

Asia

North East Asia

➔ **China/Japan Tensions persisted between Japan and China over contested island chain in East China Sea, while Tokyo continued security engagement with broad range of international stakeholders.** Amid increased Chinese military activity in East and South China Seas, Japan, France and U.S. 6 Dec confirmed they would hold joint land and sea military drills in May 2021 for first time on one of Japan's outlying islands. Japanese Ground Self-Defence Force and U.S. military 2-15 Dec held traditional large-scale joint military drill in southwestern Japan and 7 Dec launched separate exercise north west of Japan's capital Tokyo; both drills focused on repelling attacks on remote islands. Four Chinese H-6K and two Russian Tu-95 bombers 22 Dec took part in joint patrol over Sea of Japan and East China Sea; Japanese Air Self-Defence Force scrambled fighters to monitor bombers. Japanese media reported that two Chinese ships 26 Dec entered Japanese territorial waters near disputed Senkaku Islands; Japanese Coast Guard Service urged violators to leave country's territorial waters. Chinese National Defence Minister Wei Fenghe and Japanese counterpart Nobuo Kishi 14 Dec discussed via videoconference ongoing tensions in disputed East China Sea; Kyodo News reported that Kishi expressed concerns over Chinese ships "repeatedly sailing close to and entering the waters" around Senkaku Islands, while both ministers reiterated commitment to establish hotline between their officials. Kishi 15 Dec held online talks with German counterpart Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, during which he called on Berlin to send vessel to participate in joint exercises with Japanese Self-Defence Force units in 2021. Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Kishi 22 Dec discussed regional security situation during phone conversation, including East and South China Seas, and reaffirmed continued close cooperation.

➔ **Korean Peninsula South Korea protested Chinese and Russian military activity, U.S. accused China of violating UN sanctions, and Seoul criminalised sending propaganda balloons to North Korea.** Four Chinese warplanes and 15 Russian aircraft 22 Dec entered Korea Air Defence Identification Zone (KADIZ) for alleged routine training, according to South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff; South Korea's military scrambled air force fighters in response, while South Korean MFA same day reportedly lodged protest with China and Russia; Chinese MFA next day responded that Chinese and Russian warplanes did not enter KADIZ. U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary for North Korea Alex Wong 1 Dec accused China of "flagrant violation" of its obligation to enforce UN sanctions regime, and announced U.S. was offering up to \$5mn reward for information on Chinese sanctions evasion; U.S. 8 Dec imposed sanctions on several Chinese companies for allegedly helping Pyongyang export coal; Chinese MFA 23 Dec responded that govt had always implemented sanctions seriously. On final visit to Seoul 8-11 Dec, U.S. Deputy Sec State Stephen Biegun said North Korea had "squandered" opportunities for progress in negotiations over last two years, and called on Pyongyang to agree to "lay out a map for action" leading to denuclearisation. South Korean parliament 15 Dec approved controversial legislation criminalising flying of propaganda leaflets by balloon toward North Korea; minority opposition lawmakers boycotted vote, saying

that govt was sacrificing freedom of expression; human rights groups rallied same day at National Assembly to protest bill. South Korean President Moon Jae-in 4 Dec nominated new ministers of interior, health, land and housing, and gender in effort to refresh administration amid backlash over housing policies, rising COVID-19 cases, and scandal involving justice ministry and top prosecutors. UN Security Council 11 Dec discussed human rights abuses in North Korea in closed-door virtual meeting after seven members raised issue, accusing Pyongyang of using COVID-19 pandemic “to crack down further on the human rights of its own people.”

➡ **Taiwan Strait Cross-strait tensions remained high amid intense Chinese and U.S. military activity.** Taiwanese defence ministry claimed series of Chinese military aircraft entered Taiwanese Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) during month, including: one Y-8 reconnaissance aircraft and one Y-8 electronic warfare aircraft 9 and 21 Dec; one Y-8 anti-submarine aircraft 1, 2, 6, 7, 26 Dec; one Y-8 anti-submarine aircraft, one Y-8 tactical reconnaissance aircraft and one Y-8 electronic warfare aircraft 4 Dec; one Y-8 electronic warfare aircraft 10 Dec; one Y-8 anti-submarine aircraft and one Y-8 reconnaissance aircraft 15 Dec; one Y-8 anti-submarine aircraft, one Y-8 electronic intelligence aircraft, one Y-9 electronic aircraft, and one Y-8 reconnaissance aircraft 16 Dec; one Y-8 anti-submarine aircraft and one Y-8 electronic aircraft 20, 22, 24 Dec. In response, Taiwan scrambled jets, broadcast radio warnings and tracked planes with air defence system on each occasion. Meanwhile, U.S. continued military activity in region and support for Taiwan. U.S. govt 7 Dec notified Congress of new \$280mn arms sale package to Taiwan. Aircraft spotters 14 Dec detected U.S. Navy surveillance drone flying within ADIZ. Chinese military 19 Dec said it had “tailed and monitored” guided missile destroyer USS Mustin as it passed through Taiwan Strait, denouncing such missions as “flirtatious glances to Taiwan independence forces”; U.S. Navy said warship had conducted “routine Taiwan Strait transit [...] in accordance with international law”. Two U.S. Navy destroyers, USS John S. McCain and USS Curtis Wilbur, 31 Dec conducted a rare “double transit” of Taiwan Strait. China 20 Dec sailed Shandong aircraft carrier through Taiwan Strait; Chinese navy 21 Dec said that Shandong was on its way to conduct drills in South China Sea; Taiwanese defence ministry same day said it had deployed six ships and eight types of aircraft to monitor situation. Japanese State Minister of Defence Yasuhide Nakayama 25 Dec called on U.S. President-elect Joe Biden to “be strong” in supporting Taiwan, referring to country’s safety as “red line.”

South Asia

➔ **Afghanistan** **High-intensity violence persisted and intra-Afghan peace talks remained delayed ahead of planned U.S. military drawdown in Jan.** Taliban continued to attack district centres in Kunduz, Farah, Uruzgan, Baghlan and elsewhere despite previous self-imposed restrictions regarding reprisals in urban areas. Unclaimed killings and smaller explosions continued to target activists, journalists and other non-combatants around capital Kabul; unknown gunmen 22 Dec attacked vehicle of govt-employed doctors who treat prisoners (including Taliban and Islamic State fighters) at Pul-e Charkhi prison. In Ghazni province, attack 18 Dec killed at least 15 civilians, mostly children, and wounded 20 others; car bomb in Kabul targeting Afghan parliament member Khan Mohammad Wardak 20 Dec killed at least ten civilians and wounded 52 others. Islamic State's Khorasan Province branch (IS-KP) claimed responsibility for several attacks, including shooting of journalist Malala Maiwand in Jalalabad city on 10 Dec. IS-KP also claimed multiple attacks in Kabul, notably rocket attacks 12 Dec that killed one and injured two, and additional rockets 10 Dec that targeted U.S. Bagram Airfield. Meanwhile, in positive step, govt finalised formation of High Council of National Reconciliation, which 5 Dec convened for first time. Despite initial progress in intra-Afghan talks, U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad 14 Dec announced both negotiating teams would take 20 days to "consult on the agenda items", delaying intra-Afghan negotiations until 5 Jan. Agendas leaked 20-21 Dec illustrated stark differences between govt and Taliban regarding fundamental purpose of talks; notably, govt reportedly proposed ceasefire as first topic, while Taliban proposed it as final topic. Acting U.S. Defense Secretary Christopher Miller 22 Dec arrived in Kabul in unannounced visit and met with President Ghani, as U.S. military proceeded to reduce its forces from 4,500 to 2,500 in Jan in line with announcement made in Nov.

➔ **Bangladesh** **Govt began moving Rohingya refugees to island in Bay of Bengal despite concerns over living conditions, while violence broke out in Chittagong Hill Tracts.** Govt 3-4 Dec transported 1,642 Rohingya refugees from Cox's Bazar district to Bashan Char island – silt island in Bay of Bengal – despite concerns of UN, donor govts and international organisations that it is prone to flooding and lacks services, and amid allegations that some refugees had been coerced to go. Ahead of transfer, UN statement 2 Dec called on govt to allow refugees "to make a free and informed decision" about relocating and to provide them with basic services and free movement "to and from the mainland". MFA 4 Dec emphasised that relocation was part of broader repatriation plan and called on human rights groups to help create "a conducive environment" within Myanmar to allow for a "quick, safe and dignified repatriation"; govt 29 Dec proceeded to transfer second batch of 1,804 refugees to island. Meanwhile, sporadic violence erupted in three districts of Chittagong Hill Tracts 23 years after Parabatya Jana Samhati Samity, representing ethnic minority groups, and then Awami League govt signed 1997 peace accord. Authorities accused armed groups opposing peace accord of factional violence and attacks on Bengali settlers and security forces, including shootout with military 3 Dec that allegedly killed member of anti-accord group United Peoples Democratic Front in Rangamati district; police 13 Dec accused armed hill militants of attacking security forces in Rangamati district, resulting in

one attacker killed. NGO Amnesty International 11 Dec said lack of progress in implementing human rights provisions of peace accord behind local grievances. Indian border forces 7 and 14 Dec killed three Bangladeshi cattle smugglers; opposition Bangladesh National Party's secretary general 14 Dec announced intention to hold countrywide protests against Indian security forces' "indiscriminate killings" of Bangladeshis, holding ruling Awami League's policy toward India responsible for deaths. PM Hasina 17 Dec hosted virtual summit with India's PM Modi during which both leaders signed seven agreements on bilateral cooperation and directed border forces "to work towards bringing such border incidents to zero".

➡ **India (non-Kashmir) Uttar Pradesh state authorities launched crackdown on alleged forced conversion to Islam, and anti-Maoist security operations continued.** In Uttar Pradesh state, governed by ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), police 3 Dec made first arrest under recently approved law criminalising forced religious conversion by marriage; law seeks to curb so-called "love jihad", conspiracy theory according to which Muslim men marry Hindu women to convert them to Islam in order to alter country's demographic balance; police arrested 49 individuals in 12 cases throughout month. Also run by BJP, Madhya Pradesh state govt 29 Dec cleared similar bill, still to be approved by state governor. Right-wing Hindu groups 25-31 Dec organised rallies in Madhya Pradesh state, reportedly leading to clashes with Muslims in Ujjain district 25 Dec and vandalized mosque in Indore district 29 Dec; authorities arrested nearly 50 individuals. Meanwhile, anti-Maoist security operations and Maoist violence continued. In Chhattisgarh state (centre), Maoists 2-29 Dec killed three civilians and one police officer in Bijapur, Sukma and Rajnandgaon districts; security forces 16 and 28 Dec shot and killed three Maoists in Sukma and Dantewada districts. In Madhya Pradesh state (centre), security forces 12 Dec shot and killed two Maoists in Balaghat district. In Odisha state (east), Maoists 17 Dec hacked to death civilian in Malkangiri district; security forces 11-12 Dec killed three Maoists in Kandhamal and Malkangiri districts. In Andhra Pradesh state (south east), Maoists 14 and 23 Dec killed two civilians in Visakhapatnam district. In Jharkhand state (east), security forces 16-22 Dec killed four Maoists in Latehar, West Singhbhum, Khunti and Ranchi districts. Tens of thousands of farmers continued to demonstrate throughout month on outskirts of capital New Delhi, demanding govt revoke contentious agriculture laws adopted in Sept they say will deregulate crops and reduce earnings; govt and farmers held several rounds of talks, reaching partial agreement 30 Dec. India's reported COVID-19 cases 19 Dec surpassed 10mn. Amid border standoff with China, Indian and Chinese diplomats 18 Dec held talks but failed to make any breakthrough; both sides agreed to continue dialogue.

➡ **Kashmir Military clashes persisted along Line of Control (LoC, dividing Pakistan and Indian-administered Kashmir), while tensions escalated in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) amid local elections.** India 1 Dec claimed Pakistani cross-LoC fire killed one border security force officer. Pakistani military said Indian fire 9, 15, 23 and 30 Dec killed total of four soldiers. Pakistani MFA 18 Dec said Indian cross-LoC damaged two UN vehicles; India denied responsibility, UN same day said they were investigating. New Delhi police 7 Dec arrested five suspected terrorists for alleged involvement in Pakistani attempt to link Kashmiri militant outfits with Sikh separatists. Pakistan's armed forces 9 Dec reportedly on high alert following intelligence reports of India allegedly preparing an attack across LoC; Pakistan's FM 18 Dec said that India plans "surgical strike

against Pakistan”. In Indian-administered Kashmir, security forces 9 Dec killed two militants in Pulwama district; 13 Dec killed two militants and captured another in Poonch district, alleging they had infiltrated from Pakistan’s side of LoC to disrupt ongoing local elections which began 28 Nov. Militant attack on security forces 12 Dec killed two civilians in Baramulla district; 14 Dec attacked home of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) leader and former Hizbul Mujahideen militant Haji Parvez in regional capital Srinagar, killing one. J&K police 30 Dec announced death of three “terrorists” after 20-hour “encounter” with army on outskirts of Srinagar; families immediately protested outside police office, alleging all three were actually civilians. Opposition alliance accused govt of crackdown during local elections, which concluded 19 Dec with opposition alliance winning 112 of 280 seats. Notably, authorities 9 Dec placed former chief minister and PDP leader Mehbooba Mufti under house arrest for third time in two weeks; Mufti next day tweeted that armed forces were being used “to rig this election and favour a particular party”. In Anantnag district, police 10 Dec detained three journalists covering polls; militants 4 Dec also shot candidate. New Delhi 26 Dec arrested at least 75 Kashmiri political leaders and activists, placing them in “preventive detention” allegedly to pre-empt protests and violence.

↓ **Nepal** **PM KP Oli’s decision to dissolve parliament and schedule new elections triggered protests and political crisis.** Months of internal tensions within ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) and increasing pressure on PM KP Oli to resign reached boiling point as Oli 20 Dec dissolved lower house of parliament and announced fresh elections for April/May 2021. The move, authorised by President Bidya Bhandari, drew widespread rebuke for violating 2015 constitution, called into question credibility of offices of PM and president, triggered protests across country and sparked period of political uncertainty. Oli’s decision to sack parliament followed his order (issued with immediate effect following presidential approval) 15 Dec to amend working procedures of Constitutional Council – tasked with making appointments to several key constitutional bodies – allowing PM to take decisions with quorum of three members, dispensing with previous consensus among five council members; both moves viewed as latest to consolidate power and centralise decision-making. Oli’s decision to dissolve parliament was immediately termed unconstitutional by other leaders, political parties, and civil society members for contravening 2015 constitution, which provides only limited pathways for parliamentary dissolution. Protesters late Dec held several mass demonstrations across country against dissolution and filed 13 writs at Supreme Court, which 25 Dec demanded written justification for move. Dissolution also widened NCP’s internal divisions; Oli’s faction 22 Dec expanded party’s central committee with 556 new members, while competing faction led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal same day removed Oli as party co-chair; disputes also emerged at provincial level as Dahal’s faction 27 Dec filed no-confidence motion against Oli-aligned chief minister in Province 1. Meanwhile, Guo Yezhou, vice minister of Communist Party of China’s International Department, 27-30 Dec visited capital Kathmandu, meeting several political leaders including PM and president reportedly to assess evolving political situation; earlier in month, Vijay Chauthaiwale, Foreign Cell chair of India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party 10 Dec visited Nepal and met with PM Oli to discuss bilateral ties.

➡ **Pakistan Tensions remained high between ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and opposition alliance, while deadly militant violence persisted.** Political acrimony continued between PTI govt and Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), 11-party opposition alliance including Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). Alliance 13 Dec held rally in Lahore city, defying govt's COVID-19 ban on gatherings and disregarding police warnings of potential terrorist attacks by Pakistani Taliban. Govt 15 Dec decided to hold upcoming Senate elections in Feb instead of March 2021, when terms of 52 senators are due to expire, and decided to seek Supreme Court's opinion on holding polls through open voting instead of secret ballot; opposition rejected both proposed changes, calling them "illegal". Acting leader of parliamentary opposition, and Nawaz Sharif Muslim League's former FM Khawaja Asif 29 Dec detained on corruption charges; next day, Asif said arrest aimed at breaking party. Meanwhile, militant attacks continued. Police officer 2 Dec shot dead in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Bannu district; militant attack 23 Dec killed soldier in North Waziristan district. In Rawalpindi, explosion 4 Dec killed one and injured seven; counter-terrorism police 14 Dec arrested three Pakistani Taliban militants allegedly involved in explosion and claimed to have foiled an attack on Islamabad Stock Exchange. In Balochistan, five found dead 8 Dec in Kech district according to local police, allegedly resulting from clash with security forces; two civilians killed in 26 Dec bomb blast in Panjgur district, and seven soldiers same day killed in attack on check point in Harnai district; two paramilitary soldiers killed, 13 civilians injured in 29 Dec grenade attack in Kalat division. Police 17 Dec arrested three Lashkar-e-Islam terrorists accused of planning major attack on Christmas day in Peshawar; Sindhi separatist group claimed responsibility for two attacks on 15 Dec. Visiting U.S. Afghanistan peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad reportedly sought govt's help to ensure intra-Afghan negotiations would not be further delayed. Taliban delegation from Qatar-based political office 16-18 Dec visited Islamabad; FM Qureshi met delegation calling for "reduction in violence leading to a ceasefire" but placed responsibility on all stakeholders, while PM Khan called for comprehensive political settlement.

➡ **Sri Lanka** **President Gotabaya Rajapaksa appointed loyalists to independent oversight commissions while govt's COVID-19 policy vis-à-vis Muslims sparked outrage and small-scale protests.** Parliamentary council – established under 20th amendment to constitution, which grants Gotabaya sweeping powers – early Dec rubber-stamped Gotabaya's nominees to several independent oversight commissions, including Sri Lanka's Human Rights Commission, National Election Commission and National Police Commission. In 10 Dec letter to govt, two UN special rapporteurs expressed concern that 20th constitutional amendment would damage country's liberal and democratic institutions. Supreme Court 1 Dec dismissed multiple petitions challenging govt's policy of cremating all COVID-19 victims, including Muslims, in contravention of Islamic burial practices. Cremation against parents' wishes 9 Dec of 20-day old Muslim baby who died of COVID-19 sparked public outrage and small-scale protests against govt's cremation policy in capital Colombo and across country's Buddhist, Hindu and Christian communities, as well as in Europe, U.S. and Canada. Organisation of Islamic Cooperation 10 Dec expressed concern over Sri Lankan authorities "insisting on cremation" of Muslim COVID-19 victims. Maldivian govt 14 Dec announced it was considering request by Sri Lanka to bury remains of Sri Lankan Muslims in Maldives; Muslim activists and politicians rejected proposed arrangement and UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief 16 Dec said it could further marginalise Muslims in Sri Lanka. U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation 15 Dec withdrew \$480mn development assistance grant to Sri Lanka "due to lack of partner country engagement".

South East Asia

➡ **Indonesia** **Tensions persisted in Papua, while authorities banned hardline group Islamic Defenders Front.** UN Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights 1 Dec called for full investigation into escalating violence against civilians and human rights defenders in Papua. Police same day reportedly arrested 15 demonstrators from Indonesian People's Front for West Papua during protest in Sinjai, South Sulawesi province. United Liberation Movement for West Papua's leader Benny Wenda 1 Dec announced establishment of provisional govt in exile in UK, with party declaring him interim president; govt called Wenda's announcement "small-scale treason", while West Papua Liberation Army and civilian faction West Papua National Committee early Dec both rejected declaration. In Papua province's Merauke regency, security forces early to mid-Dec reportedly raided West Papua National Committee offices, and arrested 14 members on unknown charges, leaving several injured. Military police 25 Dec named nine soldiers in case pertaining to alleged torture to death of two civilians in Intan Jaya regency in April. Meanwhile, police 7 Dec killed six bodyguards of cleric Rizieq Shihab, leader of hardline group Islamic Defenders Front, after they allegedly attacked officers on outskirts of capital Jakarta; authorities 12 Dec arrested Rizieq for allegedly inciting people to breach COVID-19 regulations; govt 30 Dec banned Islamic Defenders Front referring to terrorism links and disturbance to public order.

↑ **Myanmar** **Hostilities between Arakan Army (AA) and Tatmadaw paused in Rakhine State as parties initiated direct ceasefire talks.** After two years of escalating hostilities in Rakhine State, AA and military informally halted fighting; move follows support by both sides last month to hold polls in all cancelled Rakhine State constituencies and pledge to cooperate to create conducive security environment. Direct talks between AA and Tatmadaw on formal ceasefire commenced late Nov with online meeting and 9 Dec continued with in-person talks hosted by China-backed armed group United Wa State Army in their headquarters in Pangsang city, Shan State; neither set of talks involved civilian govt. Court martial in Rakhine's regional capital Sittwe 11 Dec sentenced three Tatmadaw soldiers to 20-year prison terms for rape of Rakhine woman in July.

➔ **Philippines** **Security forces clashed with militant groups in south as well as with communist rebels across country.** In Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in south, administration of Cotabato City 15 Dec was officially turned over to BARMM in accordance with Jan 2019 referendum. Clan violence continued at relatively lower levels than previous month, while clashes between insurgents and security forces remained at similar levels. In Maguindanao province, hostilities resumed between members of Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and military; elements of BIFF under Kagi Karialan 3 Dec attacked police station and fired shots toward military detachment in Datu Piang town; members of BIFF 9 Dec attacked military detachment in Shariff Aguak town and 13 Dec clashed with military in Northern Kabuntalan municipality; mortar shelling 15 Dec killed one civilian and injured six others in Datu Salibo and parts of Datu Unsay municipalities. In south, implementation of peace agreement with Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) remained delayed as main focus was on fighting COVID-19; total cases countrywide rose to over 467,000, with average of 1,000-2,000 new cases daily throughout month. Following military operations against elements of Islamic State-linked Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) last month, small clashes between soldiers and ASG militants continued in Zamboanga del Norte and Sulu provinces; military 2 Dec clashed with suspected militants in Sibuco municipality; clashes 17 Dec injured at least five soldiers in Patikul municipality; police raid same day killed one militant in Ipil municipality. Meanwhile, clashes between armed forces and communist New People's Army (NPA) continued in Luzon in north, Visayas in centre and Mindanao in south with at least 27 combatants and civilians killed and three injured throughout month. On island of Negros, unknown gunmen on motorcycles 15 Dec shot and killed a female doctor and her husband who led community's response to COVID-19 after they were linked to communist rebels.

➔ **South China Sea** **Amid high-level military activity in region, tensions persisted between China on one hand, and U.S., Taiwan and claimant parties on the other.** Amid strained relations between Australia and China, Chinese state news outlet *Global Times* 1 Dec called Australia "warhound of the US" and warned "its warships must not come to China's coastal areas (...) or else it will swallow the bitter pills". Following 14th ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and 7th ADMM-Plus conference 10-11 Dec via video conference, all parties said in summary of discussions that they supported "maintenance of peace, stability, security, safety and freedom of navigation and overflight in and over the South China Sea" and would "settle all the disputes and differences peacefully in accordance with

the international law”. Tensions heightened between Taiwan and China throughout month. Taiwan 20 Dec staged live-fire drill in Pratas Islands, Beijing-claimed northernmost islets of South China Sea (SCS), as part of anti-aircraft and anti-sea-landing exercise. Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy 21 Dec announced that newest carrier Shandong had sailed through Taiwan Strait on 20 Dec to hold stage exercises in SCS; Taiwan’s defence ministry said Shandong 17 Dec sailed from northern Chinese port of Dalian escorted by four warships; Taiwan 20 Dec sent six warships and eight aircraft to monitor Chinese ships (see Taiwan Strait). Beijing 22 Dec claimed its military had “expelled” U.S. Navy destroyer John S. McCain after it had “trespassed” in disputed waters near Spratly Islands in SCS; U.S. Navy 23 Dec called statement false and Chinese effort to assert its illegitimate claims. Following 21 Dec virtual summit between Indian PM Narendra Modi and Vietnamese counterpart Nguyen Xuan Phuc, both sides called for enhanced security and maritime cooperation for stability in Indo-Pacific region, as part of which Indian Navy Ship Kiltan 26-28 Dec undertook “passing exercise” with Vietnam People’s Navy in SCS.

➔ **Thailand** **Authorities reactivated lèse-majesté law prohibiting criticism of monarchy in crackdown against anti-govt demonstrators; sporadic violence continued in deep south.** Local human rights organisation Thai Lawyers for Human Rights confirmed that as of 17 Dec at least 33 people, including one minor, were charged with lèse-majesté, suggesting renewed use of dormant law after three-year hiatus as means of cracking down on dissenters. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet 18 Dec condemned use of law, particularly against minors. In capital Bangkok, thousands of anti-govt protesters continued to gather throughout month. Following Constitutional Court decision 2 Dec that unanimously cleared PM Prayuth Chan-ocha of any conflict of interest with respect to his use of gov-owned house on 1st Infantry Regiment base, protesters seized on issue as another example of double-standard justice, with some 5,000 rallying at Lad Phrao junction that evening. Protesters 10 Dec rallied at Democracy Monument, 14 October 1973 Memorial, and UN Bangkok Headquarters; small IED bomb same day exploded well in advance of rally at 14 October 1973 Memorial, causing minor damage to structure; protest leader Anon Nampa 14 Dec told reporters that protesters would take break for remainder of year and resume rallies in 2021. Late 31 Dec, small pipe detonated in Bangkok where pro-democracy activists were selling prawns to help farmers affected by COVID-19 pandemic; four people suffered minor injuries. Group of nine U.S. senators 3 Dec introduced resolution in support of Thailand’s pro-democracy movement, urging gov to “immediately and unconditionally release political activists and refrain from harassing, intimidating, or persecuting those engaged in peaceful protests”; FM Don Pramudwinai 17 Dec said in response that resolution was “work of lobbyists”. In deep south, two motorcycle gunmen, dressed as women, 8 Dec shot and killed police officer in Khok Pho district, Pattani province; several gunmen 11 Dec shot and killed Muslim assistant village headman at his home in Raman district, Yala province. Govt 20 Dec held provincial elections in first test of democracy since 2019 general elections, which drew accusations of manipulation.