraguayan President Peña was elected against his rival Efrain Alegre, who, with the support of beef and soy industry, campaigned to switch Paraguay's official allegiance to Chin. Peña visited Taiwan before his

inauguration, where he promised continued cooperation between the two countries [see AiR No.29, July/2023, 3] [Reuters]

During his inauguration, President Peña stated that Paraguay and Taiwan are "not just allies, but also brothers". Lai explained how his visit to Paraguay would show the world that "Taiwan is a country that persists in its democracy, human rights and freedom and actively takes part in international affairs". [AP]

Lai caused a diplomatic stir with China by making a visit to the United States en route to Paraguay [see AiR No.33, August/2023, 3]. Before returning to Taiwan, Lai made a stop off in San Francisco, where he spoke at a banquet of overseas Taiwanese. During his speech, which was reportedly well received, he stated his wish to make Taiwan the world's "MVP" of democracy, and to make Taiwan the "Silicon Valley of Asia". [Office of the President of the Republic of China (Taiwan) 1] [Taiwan News]

Lai's trip to the US and Paraguay inflamed tensions with China, which views Taiwan as its own territory and condemns any attempt by the island to conduct any independent diplomacy. However, analysts suggested that despite Beijing's anger at Lai's trip, the drills conducted by the Chinese military in response were "more restrained" than those seen after President Tsai Ing-wen met with US officials in April and last August.

China most likely conducted its recent drills around Taiwan in proportion to Lai's visit, which was relatively understated regarding cross-Strait relations. [SCMP]

Lai returned to Taiwan on August 18, where he thanked the Taiwanese people for making the international community see Taiwan as a force for good. [Office of the President of the Republic of China (Taiwan) 2]

Bangladesh's BRICS membership hinges on member consensus amid expansion debate

(tms) Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Dr. AK Abdul Momen remarked that the prospect of BRICS expansion and Bangladesh's inclusion ultimately rests upon the consensus among existing BRICS members, as a debate on the matter persists.

Minister Momen emphasized the importance of Bangladesh's efforts to strengthen ties with African

nations and revealed that Bangladesh has established two diplomatic missions there.

Regarding BRICS expansion, India's Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Arindam Bagchi stated that the members are currently engaged in internal discussions on the guiding principles, criteria, and procedures for expansion. China reaffirmed its commitment to BRICS expansion, emphasizing that all five members have reached a political consensus on the matter.

Earlier in June, Minister Momen expressed Bangladesh's interest in joining BRICS if formally invited and mentioned that discussions were underway to consider emerging economies like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Indonesia, and Bangladesh for inclusion.

Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina is expected to attend the upcoming BRICS Summit in South Africa from August 22 to 24.

The Summit will encompass engagements with businesses through the BRICS Business Forum and interactions with the New Development Bank and BRICS Business Council. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh, UN Development Programme sign agreements for village courts and inclusivity projects

(tms) Bangladesh and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have officially inked agreements for two projects, namely "Activating Village Courts in Bangladesh, Phase-III" (AVCB) and "Partnerships for a More Tolerant, Inclusive Bangladesh, Phase-II".

The projects aim to enhance local dispute resolution through strengthening Village Courts and engaging youths in promoting peace, tolerance, and inclusivity. The first project, with a budget of USD 50 million, will extend operations to additional Union Parishads (UPs) while the second project, with a budget of USD 757,453, empowers young advocates to counter hate and radicalism. [BSS]

India, Nepal, Bangladesh reach verbal agreement on electricity transmission

(lm) Bangladesh, India, and Nepal are on the brink of finalizing a trilateral agreement that would enable

Bangladesh to import hydroelectricity from Nepal via India's power grid, marking a significant step in regional connectivity. A formal agreement to this effect is expected to be signed within the next couple of weeks. [The Economic Times]

Beyond its energy security implications, this development offers geopolitical advantages: Dhaka, grappling with extensive power shortages, can balance its energy mix by importing hydroelectricity from Nepal, which has a surplus of such energy. Meanwhile, India's robust infrastructure can facilitate the transmission.

Geopolitically, this move holds significance as it positions Nepal as part of an India-backed connectivity initiative, thereby countering China's Belt and Road Initiative. Additionally, it diversifies Bangladesh's energy sources, potentially reducing its reliance on Russia-financed nuclear energy.

India to hold FTA talks with United Kingdom, European Union, Canada on sidelines of G20 meet

(hp/lm) India intends to engage in bilateral discussions regarding proposed free trade agreements (FTAs) with the United Kingdom (UK), the European Union (EU), and Canada on the sidelines of the G20 Trade and Investment Ministerial Meeting, scheduled to take place from August 23 to 25. The conversations will also encompass topics related to trade logistics and reforms within the World Trade Organisation (WTO). [MoneyControl]

United Kingdom

A high-level delegation from the United Kingdom will be visiting India this week to participate in the G20 meeting in Jaipur, as well as for bilateral talks with India's Commerce and Industry Minister, Piyush Goyal, and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. The visiting British delegation includes UK Secretary of State for Business and Trade, Kemi Badenoch, and Amanda Brooks, Director General for Trade Negotiations at the Department for Business and Trade. [The Economic Times]

The eleventh round of FTA negotiations concluded on July 18, with a joint statement that nine policy areas had been covered in a detailed draft treaty. [The Economic Times]

European Union

Last year, India and the EU relaunched negotiations to forge a FTA, with the aim of completing talks by the end of 2023. In light of this, the EU Executive Vice-President and Commissioner for Trade, Valdis Dombrovskis, expressed eagerness to enhance relations with New Delhi and advance negotiations on an FTA, ahead of this visit to the South Asia nation.

During his visit, Dombrovskis will co-chair the EU-India High-Level Dialogue on Trade and Investment in Delhi alongside Commerce Minister Goyal. He will also attend the G20 Trade and Investment Ministers Meeting in Jaipur. [Firstpost]

India, ASEAN agree to conclude review of existing free trade agreement by 2025

(lm) India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have reached an agreement to complete the review of their existing free trade agreement (FTA) in goods by the year 2025. The FTA between India and the ten-nation ASEAN bloc came into effect thirteen years ago, and Indian businesses have long advocated for its revision [Business Standard]

Global Leaders congratulate India on 77th Independence Day

(lf) India celebrated its 77th Independence Day on August 15, commemorating the day in 1947 when British Rule on the subcontinent ended and the nation was granted Dominion status and self-government following years of being colony. As the celebrations domestically showed the passion and variety of Indian culture, many of the nation's diplomatic bilateral partners issued congratulations and well-wishes for what they hoped would be a very happy and successful Independence Day.

India's Commonwealth partners were among the first to show their appreciation for the country. British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak celebrated at Cambridge University with members of the UK's Indian community. Sunak, who is himself descended from Indian immigrants and is a practising Hindu, attended the event "not as a Prime Minister, but as a Hindu". Justin Trudeau, Canada's prime Minister, likewise congratulated India on its successes since independence, "describing the nation as a "key partner" in promoting "democracy, pluralism and

progress." Australia's Prime Minster Anthony Albanese also hailed that India "can reflect with pride on its success in pursuit of Nehru's dreams", while quoting the nation's first leader in a statement. All three nations maintain large Indian diasporas respectively and saw local celebrations of Indian culture, heritage and religion across their many cities and communities. [NDTV] [Office of the Prime Minister of Canada] [SBS]

The United States also extended their congratulations, with US secretary of State Antony Blinken sending his nation's "warmest wishes" during a recorded statement. Blinken noted that the "US-India relationship is deeper and more expansive than ever" in attempt to court the country's goodwill during his lauding. Russia's Vladimir Putin wrote a congratulatory letter to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Droupadi Murmu, during which he maintained "India enjoys well-earned respect in the world arena". Emmanuel Macron of France also maintained that "India can count on France as a trusted friend and partner, always". [The Hindu] [Times of India]

China's embassy in New Delhi issued their remarks in a post on X, formerly Twitter, maintaining that both nations "helped each other in the struggle for national liberation and independence" and promoted further collaboration as the world's "two largest developing countries". India's immediate neighbours Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka also extended their well wishes for the celebrations. [News 18] [ABP]

India raises concerns to United States over perceived destabilizing efforts, stresses shared regional security

(tms/lm) According to a report in the Kolkatta-based *Anandabazar Patrika* newspaper, India has conveyed its concerns to the United States about perceived actions by Washington that could potentially destabilize Bangladesh's government led by Prime Minister Hasina. [Dhaka Tribune]

Specifically, New Delhi believes that a weakened government under Hasina would negatively impact both India's security as a neighboring country and the overall stability of South Asia. Thus, Indian diplomatic circles emphasize that any potential concessions to Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest Islamist political party in Bangladesh, could lead to the rise of fundamentalism in the country, potentially compromising its liberal environment.

India also questions Washington's visa policy for Bangladesh, viewing it as undue interference. [Announcement of Visa Policy to Promote Democratic Elections in Bangladesh]

Germany, Spain compete for USD 4.8 billion Indian submarine deal

(hp/lm) Two European defence manufacturing companies from Germany and Spain are competing to sign a USD 4.8 billion deal to build six military submarines in India as the South Asian nation aims to bolster its naval capabilities in response to China's increasing naval influence in the Indo-Pacific region. [Bloomberg]

One bid is from Germany's Thyssenkrupp Marine Systems in alliance with the Mumbai-based Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited; a memorandum of understanding was signed in the presence of German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius, who visited India in early June [see AiR No. 23, June/2023, 1]. The other bid was submitted by Navantia based in Spain in partnership with India's private shipyard Lauren & Toubro.

With its frequent partner for defense equipment, Russia, is occupied in a war with Ukraine, India has resorted to an alternative to fulfill its demand for new, technologically advanced instruments to build up its naval force. While it is looking for replacements of Russia, India is also trying to build on its agenda to "manufacture complex weapon systems," in its own state as proclaimed by the ministry of defense while announcing its global tenders. [Business Standard] [The Times of India]

China reiterates support for Sri Lanka's debt crisis ahead of first IMF review

(lm) China has once again reiterated its support for Sri Lanka in tackling its debt challenges, ahead of a crucial review by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) next month. Crucially, however, it was not clear if an agreement had been reached between Sri Lanka and its largest bilateral creditor regarding debt treatment. [The Hindu]

In March, Beijing – which owns about 10 percent of Colombo's foreign debt – had given crucial debt restructuring assurances, a major step for Colombo in

securing a USD 2.9 billion IMF lifeline later the same month [see AiR No. 10, March/2023, 1].

However, while the first tranche of the so-called Extended Fund Facility (EFF) was disbursed soon after the IMF approved the bailout, the second instalment is contingent on the Washington-based lenders assessment of Colombo's progress on its commitments, including on debt treatment. An IMF delegation is scheduled to visit the island nation from September 14-27 to conduct the first review of the EFF.

In light of this, Sri Lanka is actively engaging with bilateral creditors to establish the terms of its debt restructuring. Importantly, however, China has so far refused to become a member of the common platform that 17 creditor countries, including India, Japan, and France, set up in May to negotiate Sri Lanka's foreign debt. This decision has raised concerns among other creditors, impacting negotiations.

European Union encourages global integration to help Sri Lanka keep up with region

(lf) The European Union's ambassador to Sri Lanka, Denis Chaibi, emphasized the need for Sri Lanka to enhance its global integration in order to keep up with its regional peers. Chaibi encouraged Sri Lanka to look forward in a speech he delivered on August 17, noting that the nation's trade "strategy relies on elements that will no longer be valid in six years, whereas the rest of the world is moving faster".

Chaibi is referring to the European Union's GSP Plus scheme, which gives Sri Lanka and other developing nation's preferential treatment within trade networks. However, the program is set to be replaced in the near future. GSP Plus was supposed to end in 2024, but was given an extension until 2027 in order for a new trade scheme to be developed. Chaibi warned Sri Lankan nations listening that the nation had to follow the example of countries like Vietnam and Bangladesh, who have made efforts to diversify their bilateral and multilateral trade agreements.

The ambassador's warnings echo concerns within the Sri Lankan government, with President Wickremesinghe indicating his nation's desire to become a party to the RCEP agreement in the near future in a recent speech [see AiR, No. 33, August/2023, 3]. Although Sri Lanka is party to Free-Trade Agreements with India, Singapore and Pakistan, and is in the process of negotiating a similar

agreement with Thailand, Ambassador Chaibi warned that these were simply not enough to support the nation once the preferential treatment of the EU's policies are removed. [Daily Mirror]

Indonesia delays JETP investment plan for public review

(ys) The Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) Secretariat in Jakarta has pushed back the launch of the final Comprehensive Investment and Policy Plan (CIPP) to later this year.

The Secretariat stated that the delay will enable the public to overview the draft and submit comments and feedback. The spokesperson from the US Embassy in Jakarta said that the embassies of the International Partner Group (IPG) will work closely with the JETP Secretariat

The JETP is a multinational aid plan led by the United States and Japan to help countries such as Indonesia transition to a green economy by mobilizing public and private finance. The Secretariat was established to oversee the implementation of the USD 20 billion fund, which was signed in November last year and will require Indonesia to shut down its coal-powered energy. [The Jakarta Post]

Laos receives ADB loan to strengthen healthcare

(dql) Laos will receive a USD 45 million loan from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) that seeks to help the Southeast Asian country boost quality healthcare in 16 districts across 10 provinces.

On August 22, the bank approved the loan for the so-called "Improving the Quality of Health Care Project" that aims at supporting the Lao Ministry of Health in designing and implementing quality of care policies, along upgrading of provincial and district hospitals, and improving hospital management in the involved provinces.

The project is said to benefit some 1.6 million people annually, especially the poor, women, the elderly, those with disabilities, and ethnic groups residing in remote rural areas with insufficient health infrastructure.

While progress has been made since the introduction of the national health insurance scheme in 2015 that covers 94 per cent of the population, with most of the population having access to health facilities within a reasonable travel distance, Laos still lags behind neighboring countries in health sector development. [The Star]

Malaysia and US co-host UN peacekeeping exercise

(ga) Keris Aman 23, a joint military peacekeeping exercise under the auspices of the United Nations (UN), was launched on August 13 and will run until August 26.

The exercise is co-sponsored by Malaysia's military and the United States Military's Indo-Pacific Command and focuses on UN "peacekeeping and stability operations", rehearsing common procedures for use in those operations.

The exercise involves military forces from 19 countries: Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei, Canada, Fiji, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the United States, Uruguay, and Vietnam. [US Embassy, Malaysia]

UN claims PDFs and EAOs obstruct humanitarian aid convoys

(ha) The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the United Nations (UN) relief agency, has voiced criticism against People Defense Forces (PDFs) and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) in Myanmar, accusing them of obstructing "humanitarian movements, detaining private transporters and confiscating relief goods in northern Shan, Chin, Kayah and Sagaing." [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Head of UNOCHA visits Rakhine state

(wn) The head of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), Martin Griffiths, led a delegation that visited refugee camps in Rakhine State. Griffiths also met with

Chairman of the Military Council, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.

The Rakhine government office confirmed that the UNOCHA chief met with the Rakhine Prime Minister during the visit but did not reveal any details of the meeting.

The military council announced that they discussed with Grriffith conditions for further cooperation on humanitarian aid with UNOCHA. [BBC - Burmese]

Speaking after the visit, Griffith called for expanded humanitarian access and increased funding to assist the 18 million people in need of aid across the country.

Over the past years, humanitarian needs in the Southeast Asian country have risen as the number of displaced persons increased fivefold in less than three years, from 380,000 at the start of 2021 to 1.9 million at present. [Relief Web]

Myanmar: Junta leader accuses countries of using USD as a weapon against his country

(ha) At the 11th Moscow Conference on International Security held in Moscow, Russia on August 14, the Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing said in a video message that some countries are "using the dollar, which is related to financial and security issues, as a weapon in trading the main agro-inputs including fuel and chemical fertilizers."

The Myanmar junta leader did not mention any affected countries, but it is obvious that he meant Myanmar,

The statement comes as since the military takeover in February 2021, the Myanmar has been facing shortages of fuel and chemical fertilizer – both of which the country must import. Further complicating the situation, the value of the country's currency, the kyat, against the dollar is deteriorating daily, with the market exchange rate now approaching 4,000 kyats to the greenback. The daily minimum wage in Myanmar is 4,800 kyats.

In addition to this, the US imposed sanctions on two big banks owned by the Myanmar junta government which are important to the military's foreign trade. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar won't assume 2026 rotating chairmanship of ASEAN, media outlets say

(ha) Asian media report that Myanmar does not think it will be able to hold the rotating chairmanship of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2026 due to the civil war situation and humanitarian crises occurring in Myanmar due to the military coup.

Thai PBS and Nikkei Asia report that the Philippines will take over the chairmanship that year while Myanmar plans to take over next year. It is not clear whether ASEAN or Myanmar military junta initiated the movement on this matter because they are silent on the issue.

The current chairmanship of ASEAN is Indonesia followed by Laos next year and Malaysia in 2025 respectively.

In its capacity as ASEAN chair, Myanmar would organize the ASEAN Summit and related summits, the ASEAN Coordinating Council, the three ASEAN Community Councils, relevant ASEAN Sectoral Ministerial Bodies and the Committee of Permanent Representatives.

Further, the ASEAN chair's diplomatic responsibilities also include hosting the East Asia Summit and other meetings attended by countries from beyond the region such as the US, China and Japan. This have raised concerns that a Myanmar chairmanship could lead to diplomatic incidents and exacerbate global tensions.

In addition, ASEAN has banned the Myanmar leadership from its summits since late 2021. [The Irrawaddy]

Leader of Bangladesh's Jatiya Party visits India upon invitation by ruling Bharatiya Janata Party

(lm) GM Quader, the chairman of Bangladesh's Jatiya Party and deputy leader of the parliamentary opposition, has completed a three-day visit to India in response to an invitation from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). While in New Delhi, GM Quader's itinerary included engagements with various echelons of the Indian government and the BJP. [Prothom Alo]

Bangladesh, Singapore pledge to enhance bilateral ties

(tms) Delegations of Bangladesh and Singapore have engaged in discussions to intensify their economic collaboration and mutual benefits during the recent Foreign Office Consultations (FOC). A key focus was the swift repatriation of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar and Bangladesh's inclusion as a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN. [Dhaka Tribune]

After an over-eight-year hiatus, the FOC addressed a wide spectrum of bilateral ties, encompassing trade, investment, energy, connectivity, tourism, culture, security, agriculture, and more. Progress on a proposed bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was evaluated, with both nations determined to conclude it promptly to elevate trade and economic cooperation.

The Bangladesh-Singapore Joint Working Group, formed under a recent Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC), was praised for its consistent functioning. Bangladesh urged Singapore to consider it as a source for various goods, such as RMG, pharmaceuticals, and more.

Bangladesh to discuss regional stability, trade with China at BRICS summit

(tms) Bangladesh is seeking to engage with Chinese President Xi Jinping during a potential meeting at the BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa. Foreign Minister if Bangladesh Dr AK Abdul Momen indicated that the topics of discussion could include regional peace and stability, as well as matters related to trade, investment, and loans.

While the details of the meeting are yet to be finalized, a senior official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs mentioned that the bilateral discussion between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and President Xi Jinping is likely to occur on August 23.

This potential meeting follows the talks held between President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on October 14, 2016, in Dhaka. During that meeting, both leaders expressed positive sentiments about the traditional friendship between China and Bangladesh and discussed progress achieved through bilateral cooperation. [The Daily Star]

In separate developments, China's Ambassador to Bangladesh, Yao Wen, has reiterated his country's commitment to non-interference in the internal matters and political affairs of other nations during a meeting with Bangladesh's Planning Minister, MA Mannan. Furthermore, the Chinese top diplomat expressed Beijing's willingness to share its wealth of experience in infrastructural development with Bangladesh.

Wen also indicated that Chinese investors are interested in the solar power and electric vehicle sectors of Bangladesh. The discussions also included potential training opportunities for officials from the Ministry of Planning in China, allowing them to acquire expertise in relevant fields. [BSS]

Sri Lanka repays USD 50 million out of USD 200 million loan to Bangladesh

(tms) Sri Lanka has repaid USD 50 million out of the USD 200 million loan provided by Bangladesh during its economic crisis 2021 under a currency swap agreement, with a requirement for repayment within three months. [The Straits Times]

While the country had received the loan in three installments, the repayment timeline had been extended multiple times. The remaining installments are expected to be repaid later this month, and Bangladesh anticipates the full loan to be repaid within the year. [UNB]

Bangladesh rejects US suggestion to integrate Rohingya, urges repatriation

(tms) Bangladesh has declined a proposal from United States Congressmen Ed Case and Richard McCormick, who had recently visited Dhaka, to assimilate the Rohingya population by providing them with education and skills. Momen clarified that while Western nations may assume Bangladesh's inclination to absorb Rohingya refugees due to their presence in the country, the primary focus is on facilitating their safe return to Myanmar and suggested that Washington could consider accommodating some of the Rohingya population. [The Business Standard]

Cambodia-Indonesia: Agreement on export of rice and fertilizers

(dql) During a meeting between Indonesian Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Pahala Nugraha Mansury and Soeung Rathchavy, Secretary of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MFAIC), on August 15, the former announced Jakarta's plans to import rice from Cambodia and export fertilizers to the country, in a bid to boost food security in both countries.

The two sides also agreed to work together in other areas such as political-security, trade, tourism, education, health, and agriculture.

In addition, the preparations for the upcoming summit between new Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet and President Joko Widodo on the sidelines of the 43rd ASEAN Summit and Related Summits in Jakarta were exchanged. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia-Thailand: Joint disaster relief exercise completed

(dql) On August 18, 32 Special Forces Command officers of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) completed a 13-day joint exercise with counterparts from the Thai Special Warfare Command in Thailand's central Lopburi province.

The focus of the drill was put on the rescue of victims of natural disasters and other calamities, in addition to building and promoting bilateral cooperation between the two forces. [Khmer Times]

Cambodian provincial police tighten security at border to Thailand

(dql) The Banteay Meanchey provincial police has announced that it has tightened security along Cambodian-Thai border.

The move came after the seizure of four illegal mobile phone transmission antennas and order of re-positioning of 23 licensed antennas in the bordering Thai Sa Kaeo province by Thai authorities. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia-Vietnam: Defense cooperation to be strengthened

(dql) During a meeting between Maj. Gen. Pham Truong Son, Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) and Lieut. Gen. Neum Balen, head of the Operations Department under the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces High Command, in Hanoi on August 18, the two sides agreed to deepen cooperation in defense, highlighting working together in security and order in border areas, as well as in intensifying training and assistance for each other. [Khmer Times]

China plans response to US tech investment restrictions, invites US Commerce Secretary to Beijing

(ga) Last week the Chinese Ministry of Commerce invited US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo to Beijing to discuss the technology investment restrictions created by a recent US executive order. In the same statement, the ministry said China is making an internal assessment of the order's impact in consultation with businesses to decide what response and countermeasures to take. [ABC] [CNBC]

The August 9 executive order signed by US President Joe Biden places restrictions on US investments in Chinese companies developing sensitive technologies, notably semiconductors, micro-electronics, quantum computing technology, and artificial intelligence. The stated aim of the order is to prevent the development of technologies in China which would be applied to Chinese military strengthening. The US Secretaries of Treasury and Commerce are jointly responsible for determining which investments are to be restricted under this order, precipitating the invitation of Secretary Raimondo to Beijing [see AiR No. 33, August/2023, 3].

Secretary Raimondo is reportedly considering forming a working group with her Chinese counterparts on her visit to Beijing to discuss the specifics and methods of implementation of US export and investment restrictions under this executive order. Republicans from the US Congress are urging Secretary Raimondo not to consider this, claiming that China is insincere in addressing the problems over which the investment restrictions have been implemented. [Yahoo! News]

The Chinese Ministry of Commerce also announced its intention last week to "promote and strengthen policy

support for inbound foreign investment". The ministry discussed plans to optimize the foreign investment environment, further pursue economic opening up and reform, and to deepen reforms in free trade zones and the Hainan Free Trade Port to facilitate trade. More specifically, the Ministry announced its intention to shorten the list of industries which can't receive foreign investment and to expand market access for foreign investment. [Xinhua]

These moves come on the heels of the US executive order, slowing Chinese economic growth, and reports that foreign companies have been nervous to invest in China recently due to calls by Chinese President Xi Jinping for economic self-reliance. [ABC]

US businesses have also been unsure about the impacts of the executive order, with fears in the business community that the investment restrictions lay the groundwork for further restrictions on investment in China going forward. Concerns internationally about the potential for tit-for-tat responses by China or further US restrictions could contribute to capital flight from China and the building of supply chains excluding China. [Reuters]

China and Vietnam fortify South China Sea islands, stoking tensions

(ga) Satellite photos in the South China Sea released on August 15 suggest that China is creating a runway for airplanes on Triton Island in the Paracels, claimed by China, Vietnam, and Taiwan.

China has had installations on Triton for several years, including a harbor, buildings, a helicopter landing pad, and radar arrays. The new construction looks similar to other projects China has undertaken on the Spratly islands in the South China Sea, although it is in a comparatively early stage of development. As a result of this, some analysts are conflicted over whether or not the substantial construction is of a runway. If the construction is of a runway, it is estimated that the runway's length could accommodate "turboprop aircraft and drones, but not fighter jets or bombers". [ABC Australia] [AP]

Meanwhile, a leaked Vietnamese government document last week reportedly shows plans to increase Vietnam's military presence on the Spratly Islands that they control, specifically Pearson Reef and Pigeon Reef. A Vietnamese document detailing the plans reportedly suggests the construction of a dock, upgrades to missile and anti-aircraft facilities, and

construction to facilitate military and civilian occupation of the island such as housing and wastewater treatment. These reefs are also claimed by China and the Philippines and could prompt those countries to fortify their own positions in the area. [Nikkei Asia]

China has overlapping claims to the South China Sea with a number of other claimants, including Vietnam, Taiwan, and the Philippines. In spite of an international ruling in 2016 that China's claims to the South China Sea were invalid, China maintains a claim on nearly all of the South China Sea. These overlapping claims have caused tensions between China and its neighbors, with multiple countries fortifying their respective holdings within the South China Sea, leading to incidents such as a recent clash between Chinese Coast Guard vessels and Philippine vessels en route to resupply a Philippine outpost. [AiR No. 33, August/2023, 3]

Increasing tensions in the South China Sea could undermine ongoing talks between China and the members of ASEAN over an agreed code of conduct in the region. [Nikkei Asia]

German Deputy Chancellor proposes tougher rules on Chinese foreign direct investment

(ic) Deputy Chancellor and Economy Minister Robert Habeck recently called for harsher restrictions on Chinese investment flowing into Germany. [Berliner Zeitung]

Habeck has often been at odds with Chancellor Olaf Scholz regarding their approaches to China. This is indicative between a broader split between the Social Democratic Party (SPD), represented by Chancellor Scholz, and their junior coalition partners the Greens, whose leaders Habeck and Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock. Where the SPD have often pursued generally conciliatory foreign policies focused on trade, the Greens have pushed for a foreign policy framed through the protection of German interests and values. [Agenzia Nova] [Spiegel]

In May, Habeck criticized Scholz for his approval of a Chinese investment into a port terminal in Hamburg. [Politico] In June, Chinese Premier Li Qiang visited Berlin, and the trip was hoped to lower the preference for de-risking in Europe. [Global Times] In July, Germany would publish its China strategy, to dismay from the Chinese. [Federal Foreign Office] [South China Morning Post] It is unknown when the winds of

German foreign policy regarding China will next shift, and in what direction.

Australian Foreign Minister to host Chinese official for talks

(ic) Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong is reportedly arranging a visit by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at an “appropriate time”. This is in light of an improved diplomatic relationship between the two countries in recent months, in particular with China lifting its tariff on imports of Australian barley. [Straits Times]

British Foreign Minister to Visit China

(ic) Three unnamed sources have reported that British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly is due to visit China at the end of August. This visit is reportedly a month overdue; Cleverly was to visit in July but was unable to due to the absence of then-Foreign Minister Qin Gang. [Reuters]

This is after British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak declared China the top challenge to global security at a G7 Summit in May. [Politico] He has reportedly shifted towards a more conciliatory policy in June, however. [Bloomberg]

China-Iran: Phone call between foreign ministers signals closer cooperation

(ms) In a telephone conversation between China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian on August 20, both sides spoke out in favor of further intensifying bilateral relations.

In particular, the timing, shortly before the BRICS meeting in South Africa on August 22, is significant. Iran has been interested in joining the alliance for several years now, and the talks with China could be an indication of its support for these efforts. In general, China positions itself for an expansion of the member states and besides Iran, China for example assured Argentina in the course of discussions on their Free Trade Agreement support in the efforts to join.

With regard to concrete results or content of the talks, both parties were rather reserved. China assured Iran that it would support them in safeguarding their common core interests, above all the country's sovereignty and the fight against external influence. Iran, meanwhile, pledged its commitment to the BRI and to strengthening cooperation with China.

In addition to bilateral relations, the Iran nuclear deal is also said to have been a topic. After the U.S. withdrew from the deal under the Trump administration, China once again positioned itself in a leading role in the realization of the deal.

Another topic was the improvement of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, in which China played a very prominent role. Wang stressed during the meeting that China "appreciates the correct decision made by the Iranian side" and that it will continue to support the region and its countries in their development. [Al Jazeera] [Reuters] [South China Morning Post] [Xinhua]

Chinese weapon expands influence in West Africa by opening sales office in Senegal

(ms) China's state-owned defense conglomerate, Norinco, is strategically extending its footprint in the West African arms market by establishing a new office in Senegal. This development presents a potential challenge to traditional players like Russia and France in the region's defense sector.

The establishment of Norinco's office in Senegal marks a significant step in its expansion strategy in the region. The company has been actively securing contracts across West African nations, including Nigeria and Ghana, by offering an array of military hardware and technology solutions. This includes artillery, armored vehicles, surveillance systems, and communication technology.

The entrance of Norinco into this market presents a direct challenge to Russia and France, which have historically dominated arms trade in the region. By offering an alternative source for arms procurement, Norinco aims to diversify the options available to West African countries, potentially shifting the balance of influence. [South China Morning Post]

No breakthrough in 19th round of India-China military talks on resolving Ladakh standoff

(hp/lm) On August 14-15, high-ranking military officials from India and China engaged in their 19th round of discussions at the Chushul border meeting point in Eastern Ladakh. However, the talks did not yield any headway regarding the troop face-off at Depsang Plains and Demchok. This lack of progress comes in light of reports indicating that China continues to maintain control over additional territories it seized in 2020. [Times of India] [Al Jazeera]

In the aftermath of the so-called Galwan clashes in June 2020, a series of meetings at the level of corps commanders were convened, leading to a partial reduction in troop presence and the creation of military buffer zones, successfully curbing the potential for further escalation. However, both the Indian and Chinese armed forces still have a significant presence with substantial troop numbers and equipment along the Line of Actual Control that serves as a de facto border between the countries in the disputed Himalayan region.

India claims that the People's Liberation Army continues to prevent its soldiers from accessing traditional patrolling points 10, 11, 11A, 12, and 13 in the "Bottleneck" or "Y-junction" area within the Depsang Plains, located about 18 kilometers inside the territory India claims as its own. In fact, China asserts control over as much as 972 square kilometers of territory in this region, which is strategically close to its vital Western Highway G-219 connecting Tibet to Xinjiang. [Tibetan Review]

As a follow up to the 19th round of Corps Commander-level talks, two Major General-level talks were held on August 18. However, no breakthrough was observed on the LAC impasse issue. [The Hindu]

India, United Arab Emirates officially start trading in national currencies

(hp) India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have officially commenced trade using their respective local currencies. New Delhi revealed on August 14 that Indian Oil Corp., the country's leading petroleum refiner, utilized the local rupee to acquire one million barrels of oil from the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company. This transaction marked a departure from

the common practice of using the U.S. dollar for such exchanges. [Yahoo!finance]

During Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Dubai in July 2023, the two countries entered into an agreement that permits trade settlements in local currencies instead of dollars. They also agreed to create a payment link to facilitate easier and smoother cross-border transactions. [AiR No. 29, July/2023, 3]

In recent times, India is working towards expanding the usage of its national currency. It has already established special rupee vostro accounts in twenty-two different countries to facilitate trade in its own currency. [Reuters]

United States Congressman Ro Khanna criticized for meeting controversial scholar during trip to India

(lf/lm) United States Democratic Congressman Ro Khanna has faced backlash for meeting with a scholar who has been accused of promoting an Islamophobic narrative through his social media posts, during his recent trip to India.

Khanna, who is the co-chair of the Congressional India Caucus, was leading a bipartisan congressional delegation to the country of his parents' birth, where he met Indian government officials, business and technology leaders, and Mahatma Gandhi's great-grandson, among others.

On August 14, he met with Abhijeet Iyer-Mitra, an Indian defence and security expert who previously called Khanna's Muslim colleague, Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, a "jihadi" after her sharp exchange with an Indian journalist during a US House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing.

Khanna's meeting with Iyer-Mitra was met with sharp criticism from civil organizations within the United States, especially the Indian-American Muslim Council which maintained in a statement that it was "deeply disappointed" seeing Khanna meeting with an individual whom they described as a "far-right Islamophobe" who promotes "hate and violence" against Muslims. [Al Jazeera] [Hindustan Times]

Russia to deliver remaining two S-400 air defense systems to India by end of 2024,

Moscow says

(hp/lm) A senior Russian defense export official has confirmed that Moscow will deliver an order of S-400 ground-to-air missile defense systems to India on the scheduled time.

In October 2018, India had signed a USD 5.8 billion deal with Russia to acquire five S-400 defense system units, despite a warning from the United States that going ahead with the contract may invite sanctions from Washington under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. The first three systems were delivered in December 2021, April 2022, and March 2023, respectively, and Russia intends to deliver the remaining two systems by the end of 2024. [The Times of India] [Reuters]

Indonesia links the QR payment system with Singapore

(ys) Bank Indonesia (BI) has launched a trial to connect the QR-based payment system with Singapore.

Indonesia has been trying to establish borderless payment, in particular with ASEAN member-states to heighten the group's economic pillar. Last year, Indonesia implemented a similar plan with Thailand and then with Malaysia this May.

The Quick Response Indonesia Standard (QRIS), introduced in May 2019, has been popular in Indonesia as an easy cashless payment and is said to find favor in ASEAN countries. According to BI, at least 36 million people in Indonesia have used QRIS as of July 7. Indonesia is eyeing even more countries to link up the QR payment system. [The Jakarta Post]

Japan and Iran leaders agree to meet in USA

(ed) Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi have agreed to meet in New York in September, according to unnamed Iranian diplomatic sources.

Iran is likely capitalizing on its relatively friendly relationship with Japan to alleviate its international isolation, especially as talks with the United States and Europe regarding its nuclear program have been in standstill since September.

The two countries' foreign ministers met on August 7, where they exchanged "frank" views on Iran's restarted nuclear program. The Japanese foreign minister also pressed Iran on Russia's invasion of Ukraine [see AiR No.32, August/2023, 2].

Kishida and Raisi are likely to discuss the nuclear program, as well as Iran's alleged provision of drones to Russia, which have been extensively used in its invasion of Ukraine. Japan will also ask Iran to maintain the safe passage of its oil imports through Strait of Hormuz. Meanwhile, Raisi is expected to ask Japan to unfreeze Iranian assets worth around 3 billion. [Reuters]

Laos partners with Australia for sustainable energy transition

(ws) On August 10, representatives from the Australian and Lao governments gathered in Vientiane for the inaugural meeting of the Program Steering Committee (PSC) of the Laos-Australia Sustainable Energy Partnership (LASEP). The main focus of LASEP is to aid Laos in its shift towards sustainable energy by concentrating on energy planning and renewable energy technology. [Laotian Times]

Laos-Cambodia: First phase of cross-border QR code payments in Laos launched

(dql) The National Bank of Cambodia (NBC) and Bank of the LAO PDR (BOL), the two countries' central banks, have launched the first phase of cross-border QR code payments in Laos.

The move was made during the 13th multilateral meeting between the two banks on August 18 in Vientiane.

A similar system, allowing Lao tourists to pay for goods and services in Cambodia, is scheduled to be introduced in the fourth quarter of this year. [Laotian Times]

Laos and Thai authorities discuss possibility of expressway construction

(ws) Lao and Thai authorities have engaged in discussions regarding the feasibility of constructing an expressway connecting the provincial capital of Savannakhet to the Laos-Vietnam border, spanning approximately 160 kilometers.

The proposal for this project was brought forward for consideration during a recent meeting between Savannakhet provincial authorities Thai delegates. If materialized, this project would possibly enhance economic activities between Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and beyond since it helps strengthen the regional connectivity plan, namely the East-West Economic Corridor. [Vientiane Times]

Malaysia Foreign Minister Zambry to undertake official visit to Iran

(ic) Malaysian Foreign Minister Zambry Abdul Kadir will embark on his inaugural official visit to Iran from August 20-23, having been invited by his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Amirabdollahian.

The visit will see Zamry meet with Iranian leaders, including a bilateral discussion with Hossein, to continue the discussion they had during the Ministerial Meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) on July 5. [The Star]

Myanmar-China: Military council ministers discuss establishing Lancang border economic zone

(wn) Minister of Investment and Foreign Trade Communications of the Military Council Kan Zaw and, Minister of Information U Maung Maung Ohn travelled last week to Kunming, China, to attend the 7th China-South Asia Expo and the 27th China Kunming Export and Import Fair as well as the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Economic Corridor Governors Forum.

Burmese state-run newspapers reported that the August 17 and 18 meetings aimed to promote trade cooperation among GMS member countries by establishing the Lancang Border Economic Cooperation Zone.

The Burmese delgation highlighted during the meetings that the completion of the China-supported Kunlong Bridge, whose construction begun late

2020 will boost agriculture and livestock exports between Myanmar and China, benefiting both countries' border areas.

Kan Zaw also stressed Myanmar has attracted 597 Chinese investment companies, with a total worth of Chinese investment of nearly USD 21 billion, representing 23.5 percent of the country's foreign investment. [BBC - Burmese] [The Global New Light of Myanmar] [The Irrawaddy]

Bangladesh bank freezes accounts Myanmar state-owned banks

(wn) Bangladesh's state-owned Sonali Bank froze the accounts of two Myanmar state-owned banks on August 16. The two banks are the Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank and the Myanmar Investment and Commercial Bank, with a total of USD 1,1 million deposited at Sonali Bank.

The bank cited for its move a request of the US that has imposed sanctions on the two banks in June. [Irrawaddy, in Burmese] [The Financial Express]

Clothing retailer H&M to stop operating in Myanmar

(wn) Sweden-based clothing company H&M, the world's second-largest fashion retailer, has announced that it will stop operating in Myanmar.

The move comes as H&M is currently investigating 20 allegations of labor rights abuses by Myanmar garment factories that supply the company after the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, an international, nonprofit organization, published findings according to which 156 instances of labor rights violations in Myanmar's garment factories between February 2022 and February 2023 have been recorded, including wage reduction and wage theft as well as unfair dismissal, inhumane working conditions, and forced overtime.

In a separate move, Inditex, the owner of Spanish fashion retailer Zara, announced that it would stop purchasing clothes from Myanmar garment factories. [CNN] [Reuters] [Irrawaddy, in Burmese]

North Korea reports US soldier's intention to seek asylum

(tms) North Korea has publicly acknowledged the detention of US Army Private Travis King, who crossed the inter-Korean border into North Korea on July 18.

The North Korean state media reported that King confessed to illegally intruding due to "inhuman maltreatment and racial discrimination within the U.S. Army" and stated that King expressed a willingness to seek refuge either in North Korea or a third country.

The North's soldiers took custody of King after he crossed into the North's side of the Joint Security Area (JSA) in the Demilitarized Zone.

The US Department of Defense commented that it cannot confirm King's alleged statements and reiterated its priority to bring King back home.

Analysts suggest that North Korea may use King as a propaganda tool or leverage for concessions from the US. [Korea Herald]

North Korea scrambles jets in response to US reconnaissance plane's intrusion

(tms) North Korea's military scrambled fighter jets in response to a US reconnaissance plane entering its economic zone off its eastern coast, as reported by Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

North Korea is contemplating measures to prevent future intrusions, according to the General Staff of the Korean People's Army.

This comes ahead of a summit involving the US, South Korea, and Japan (see article in this edition), where security ties are to be reinforced considering North Korea's nuclear threats and China's growing regional influence. [Korea Times]

North Korea reportedly preparing for military actions, says South Korea

(tms) Lawmaker Yoo Sang-bum from South Korea's ruling People Power Party (PPP) shared information from the National Intelligence Service (NIS) indicating that North Korea is preparing for potential military

provocations, including an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launch.

The NIS has reportedly observed active movements of vehicles linked to ICBM launches in Pyongyang, as well as frequent transfers of propellants from liquid fuel factories.

The NIS highlighted North Korea's economic struggles, with three consecutive years of negative growth leading to a 12 percent GDP decline in 2022 compared to 2016. To address growing dissent and protests due to economic difficulties, the North Korean regime reportedly established a task force to identify dissidents.

Yoo mentioned that North Korea could also conduct joint military exercises, involving the test launch of missiles possibly fitted with tactical nuclear weapons. North Korea might also attempt to launch another military reconnaissance satellite in late August or early September, ahead of the regime's 75th anniversary on September 9.

The annual Ulchi Freedom Shield (UFS) military exercise with the United States is scheduled for August 21 to 31, while a trilateral summit involving South Korea, the US, and Japan took place on August 18 at Camp David. [Yonhap]

Chinese police detain North Korean defectors attempting to reach South Korea

(tms) Two North Korean defectors who were attempting to reach South Korea via China's Jilin Province were recently apprehended by Chinese police.

The incident occurred in mid-July when the defectors boarded a bus destined for the China-Laos border after being promised safe passage to South Korea by a broker.

Rumors have been circulating on social media platforms about defectors detained in Chinese prisons facing potential forced repatriation. The source notes that the two recently arrested defectors represent a pattern of brokers taking advantage of vulnerable individuals.

In contrast to previous practices where individuals could secure release by paying a fine if caught attempting to flee to South Korea, it has become

challenging for detainees to secure their freedom in recent times. [Daily NK]

Philippines President Marcos Jr. appoints outspoken Teodoro Locsin special envoy to China

(ak/lm) Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Has appointed Teodoro Locsin Jr., Manila's foreign secretary under ex-President Rodrigo Duterte, as his Special Envoy to China for Special Concerns, a decision that comes at a delicate time for relations between the two countries. Locsin, who filed numerous diplomatic protests and sometimes tweeted expletives against China, will continue to hold his other role as ambassador to the United Kingdom. [South China Morning Post] [Rappler] [PNA]

The new appointment comes as the West Philippine Sea dispute between the Philippines and China is heating up again. On August 5, Chinese Coast Guard ships fired water cannons at Philippine vessels carrying supplies for Filipino soldiers stationed on one of the contested Spratly Islands. This action has ignited diplomatic tensions and garnered international attention, prompting various countries, including the United States, Japan, and even South Korea, to express their concerns [see AiR No. 32, August/2023, 2].

Against this backdrop, Filippino Foreign Affairs Secretary Enrique Manalo told Parliament's lower House that the government was not on 'war footing' in the West Philippines Sea, adding that the Marcos Jr. administration was trying to protect the country's sovereignty in the Exclusive Economic Zone through diplomatic and peaceful methods based on international law. [Manila Bulletin]

Using a similar language, Manalo told attendees of a dialogue co-organized by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Philippines and the Foreign Service Institute Philippines that Manila is taking proactive steps in the formulation of the "Treaty on the High Seas". [The Manila Times 1]

Meanwhile, a government defense official on August 15 said that Beijing was using psychological warfare to confuse Filipinos on the issue involving the West Philippine Sea. Another defense official said China would contravene all Philippine efforts to attain international prominence by defending its territorial integrity and sovereign rights. [The Manila Times 2]

On August 19, then, Manila announced it would dispatch another resupply mission to the grounded BRP Sierra Madre in the Spratly Islands. [Bloomberg]

South Korea, Canada provide financial aid to support typhoon Egay victims

(ak) South Korea has provided USD 300,000 in humanitarian aid to the Philippines to support the victims of typhoon Egay, which brought widespread flooding and landslides to the Southeast Asian nation earlier this month. Meanwhile, Canada has provided approx. USD 280,000 in humanitarian aid in Cagayan and areas affected by the typhoon. [Manila Times] [PNA]

Philippines and Australia to hold bilateral meeting on September 18

(ak) Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is scheduled to have a bilateral meeting with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in Manila on September 8 to discuss on the bilateral cooperation in key sectors such as defense and security trade. [PNA]

The Philippine Air Force and United States Air Force hold austere medical drills

(ak) The Philippine Air Force and United States Air Force carried out on August 15 and 16 a hands on austere medical care drills to help better respond to future medical threats in Philippines. [PNA]

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is looking for stronger ties with Japan

(ak) Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has shared the importance of looking out for security and defense initiatives to maintain peace in Asia-Pacific as the tensions in the South China Sea and the Korean Peninsula remained.

He made this statement during a meeting with Komeito Party Chief Representative Natsuo Yamaguchi at Malacañan Palace in Manila on August 16. Komeito is the junior partner in the ruling coalition with the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan.

In their conversation, the two sides acknowledge their support on defense cooperation both in bilateral and multilateral relations. [PNA]

Sweden offers JAS-39 aircraft to the Philippines

(ak/lm) In a move to bolster the modernization efforts of the Philippine Air Force (PAF), Sweden has once again extended an offer for its Saab JAS 39 Gripen multirole fighter aircraft. This offer comes on the heels of a recently signed defense agreement between the two countries, which opened the door for Swedish defense contractors to contribute to the modernization efforts of the Philippine Armed Forces. [PNA] [The EurAsian Times]

Among the prime contenders for the PAF multirole fighter acquisition initiative, the JAS-39 is among the two leading choices. The other contender is the American Lockheed Martin F-16V "Viper," the latest iteration of the US-made aircraft that has found its way into numerous air forces globally. The project's parameters necessitate a minimum of 12 multirole fighters capable of patrolling the country's protected waters and airspace.

Philippines and the United States find ways to enhance energy cooperation

(ak) The US Department of State shared that Philippines and the United States have discussed potential ways to boost the energy cooperation after the two countries launched the inaugural US-Philippines Energy Policy Dialogue (EPD) on April 17.

Both countries are reviewing the progress of the current energy projects and looking forward for future cooperation and technical support. [Manila Times]

US embassy shares their concerns over Manila Bay reclamation

(ak) Following the suspension of all reclamation projects in Manila Bay on August 7, the Embassy of the United States in Manila revealed the reasons why it is concerned over the reclamation project in Manila Bay.

The concern is about the project ties with China Communications Construction Co as the area will no longer be secured and the company has been added to the US Department of Commerce's Entity List as a company supported the Chinese military construction and militarize artificial islands in the South China Sea.

Furthermore, the environmental concern is crucial as its impact on the environment of the neighboring provinces. [PNA]

Philippines to resupply the armed forces in South China Sea after Beijing's block

(ak) The Philippine armed forces announced on August 19 that they would resupply troops stationed in a rusty World War 2-era ship on a reef in the South China Sea, after China's previous effort to block Philippines with water cannons.

The aim of this action is to exercise the sovereign rights and jurisdiction that the country believes in the rule-based international order for regional peace and stability. [Reuters]

Philippines and UAE look to strengthen technology ties on 49th anniversary

(ak) The two countries celebrated the 49th anniversary of the bilateral relations since 1974 as Filipinos were among the first expatriates to come to the UAE and Filipinos are the second-largest employer in the country.

Both countries are looking to build a deeper connection after a recent talk on the free trade agreement. Both countries are expected to expand their cooperation to new fields such as technology. [Arab News]

Philippines and Korea are aiming to sign the FTA next month

(ak) Philippine Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) Secretary Alfredo Pascual and South Korea's Trade, Industry and Energy Minister Ahn Duk-Geun met on the sidelines of the 55th ASEAN Economic Minister Meeting held in Semarang, Indonesia on August 19-20.

Both ministers agreed to work on the signing of the FTA at the 24th ASEAN-ROK Summit in September 2023. [PNA]

Philippines-Brunei Darussalam: Coast guard cooperation to be deepened

(dql) The Philippines and Brunei have affirmed their commitment to deepening cooperation between their coast guard personnel during the 3rd Joint Commission for Bilateral Cooperation, held in Manila on August 15.

Both sides expressed their expectation that defense cooperation between the two countries would be strengthened in the coming months once Manila convenes the Joint Defense Working Committee.

The discussion highlighted potential cooperation in maritime infrastructure development and the protection and promotion of the marine environment and its resources. [Manila Times]

Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan splinter group commander killed in Afghanistan

(tj) A key commander of a faction within the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP), the largest militant organization in Pakistan that operates under the larger umbrella of the Pakistani Taliban, has been killed in an airstrike in Afghanistan. [The Express Tribune]

Dost Muhammad, alias Asad Afridi, was the TTP's former shadow governor of the Dera Ismail Khan district of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which borders Afghanistan. He had claimed responsibility for several attacks, including the attack on a Pakistani military garrison in Balochistan in July.

It was reported that the TTP and the Jamaat-ul-Ahrar faction headed by Afridi had developed differences following the attack on the garrison and led to Afridi's removal as shadow governor.

Pakistan's ties with Afghanistan fraying amid rise in armed attacks

(tj/lm) As the Afghan Taliban marked their two-year control over Afghanistan on August 15, tensions

between the group and its longtime ally and neighbor, Pakistan, are gradually escalating, with Islamabad accusing Kabul of being responsible for a series of deadly attacks in the South Asian country's tribal region along the border. The most recent attack, a suicide bombing in Bajaur district claimed by an ISIS affiliate, killed over 54 people.

The deteriorating relationship reflects the challenges Pakistan faces as it deals with increasing attacks on law enforcement and civilians. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an outlawed group ideologically aligned with the Afghan Taliban, is claimed to be responsible for many of these attacks.

As both sides engage in a blame game and the Afghan Taliban denies its involvement in these attacks, experts suggest that the prospects of a close alliance between Afghanistan and Pakistan in the near future are dim. Instead, they anticipate that managing their relations might be the most feasible outcome for now. [Al Jazeera]

South Korea welcomes US sanctions against arms trade between North Korea and Russia

(cx) South Korea's Foreign Ministry welcomed US sanctions against three entities involved in illicit arms deals between North Korea and Russia.

On August 16, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Controls (OFAC) imposed sanctions on Verus LLC, Defense Engineering LLP and Versor SRO, three entities owned or led by Slovakian national Ashot Mkrtychev.

Mkrtychev was already blacklisted by the OFAC on March 30 for attempting to facilitate arms trade between North Korea and Russia. These sanctions against Mkrtychev were imposed following speculation that Russia and North Korea were bolstering their illegal arms trade.

Lim Soo-suk, spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry stated that South Korea intends to continue to bolster international cooperation on the enforcement of UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea. Lim also said that the South Korean government continue to review unilateral sanctions on North Korea. [Yonhap] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea]

South Korea-Brazil: Discussed stronger trade, industry ties

(cx) On August 16, South Korea and Brazil held a working-level videoconference where both sides discussed ways to boost cooperation in trade, energy, and other sectors.

The two sides discussed the potential of signing a bilateral Investment Promotion Framework (TIPF) to deepen bilateral trade and investment ties. They also discussed joint projects on technology, energy and resources, cyber issues, among other sectors.

The South Korean Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Energy commented that they wish to cooperate with Brazil to create greater business opportunities for South Korean companies operating in the country as the Brazilian government deploys "neo-industrialization" policies to spur growth. [Yonhap]

South Korea-UAE: Completes combined high-tech military training

(cx) South Korea and the United Arab Emirates completed combined high-tech military drills on August 18 aimed to bolster bilateral military cooperation.

The exercise was conducted at the Korea Combat Training Center, in Inje, 165 kilometers east of Seoul, from August 7 to 18. The drills mobilized around 2500 troops to the facility, including a platoon of UAE soldiers and a unit from South Korea's 22nd Infantry Division. Over 200 pieces of military equipment, such as tanks, helicopters, and unmanned aircraft were in use. The drills mark the first time UAE has participated in the exercise at the facility.

South Korea and the UAE have recently sought to increase bilateral ties in various sectors. The two countries signed a memorandum of understanding on strategic defense industry cooperation when President Yoon Suk-yeol visited Abu Dhabi for a summit in January [see AiR No. 3, January/2023, 3]. [The Korea Herald] [Ministry of National Defense, South Korea]

South Korea-Japan: President Yoon advocates strengthened security cooperation

(tms) President Yoon Suk Yeol emphasized the evolving partnership between South Korea and Japan, highlighting their shared values and common interests.

In his Liberation Day address, Yoon called for enhanced security collaboration with Japan and the United States to address North Korean threats. He acknowledged Japan's role in deterring North Korean aggression, underscoring the potential for trilateral security cooperation. [Yonhap 1]

Yoon expressed the growing significance of ROK-U.S.-Japan collaboration in countering regional challenges and advocated for real-time sharing of North Korea's nuclear and missile data. The recent improvement in South Korea-Japan relations was emphasized, citing efforts to compensate Korean victims of wartime forced labor and successful bilateral summits between Yoon and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida.

The upcoming trilateral summit involving Yoon, Kishida, and U.S. President Joe Biden was noted as a landmark event, set to advance peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.

Yoon also cautioned against "anti-state forces" promoting communist totalitarianism through manipulative propaganda, urging vigilance against such influences. He reiterated his goal of positioning South Korea as a "global pivotal state" that fulfills international responsibilities and roles. [Yonhap 2]

Sri Lanka receives substitute surveillance aircraft from India

(lm) India has handed over a replacement maritime surveillance aircraft to Sri Lanka, as the original airplane, which was gifted by New Delhi in 2018, is currently undergoing yearly maintenance. [Devdicourse]

Chair of Sri Lanka's human rights commission meets with Qatari counterpart

(lm) The chair of Sri Lanka's human rights commission, Judge Rohini Marasinghe, met with the deputy chair of Quatar's National Human Rights Committee on the margins of the Committee's delegation visit to Colombo. [Gulf Times]

KMT mayor of Taipei to visit China

(ed) The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) mayor of Taiwan's capital city Taipei is expected to visit Shanghai at the end of August for an annual city forum.

Although tensions are currently running high between Taiwan and China, with the Chinese government refusing to hold talks with its Taiwanese counterpart since current President Tsai Ing-wen's election in 2016, city-level co-operation had continued to take place until the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a party, the KMT has usually advocated for closer ties with China, especially amid rising tensions over Taiwan's sovereignty. In March this year, former KMT president Ma Ying-jeou visited mainland China in the first instance of a sitting or former Taiwanese president visiting China since 1949 in an effort to promote peace and improve relations [see AiR No. 13, March/2023, 4].

Emphasizing the need for communication amid high cross-Strait tensions, the KMT mayor of Taipei, Chiang Wan-an, announced he will attend the Taipei-Shanghai City Forum from August 29-31, which has the theme of "new trends, new development". [Reuters]

Taiwan pledges reconstruction aid to Ukraine

(ed) On August 17, Taiwan signed an agreement pledging USD 600,000 to aid in the reconstruction of the Ukrainian city of Bucha, which has been damaged by the Russian invasion.

The agreement was signed by Taiwan's representative in Poland and is designed to cover the costs of an air-raid shelter and repairs to a school damaged by Russian attacks.

Taiwan's representative drew on the shared experiences of Taiwan and Ukraine in standing up to authoritarian regimes, and pledged to work with other democracies around the world to further contribute to Ukraine's reconstruction.

The promise of funds comes after Taiwan and Poland signed an agreement on July 29 to cooperate in sending humanitarian aid to Ukraine [see AiR No.31, August/2023, 1]. [Focus Taiwan] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of China (Taiwan)]

Taiwan vice president hosts LDP delegation from Japan

[ed] On August 21, Taiwan's Vice President and frontrunner in the upcoming presidential election Lai Ching-te welcomed a 65-member youth delegation from Japan's ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

The LDP delegation, which arrived on August 20, consisted of 65 members of legislators from the Japanese Diet, as well as local representatives and university students. The delegation also met with members of the opposition Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP).

The leader of the delegation, the Representative Norikazu Suzuki, expressed his hopes to elevate the friendship between Taiwan and Japan. He stated that they share a "true friendship" based on the universal values of democracy and human rights. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of China (Taiwan)] [Taipei Times]

Taiwan congratulates Guatemala's Arévalo on winning presidential election

(ed) On August 21, Taiwan congratulated César Bernardo Arévalo de Leon for his decisive victory in Guatemala's presidential election and expressed its hopes that Guatemala and Taiwan can continue to cooperate as diplomatic allies.

Guatemala is one of only 13 countries that provides Taiwan with official diplomatic recognition. Arévalo had caused anxiety among policymakers in Taiwan by advocating to switch Guatemala's official diplomatic recognition to China due to the potential economic benefits. However, Arévalo later stated he had no plans to switch Guatemala's allegiance from Taiwan to China if elected [see AiR No.31, August/2023, 1].

According to Arévalo, maintaining diplomatic relations with Taiwan and seeking to improve trade with China are "completely compatible" policies. [Focus Taiwan] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of China (Taiwan)] [SCMP]

Vietnam-European Union: European Commission launches investigation into import of cold-rolled stainless-steel products

(km) According to the Trade Remedies Authority under the Ministry of Industry and Trade, the European Commission (EC) has initiated investigations into alleged anti-dumping and anti-subsidy practices concerning cold-rolled stainless-steel products imported from Vietnam.

The EC suspects that these products are being sold in the EU market at unfairly low prices and are benefiting from unfair subsidies. [VietnamPlus]

Vietnamese defense minister affirms comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia

(km) Vietnam's Minister of National Defense, Gen. Phan Van Giang, led a delegation to the 11th Moscow Conference on International Security (MCIS-11) in Russia.

Addressing a session on security in Asia-Pacific, he highlighted the region's significance, attracting various countries and interests.

Giang emphasized the need for unity to address non-traditional security challenges such as natural disasters, epidemics, climate change, and terrorism.

He also stressed the importance of political trust, cooperation, and respect among nations for peace and development.

Regarding the South China Sea, he reaffirmed Vietnam's commitment to resolving disputes peacefully, adhering to international law, including UNCLOS, and supporting an effective Code of Conduct.

Giang also announced plans for the Vietnam International Defense Expo 2024 and discussed bilateral cooperation during meetings with Russian and Chinese counterparts.

He affirmed Vietnam's comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia and its commitment to defense collaboration.

He also reaffirmed the importance of defense cooperation in Vietnam-China relations, with a focus on upcoming exchanges.

Giang, furthermore, discussed defense cooperation with the Mongolian and Belarusian defense ministers, fostering ties and future visits. [VietnamPlus]

Announcements

Upcoming Online Events

23 August 2023 @ 9.00 a.m. – 5.00 p.m. (GMT+8), ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

Social Fault Lines in Indonesia: Persistence and Change in An Evolving Landscape

This webinar aims to provide a platform for academic dialogue on multifaceted issues related to demographic diversity in Indonesia today. It considers the processes that lead to the persistence of social fault lines, how they are negotiated and managed, and how new fault lines emerge.

More event details can be found at [ISEAS].

23 August 2023 @ 1:30 p.m. (GMT-4), Atlantic Council, USA

The 2023 BRICS Summit: Africa in action

This event will discuss what the future holds for African foreign relations and global politics. From the war in Ukraine to recent events in Niger, attention to the

continent is only growing. Given the recent Russia-Africa Summit, and last year's US-Africa Leaders Summit, it is clear that African nations are playing an ever-increasing role in global affairs.

For more information, see [Atlantic Council].

23 August 2023 @ 18:00 - 19:00 p.m. (GMT+10), Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA), Australia

'Forgotten Warriors' A History of Women on the Front Line

This event will discuss the bool "'Forgotten Warriors': A History of Women on the Front Line," providing a fascinating new light on the history of warfare.

Learn more about the event at [AIIA].

24 August 2023 @ 18:00 - 19:00 p.m. (GMT+10), Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA), Australia

A Strategic Analysis of the Russo-Ukraine War: An Update

The panel will explore the effectiveness of Ukrainian counter offences and the consequences of the battle over the Black Sea, an increasingly important area of military and geopolitical tensions. [AIIA].

29 August 2023 @ 9:00 p.m. – 9:30 a.m. (GMT-5), Wilson Center, USA

China's Methane Mitigation in the Era of Climate Boiling: A Green Tea Chat with Dr. Hu Tao

This event will discuss about the unique energy transition work on methane mitigation from food waste and manure in rural and urban China.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center]

Recent and Upcoming Book Releases

Yan Wang, ***Pension Policy and Governmentality in China: Manufacturing Public Compliance***, Ubiquity Press, 282 pages, published October 26, 2022, reviewed in [LSE].

Matthew Goodwin, ***Values, Voice and Virtue: The New British Politics***, Penguin, 272 pages, published March 30, 2023, with a review in [Financial Times].

William Magnuson, ***For Profit: A History of Corporations***, Basic Books, 368 pages, published November 8, 2022. For a review, see [Publishers Weekly].

Calls

The **University of Bristol Law School** invites paper proposals the ***26th British Legal History Conference***, to be held on July 3-6, 2024. The conference theme is "Insiders and Outsiders in the History of Law." The deadline for abstract submission is December 31, 2023. For more information, see [University of Bristol].

The organizers of the **international workshop "Arguing over Empire: Hugo Grotius, European Expansionism and Slavery,"** scheduled for June 6-7, 2024, at the University of Dundee invite paper proposals for this event. The deadline for abstract submission is October 15, 2023. For more information, see [KU Leuven].

Jobs and Positions

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) seeks a ***Driver*** to be based in Amman, Jordan. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) seeks a ***Humanitarian Affairs Officer*** to be based in Jordan. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) seeks an ***Administrative Facility Assistant*** to be based in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) seeks a ***Chauffeur*** to be based in Isiro, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Applications are

accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) seeks a ***Monitoring and Communication Officer*** to be based in Kabul, Afghanistan. Applications are accepted until September 1, 2023. More information is provided as [UNDP].

The World Food Programme (WFP) seeks a ***Head of Administration & Finance*** to be based in Liberia. Applications are accepted until August 30, 2023. More information is provided as [WFP].

The World Food Programme (WFP) seeks a ***Donor Review Manager*** to be based in Italy. Applications are accepted until September 11, 2023. More information is provided as [WFP].

The World Food Programme (WFP) seeks a ***Security Associate*** to be based in Sierra Leone. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [WFP].

The World Food Programme (WFP) seeks a ***Logistics Associate*** to be based in Ethiopia. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [WFP].

The World Food Programme (WFP) seeks a ***Programme Policy Officer*** to be based in Guatemala. Applications are accepted until August 30, 2023. More information is provided as [WFP].

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) seeks a ***Business Analysis Manager,*** to be based in New York, United States. Applications are accepted until September 8, 2023. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) seeks a ***Senior Supply Associate***, to be based in Islamabad, Pakistan. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) seeks a ***Child Protection Officer***, to be based in Kyiv, Ukraine. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) seeks an ***Administrative Assistant,*** to be based in Gaziantep, Turkey. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) seeks an ***Education Officer***, to be based in Yaoundem,

Cameroon. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [UNICEF].

The World Health Organization (WHO) seeks a ***Health Cluster Support Officer,*** to be based in Gaziantep, Turkey. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [WHO].

The World Health Organization (WHO) seeks a ***Consultant***, to be based in Manila, Philippines. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [WHO].

The World Health Organization (WHO) seeks a ***Driver,*** to be based in Nairobi, Kenya. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [WHO].

The World Health Organization (WHO) seeks a ***National Consultant,*** to be based in Suva, Fiji. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [WHO].

The World Health Organization (WHO) seeks a ***Deputy Manager,*** to be based in Washington DC, United States. Applications are accepted until September 6, 2023. More information is provided as [WHO].

The United Nations Secretariate (UN) seeks a ***Driver*** to be based in Nouakchott, Mauritania. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [UN].

The United Nations Secretariate (UN) seeks an ***Associate Human Rights Officer*** to be based in Hati. Applications are accepted until September 14, 2023. More information is provided as [UN].

The United Nations Secretariate (UN) seeks a ***Political Affairs Officer*** to be based in Libreville, Gabon. Applications are accepted until August 29, 2023. More information is provided as [UN].

The United Nations Secretariate (UN) seeks a ***Human Resources Officer*** to be based in New York, United States. Applications are accepted until August 29, 2023. More information is provided as [UN].

The United Nations Secretariate (UN) seeks a ***Geospatial Information Officer*** to be based in New York, United States. Applications are accepted until September 29, 2023. More information is provided as [UN].

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) seeks a ***Project Director,*** to be based in Sudan and South Sudan. Applications are accepted until September 17, 2023. More information is provided as [IRC].

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) seeks a **Grants Coordinator**, to be based in Burkina Faso. Applications are accepted until September 17, 2023. More information is provided as [IRC].

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) seeks a ***Technical Director,*** to be based in Sudan and South Sudan. Applications are accepted until September 17, 2023. More information is provided as [IRC].

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) seeks a ***Youth Program Specialist***, to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until October 16, 2023. More information is provided as [IRC].

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) seeks a ***Volunteer Coordinator***, to be based in United States. Applications are accepted until October 16, 2023. More information is provided as [IRC].

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) seeks an ***Office Assistant,*** to be based in Rome, Italy. Applications are accepted until August 30, 2023. More information is provided as [FAO].

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) seeks a ***National coordinator,*** to be based in Ghana. Applications are accepted until September 7, 2023. More information is provided as [FAO].

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) seeks a ***Procurement Specialist,*** to be based in Maputo, Mozambique. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [FAO].

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) seeks a ***National Project Specialist***, to be based in Jakarta, Indonesia. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [FAO].

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) seeks a ***Procurement Assistant,*** to be based in Maputo, Mozambique. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [FAO].

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) seeks a ***Programme Management Assistant***, to be based in Bangkok, Thailand. Applications are accepted until September 9, 2023. More information is provided as [UNEP].

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) seeks a ***Consultant,*** to be based in Panama City, Panama. Applications are accepted until September 5, 2023. More information is provided as [UNEP].

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) seeks a ***Senior Program Management Assistant***, to be based in Nairobi, Kenya. Applications are accepted until September 13, 2023. More information is provided as [UNEP].

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) seeks a ***Legal Advisor,*** to be based in Panama City, Panama. Applications are accepted until September 9, 2023. More information is provided as [UNEP].

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) seeks a ***Research Assistant***, to be based in Geneva, Switzerland. Applications are accepted until September 13, 2023. More information is provided as [UNEP].

United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) seeks a ***Head of Programme,*** to be based in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Applications are accepted until September 6, 2023. More information is provided as [UNOPS].

United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) seeks an ***Information Management and Analytics Senior Analyst,*** to be based in Laayoune, Western Sahara. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [UNOPS].

United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) seeks an ***Investigator,*** to be based in Remote Work. Applications are accepted until September 5, 2023. More information is provided as [UNOPS].

United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) seeks a ***Procurement Specialist,*** to be based in Mogadishu, Somalia. Applications are accepted until August 30, 2023. More information is provided as [UNOPS].

United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) seeks a ***Civil Engineer,*** to be based in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. Applications are accepted until September 5, 2023. More information is provided as [UNOPS].

World Bank (WB) seeks a ***Social Development,*** to be based in Washington DC, United States. Applications are accepted until September 7, 2023. More information is provided as [WB].

World Bank (WB) seeks an ***Economics***, to be based in Mumbai, India. Applications are accepted until September 4, 2023. More information is provided as [WB].

World Bank (WB) seeks a ***Financial Sector***, to be based in Hanoi, Vietnam. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [WB].

World Bank (WB) seeks an ***Operations***, to be based in Vienna, Austria. Applications are accepted until September 6, 2023. More information is provided as [WB].

World Bank (WB) seeks an ***IT Analyst***, to be based in Washington DC, United States. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [WB].

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) seeks a ***Staff Officer***, to be based in Norfolk, United States. Applications are accepted until September 17, 2023. More information is provided as [NATO].

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) seeks a ***Principal Technician***, to be based in Norfolk, United States. Applications are accepted until September 4, 2023. More information is provided as [NATO].

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) seeks a ***Junior Budget Officer***, to be based in Brussels, Belgium. Applications are accepted until September 10, 2023. More information is provided as [NATO].

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) seeks an ***Investigator***, to be based in Brussels, Belgium. Applications are accepted until September 17, 2023. More information is provided as [NATO].

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) seeks a ***Senior Assistant***, to be based in Mons, Belgium. Applications are accepted until August 31, 2023. More information is provided as [NATO].

The College of Literature Science and the Arts at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan is inviting applications for ***associate professors***. Application submission deadline is September 8, 2023. For more details, see [University of Michigan].

The Government Department at The University of Texas at Austin in Texas, United States is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor***. Application

submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [University of Texas at Austin].

College of Lake County in Illinois, United States is inviting applications for a ***Dual Credit Adjunct***. Application submission deadline is September 7, 2023. For more details, see [College of Lake County].

University of Missouri in Missouri, United States is inviting applications for an ***Associate or Full Professor***. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [University of Missouri].

Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, United States is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor***. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Dartmouth College].

The Department of Earth, Environmental and Planetary Sciences at Rice University in Texas, United States is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor***. Application submission deadline is November 1, 2023. For more details, see [Rice University].

State University of New York Brockport in New York, United States is inviting applications for an ***Adjunct Lecturer***. Application submission deadline is April 24, 2023. For more details, see [SUNY Brockport].

Furman University in South Carolina, United States is inviting applications for an ***Associate, or Full Professor in Politics and International Affairs***. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Furman University].

The Department of Political Science and Public Administration at Auburn University in Alabama, United States is inviting applications for an ***endowed Khaled Chair in Political Science and International Policy***. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Auburn University].

University of California in Riverside, California is inviting applications for a ***Program Director***. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [University of California].

Carnegie Mellon University in Pennsylvania, United States is inviting applications for a ***Tenure-track Faculty***. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Carnegie Mellon University].

The Department of Government at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, United States is inviting

applications for an ***Assistant Professor***. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Dartmouth College].

The Department of Political Science & International Relations at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor***. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Knox College].

The Williams College Economics Department in Massachusetts, United States is inviting applications for an an ***Associate, or Full Professor of Economics***. Application submission deadline is November 15, 2023. For more details, see [Williams College].

Auburn University at Montgomery in Alabama, United States is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor***. Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [Auburn University at Montgomery].

The Department of Sociology in the College of Social Sciences in California, United States is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor***. Application submission deadline is March 31, 2023. For more details, see [California State University].

University of Maryland Department of Government & Politics in United States is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor***. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [University of Maryland Department of Government & Politics].

Ewha Womans University in Seoul, South Korea is inviting applications for an ***Faculty Position***. Application submission deadline is not specified. For more details, see [Ewha Womans University].

The Department of Politics at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine is inviting applications for an ***Assistant Professor***. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Bates College].

Syracuse University in New York, United States is inviting applications for an ***Research Associate Professor***. Application submission deadline is open until filled. For more details, see [Syracuse University].

Team:

Collin Xia (cx), Dan Kristian Rivera (kr), Duc Quang Ly (dql), Edward Green (ed), Griffin Allan (ga), Hanzaw Aung (ha), Harshita Prashar (ph), Isabelle Chua (ic), Kanokphong Visetvoharn, Khin Ohnmar Moe (km), Lachlan Foster (lf), Lucas Meier (lm), Morten Strantzen (ms), Nath Kusolsong (nk), Noor Afrose (na), Tatjana Buehring (tb), Tarazi Mohammed Sheikh (tms), Tomwit Jarnson (tj), Venus Phuangkom, Wai Yan Phyo Naing (wn), Worrawit Sirijintana (ws), Yesi Riana Yusnita Sari (ys)

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