

# Asia

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## North East Asia

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➔ **China/Japan Tensions continued between Japan and China over disputed island chain in East China Sea as U.S. reaffirmed its support for Tokyo.** Following tensions in Feb over new Chinese Coast Guard Law, Chinese defence ministry 1 March defended its coast guard activities in area near disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in East China Sea and urged Japan not to take “dangerous actions that may complicate” situation in area; Japanese Defence Minister Kishi Nobuo 2 March told media that such activities are unacceptable as islands are part of Japanese territory. Chinese defence ministry 2 March confirmed that Beijing and Tokyo have expanded their military hotlines. Two Chinese coast guard ships 29 March entered Japanese waters around Senkaku Islands, prompting Tokyo to lodge protest with Beijing. U.S. Sec Defence Lloyd Austin and Sec State Antony Blinken 15-17 March visited Japan and 16 March met with FM Toshimitsu Motegi and Defence Minister Kishi in Japanese capital Tokyo to discuss China’s “destabilising actions” in South and East China Seas; Blinken same day warned that U.S. “will push back if necessary, when China uses coercion or aggression to get its way”; Kishi and Austin also reached agreement to hold joint exercises between Japanese Self-Defence Forces and U.S. military in preparation for contingencies involving Senkaku Islands. In response, Chinese MFA called joint statement “malicious attack” and “gross interference in China’s internal affairs.” Tokyo and Indonesia 30 March signed deal to bolster security ties; Motegi said parties “exchanged views on the situation in the East and South China seas” and “shared serious concern about [...] unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force”. Municipal govt of Ishigaki in Japan’s Okinawa Prefecture, which has jurisdiction over Senkaku Islands, 16 March confirmed it had applied to central govt for approval to install signposts on islands with newly chosen district name “Tonoshiro Senkaku”.

➔ **Korean Peninsula North Korea rebuffed Washington’s diplomatic overtures, top U.S. officials visited South Korea, and Pyongyang conducted provocative missile tests.** U.S. 15 March confirmed that it had attempted to reach out to Pyongyang through several channels since mid-Feb, with no response from Pyongyang; North Korea’s First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Choe Son Hui 17 March called U.S. efforts “cheap tricks”, claiming that no dialogue would be possible until Washington drops its hostile policy. U.S. Sec Defence Lloyd Austin and Sec State Antony Blinken 17 March met with South Korean FM Chung Eui-yong and Defence Minister Suh Wook in South Korean capital Seoul; Blinken accused North Korea of committing “systemic and widespread abuses” against its people. Meeting concluded with joint statement emphasising that North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile issues are priority for alliance. Shortly after visit, North Korea 21 March fired two cruise missiles into Yellow Sea; U.S. and Japan 24 March confirmed North Korea subsequently fired two suspected ballistic missiles into Sea of Japan, in violation of UN Security Council resolutions prohibiting such tests; Japan and South Korea condemned launches while U.S. President Biden 25 March said he was open to diplomacy but warned Pyongyang not to escalate. Earlier in month, U.S. and South Korea 7 March reached deal for new six-year Special

Measures Agreement that includes 13.9% increase in Seoul's contribution to cost of hosting some 28,500 U.S. troops for 2021. U.S. and South Korea 8-16 March held nine-day joint military exercises, noting exercises are "defensive" in nature and had been scaled back because of COVID-19; Kim Yo-jong, senior official and sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, 16 March condemned exercises, warning that U.S. should refrain from "causing a stink." Pyongyang 18 March said it would sever diplomatic relations with Malaysia after North Korean man previous day extradited to U.S. on money-laundering charges. Kim Jong-un 22 March stressed to Chinese President Xi need to strengthen unity and cooperation between both countries. International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Rafael Grossi 2 March said North Korea continues developments of its nuclear program which remains "cause for serious concern."

↓ **Taiwan Strait** **Cross-strait tensions rose as China rejected new U.S.-Taiwan coast guard cooperation deal and deployed dozens of military aircraft in Taiwanese air zone.** In their first major accord under U.S. Biden administration, U.S. and Taiwan 25 March established Coast Guard Working Group to "improve communications, build cooperation, and share information" on related matters; China next day denounced deal, warning Washington to "be cautious with its words and actions on Taiwan-related issues". Beijing same day deployed 20 military aircraft into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zones (ADIZ), in largest ever incursion reported by Taiwan's defence ministry since it started making public Chinese military plane movements in area in Sept 2020. China deployed further ten aircraft on 29 March. Prior to deal, Taiwanese defence ministry claimed series of Chinese military aircraft entered ADIZ, including: one Y-8 anti-submarine warfare aircraft 1, 10, 11, 14, and 17 March; one Shaanxi Y-8 reconnaissance aircraft 2 March; one Shaanxi Y-8 reconnaissance aircraft and one Y-8 anti-submarine warfare aircraft 4, 8, and 15 March; two Chengdu J-10 fighter jets 22 March. In response, Taiwan scrambled jets, broadcast radio warnings and tracked planes with air defence system on each occasion. Taiwan Coast Guard Administration 1 and 9 March held live-fire artillery drill. Earlier in month, Chinese Premier of State Council Li Keqiang 5 March stated govt remained committed to "China's reunification" and would "resolutely deter any separatist activity seeking Taiwan independence"; Taiwanese Mainland Affairs Council responded "healthy and orderly exchanges are better than enforced pressure". Chinese FM Wang Yi 7 March said there was "no room for compromise or concessions" in China's sovereignty claim over Taiwan and that U.S. should recognise this. U.S. and Japanese defence ministers 16 March agreed at meeting in Japanese capital Tokyo to cooperate closely in case of military clash between China and Taiwan. Taiwanese Defence Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng 17 March confirmed that U.S. had approved export permits for sensitive technology for Taiwan's indigenous submarine fleet. After Chinese ambassador in France warned French lawmakers against meetings with Taiwanese officials, French MFA 17 March stated that French parliamentarians were free to meet with whomever.

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## **South Asia**

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➔ **Afghanistan** **Deadly attacks targeted women and Hazara community as Taliban continued assaults and clashes erupted between**

**security forces and Hazara militia; U.S. proposed new peace plan.**

Following brief lull in violence late Feb, attacks – particularly targeting women, children and Hazara community – rose during first half of month. In Nangarhar (east), three separate attacks claimed by Islamic State's Khorasan Province branch 2-3 March killed three female journalists and one female doctor, and armed gunmen 3 March killed seven Hazara civilians. Two IEDs in Hazara-majority neighbourhoods in capital Kabul 13 March killed four women and one child. Taliban attacks continued at high intensity in Nimroz, Kunduz, Daikundi, Sar-e-Pul provinces and elsewhere; notably, attacks targeting security outposts 19 and 22 March killed 11 and wounded ten in Baghlan province, and attack by Taliban infiltrator 13 March killed eight soldiers in Balkh province. In Wardak province (centre), tensions rose between security forces and Hazara militia after helicopter 18 March shot down by likely advanced weaponry, killing at least ten govt soldiers; govt forces responded by retaking Behsud district centre, under control of Hazara militia leader Abdul Ghani Alipur, raising prospect of clashes in coming month. Meanwhile, in Khost province (east), U.S. Central Intelligence Agency-backed paramilitary group Khost Provincial Force (KPF) 8 March killed 15 civilians during military operation against Taliban in Spera district. On diplomatic front, U.S. early month outlined multi-part peace plan in letter to Afghan leaders, proposing UN-led regional conference, interim power-sharing govt between Taliban and Afghan leaders, and high-level meeting hosted by Turkey to finalise agreement; U.S. Envoy Zalmay Khalizad shared plan with Taliban and Pakistan during visits to Qatari capital Doha and Pakistani capital Islamabad 4-9 March; letter also noted U.S. yet to make decision on whether to completely withdraw forces by 1 May deadline; uncertainty over U.S. decision raises prospect of Taliban dropping self-imposed restrictions on attacks on provincial capitals and large-scale urban attacks, potentially escalating violence in run up to 1 May – or at least thereafter. Moscow 18 March hosted dialogue attended by China, Pakistan, Iran, India, Afghan political leaders and Taliban; President Ghani did not attend.

↓ **Bangladesh Anti-India rallies to protest visit of Indian PM Modi turned deadly, while election-related violence continued.** Muslim and student activists held large rallies to protest Indian PM Modi's 26-27 March visit; at least 50 protesters injured in police action on 25 March in capital Dhaka. During Modi's visit, police shot dead at least 11 Hefazat-e-Islam protesters in Chittagong city and eastern Brahmanbaria district; four more shot dead as protests continued 28-29 March in Brahmanbaria, Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet, Ghazipur and Khuna, with Hefazat protesters attacking Hindu temples, govt offices and police stations; around 20,000 protesters charged by 31 March. Earlier in month, Facebook post by Hindu man criticising Hefazat-e-Islam's Joint Sec Gen Mawlana Mufti Mamunul Haque 17 March prompted group supporters to vandalise more than 80 homes in Sunamganj district (east) as Hindus fled; at least 22 people arrested, while ruling party blamed opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party for attack. Violent clashes between Awami League (AL) factions over municipality elections continued throughout month; clash in Noakhali District (south) 9 March killed one while clash in Bogra district (north) 16 March killed local leader of AL's student wing; clashes in Bagerhat (south) and Narsingdi (east) districts 18-19 March left dozens injured. UN 1 March called for "independent" investigation into death of journalist imprisoned under controversial Digital Security Act (DSA) in Feb, expressed concern for cartoonist Ahmed Kishore, detained on similar charges since May

2020, and urged govt to review DSA; law minister next day said govt will amend act to prevent misuse and authorities 3 March granted Kishore bail. Anti-militancy operations continued. Counter-terrorism police in Dhaka 4 March arrested three suspected members of banned militant outfit Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh and three alleged supporters of Hizb ut-Tahrir. Authorities 23 March sentenced 14 militants to death for attempt to assassinate Sheikh Hasina in 2000. Approximately 4,000 Rohingya refugees 3 March relocated to Bhasan Char, flood-prone island, bringing total number of refugees relocated to island since Dec to over 13,000; UN delegation 17-20 March conducted first safety assessment of island. Massive fire at Cox's Bazar Balukhali refugee camp 22 March left at least 15 dead, 400 missing and over 45,000 homeless.

➡ **India (non-Kashmir) Farmer protests against agricultural reforms continued, Maoist violence persisted, and disengagement agreement with China over border dispute held.** Farmers 6 March marked 100 days of protests against govt's proposed agricultural reforms by staging roadblock of major highway outside capital New Delhi; thousands of women 8 March participated in farmer protests on outskirts of Delhi to mark International Women's Day. Farm unions 26 March called for 12-hour nationwide shutdown to maintain pressure on govt, while protesters in northern regions blocked railways in dozens of locations. Anti-Maoist security operations and Maoist violence continued throughout month. In Jharkhand state (east), IED 4 March killed three security personnel in West Singhbhum district. In Chhattisgarh state (centre), IEDs 4-5 March killed officer in Dantewada district and Maoists 23 March killed five police in Narayanpur district; security forces 20 March killed two Maoists in Dantewada district; Maoists 26 March killed local govt member in Bijapur district. In Andhra Pradesh state (south east), Maoists 5 March killed former militant suspected of being police informer in Visakhapatnam district. In Odisha state (east), Maoists and security forces 14 March exchanged fire in Malkangiri district. In Bihar state (east), security forces 16 March killed four Maoists in Gaya district. Following partial disengagement deal along unofficial and disputed Himalayan border known as Line of Actual Control in Feb, Chinese FM Wang Yi 7 March said India and China should "expand and enhance cooperation to create enabling conditions for the settlement" of border issue, while stressing that "initiating confrontation will not solve the problem".

↑ **Kashmir Ceasefire held along Line of Control (LoC, dividing Pakistan and Indian-administered Kashmir) as rhetoric cooled between India and Pakistan; deadly violence continued in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K).** Tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad eased following Feb agreement to observe ceasefire along Kashmir's LoC. Pakistan's Army Chief Bajwa 18 March said Pakistan supported "peace process or meaningful dialogue" but cautioned that "our neighbour would have to create a conducive environment, particularly in Indian-occupied Kashmir"; Pakistan's PM Khan previous day [said](#) "India would have to take the first step [to normalise ties]". India's PM Modi in message to Khan on Pakistan day 23 March said India desired "cordial relations with the people of Pakistan. For this an environment of trust, devoid of terror and hostility, is imperative". Meanwhile, India and Pakistan's Indus Waters Commissioners 23-24 met in India's capital New Delhi; first such meeting since India's Aug 2019 actions in J&K. India's Minister of State for Home Affairs G.

Kishan Reddy 17 March told parliament of “instances of supply of weapons via drones from across the Pakistan border”; J&K’s police chief 20 March repeated allegation. Within J&K, clashes with security forces and militant attacks continued: Indian security forces 9 March killed alleged militant commander in Baramulla district; J&K police next day arrested four alleged Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) militants in Pampore district; security forces same day killed two militants in Anantnag district. Grenade attack on police post in Baramulla district 13 March injured two police officers. Security forces 14 March killed one militant in Shopian district; locals demonstrating against security operation 16 March clashed with police, leaving several injured. Attack on outskirts of regional capital Srinagar 25 March killed two paramilitary soldiers and injured two. Two militants and one soldier killed on 28 March in Shopian district. Grenade attack on police 28 March killed two civilians in Anantnag district; militant attack next day killed local official and his security guard in Baramulla. Militants 29 March killed policeman and councillor in Baramulla district.

➡ **Nepal Supreme Court dissolved ruling party, bringing judiciary’s independence into question and prompting political jockeying in parliament as PM KP Oli reportedly sought fresh elections.** In unexpected decision, Supreme Court 7 March invalidated legal status of ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) in response to 2018 petition by another party with same name. Decision created fresh political uncertainty, effectively dissolving NCP and annulling 2018 merger between Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) and Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre); both parties now effectively reinstated. Ruling came hours before House of Representatives — recalled after Supreme Court last month overturned December 2020 dissolution by Oli — reconvened. Supreme Court 31 March rejected petition filed by Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal 30 March seeking a review of 7 March decision. Original ruling sparked discussions between formerly merged communist parties and opposition leaders on potential new alliances to secure parliamentary majority or possible no-confidence motion against Oli. Tensions between Oli and senior communist leader Madhav Kumar Nepal escalated as Oli 29 March suspended Kumar Nepal from newly reinstated Unified Marxist-Leninist party. Oli’s absence from House of Representatives throughout month fuelled speculation that he is attempting to discredit parliament in bid to once again call for fresh elections.

➡ **Pakistan Tensions continued between ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and opposition amid elections, while deadly militant violence persisted.** Following the victory of the 11-party opposition alliance that includes Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) in almost all Feb by-elections to the national and provincial legislatures, political tensions remained high with PM Khan’s PTI govt. In line with Feb decision from Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), Supreme Court 1 March ruled Senate elections must be held under secret ballot, nullifying govt’s request to hold elections through open ballot. PML-N leadership 11 March accused govt of using state institutions, specifically security agencies, to help their candidate in election for Senate chair; PTI candidate Muhammad Sadiq Sanjrani next day won election. Amid ongoing tensions between the top electoral body, and the PTI govt, PTI ministers 15 March called for the resignations of the entire ECP leadership. PPP next day opposed PML-N demand to resign from federal and provincial

parliaments, straining opposition's unity; tensions heightened between them after appointment 26 March of PPP nominee as Senate opposition leader. In Balochistan province, bomb 5 March killed five in Sibi city; Baloch militants next day left two Pakistan Navy officers dead in Gwadar district; Pakistani Taliban bomb attack outside paramilitary prison in Chaman city 23 March killed four. Meanwhile, security forces 8 March killed five Baloch militants in operation in Mastung district. In North Waziristan district, security forces 7 March claimed to have killed at least eight militants, including three commanders of Pakistani Taliban, in Deta Khel town; security operation 17 March killed one militant and two civilians in Swat district; bomb blast 25 March injured Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam leader in Bajaur district. In Punjab province, successive militant attacks 7 March killed one police officer in Rawalpindi and one in Islamabad. In Karachi city, Balochistan Liberation Army-claimed explosion 15 March killed one soldier and injured ten others in Orangi Town. Pakistani Taliban 12 March threatened organisers of International Women's Day march; Islamist groups same day held protests demanding govt prosecute march organisers for blasphemy, which carries death sentence; Peshawar court 25 March ordered registration of case.

➔ **Sri Lanka UN Human Rights Council adopted groundbreaking resolution establishing new accountability process, while govt unveiled new restrictions targeting Muslims.** UN Human Rights Council 23 March adopted new resolution on Sri Lanka expressing "deep concern" at "warning signs of a deteriorating human rights situation" and calling on govt to protect religious freedom, review anti-terrorism laws, allow civil society to "operate free from hindrance, surveillance, insecurity and threat of reprisals" and "ensure the prompt, thorough and impartial investigation" of serious rights violations "including for long-standing emblematic cases". Resolution authorised UN human rights body OHCHR to "collect, consolidate, analyse and preserve information and evidence" in support of "future accountability processes for gross violations of human rights or serious violations of international humanitarian law in Sri Lanka" including through universal jurisdiction cases in individual states. Ahead of vote, in attempt to court support from Muslim-majority states for countering new UN resolution, President Rajapaksa 19 March visited Bangladesh with high-level delegation and made series of phone calls with Indian PM Modi, Egyptian President Sisi and senior officials at Organisation of Islamic Cooperation; India and Japan abstained in council vote while China and Pakistan voted against. Following vote, govt rejected UN resolution and launched public media campaign against those supporting it domestically; President Rajapaksa 27 March declared: "We are not afraid to face the impact of Geneva. It is possible not to succumb to it. We are a free country". Meanwhile, govt announced new laws targeting Muslims. Notably, defence ministry 5 March said new regulations will require all imported Islamic books to be screened beforehand as part of counter-terrorism measures; Minister of Public Security Sarath Weerasekera 13 March announced that he had signed cabinet paper to ban burqa and nikab face veil and that 1000 madrasas will be closed on national security grounds; MFA 16 March clarified measure would be implemented following public consultations. President Rajapaksa 9 March also signed new regulations under Prevention of Terrorism Act permitting two-year detention without trial for "deradicalisation" of those accused of supporting "violent extremist religious ideology". Police 16 March arrested prominent Muslim politician Azath Salley under terrorism act.

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## South East Asia

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➔ **Indonesia Suspected Islamist militants attacked church in Sulawesi while govt considered terrorist designation for West Papua separatist armed groups.** In South Sulawesi province, suspected Islamic State-linked Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) newlywed suicide bombers 28 March attacked Catholic church in Makassar city, leaving at least 19 injured and two assailants dead. President Widodo same day “strongly condemned this act of terror” and urged people to stay calm, as govt would ensure “safety to worship”; in response, police 29 March arrested dozen across several locations, including in South Sulawesi, West Nusa Tenggara and Banten provinces. In Papua province, international NGO Coalition for Papua 7 March reported that security forces previous day killed Indigenous Papuan teenager in Puyagia village, Intan Jaya, marking fifth such case since Jan and causing unknown number of civilians to flee. National Counterterrorism Agency chief Inspector General Boy Rafli Amar 22 March told House of Representatives govt ministries and agencies were discussing possibility of labelling armed groups affiliated with separatist political umbrella, Free Papua Movement, as terrorist organisations; NGO Amnesty International next day denounced potential move as “further justification for the limitation of Papuan’s freedom of speech and assembly”.

↓ **Myanmar Mass protests continued against military’s Feb coup as security forces ramped up deadly crackdown on demonstrators, prompting international outcry.** Amid tightened restrictions on internet services, hundreds of thousands of pro-democracy protesters demanding end to military rule continued street action nationwide, including in capital Naypyitaw, Yangon, Mandalay and many other towns and cities; in response, police and soldiers increasingly used deadly force against demonstrators, firing tear gas shells, stun grenades and live ammunition, and burning at least one person alive. Security forces throughout March also conducted intimidating terror campaign at night in residential neighbourhoods, which involved summary executions, indiscriminately firing rubber bullets, arbitrary house searches, beatings and other abuses. Rights group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners stated over 500 people killed during security crackdown between 1 Feb coup and late March, with over 2,258 – including 37 journalists – arrested. Armed Forces Day 27 March marked deadliest so far with security forces killing some 158 protesters and bystanders, including 14 children. Despite crackdown, civil disobedience movement persisted among govt employees and during month expanded into general strike; hundreds of police officers have also resigned, joined disobedience movement or fled country. Military 11 March confirmed new bribery charges against Aung San Suu Kyi, and said ruling military council will only control country for certain period of time before holding election. Acting VP of civilian parallel govt 13 March vowed to pursue “revolution” to overturn coup. Military 23 March expressed regret for deaths of demonstrators and security forces; next day freed hundreds of arrested protesters. FMs from South East Asia regional group ASEAN 2 March stated they were “appalled” by violence while EU 4 March suspended financial support for development projects and 22 March sanctioned military leaders. After freezing around \$1bn in Myanmar’s central bank reserves held at U.S. Federal Reserve in Feb, U.S. 4, 10 and 22 March announced new sanctions against junta. UN Security Council 10

March strongly condemned violence against protesters. Junta 11 March confirmed it had removed Arakan Army (AA) insurgents from list of terrorist groups; AA 23 March condemned military coup and “cruel and unacceptable” crackdown.

➡ **Philippines Violence persisted in south between militant groups and security forces, prompting tens of thousands to flee in Maguindanao.** In Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in south, low-level violence between insurgents and security forces continued. In Maguindanao, suspected elements of Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) 3 and 17-19 March repeatedly attacked military outposts, leaving four militants dead and three soldiers injured, and displacing 70,000 civilians; military 18 March retaliated with ground offensive, including mortar shelling, that reportedly killed 20 combatants and displaced 60,000 locals from ten towns; five BIFF combatants 17 March surrendered. Govt security forces 6 March clashed with elements of Daulah Islamiyah in Madalum, Lanao del Sur, in five-hour-long gunfire exchange. Smaller cohorts of Islamic State (ISIS)-linked Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) 14, 16 March continued to surrender to govt, especially in Sulu province; govt forces 19 March rescued three Indonesian hostages held by ASG elements in Tawi-Tawi province. Military 20 March killed key ASG commander Majan Sahidjuan, aka “Apo Mike”. Clashes between communist New People’s Army and armed forces throughout March continued in Visayas islands in centre, Mindanao island in south and Luzon island in north, leaving at least 13 dead and six injured. In south, implementation of peace agreement with Moro Islamic Liberation Front remained stalled.

➡ **South China Sea Amid ongoing regional tensions and military activity, U.S. and China traded critical comments while Philippines protested Beijing’s maritime presence near disputed reef.** Beijing late Feb announced naval military exercises in South China Sea (SCS), west of Leizhou Peninsula, from 1 to 31 March. Chinese MFA 3 March said freedom of navigation in SCS “should not be used as an excuse to endanger the sovereignty and security of littoral countries” and Chinese FM Wang Yi 7 March said instability and security risks in SCS “come mainly from outside the region”. Leaders of U.S., India, Japan and Australia 12 March held virtual Quadrilateral Security Dialogue meeting, vowing to “prioritise the role of international law in the maritime domain.” Following meeting with Japanese counterparts, U.S. Sec State Blinken and Sec Defence 16 March expressed serious concerns over China’s “destabilising actions” in South and East China Seas; Blinken warned Beijing that U.S. “will push back if necessary, when China uses coercion or aggression to get its way”; Chinese MFA 17 March called statement “malicious attack on China’s foreign policy” and asserted China’s “indisputable sovereignty” over SCS. Philippines 21 March lodged diplomatic protest against China for deploying hundreds of maritime militia ships in “clear provocative action” at Whitsun Reef in Spratly Islands; Chinese MFA next day rejected claims, stating that ships were fishing vessels sheltering from rough seas; U.S. embassy in Manila 23 March issued statement saying: “We stand with the Philippines”. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte 25 March reportedly expressed concern to Chinese ambassador. Vietnam, which also claims reef, same day said China must cease violating Vietnam’s sovereignty. Philippine defence secretary 27 March said more Navy and Coast Guard vessels would be deployed to area, as well as light fighter aircraft. U.S. tech firm 25 March reported new Chinese

construction on Subi Reef, near Philippine-occupied Pag-asa (Thitu) Island. Taiwanese defence minister 17 March confirmed govt increased personnel and armaments on Itu Aba island in SCS, warning “[China is] capable of starting a war”; U.S. and Taiwan 25 March signed agreement to enhance coast guard cooperation (see Taiwan). Germany 2 March announced it will send frigate to Asia in Aug, which will transit through SCS on its return.

➡ **Thailand** **Anti-govt protests persisted as authorities arrested and charged activists under lèse-majesté law, and violence in deep south rose for second consecutive month, leaving several dead.** In capital Bangkok, pro-democracy protest movement continued, with weekly rallies throughout month, calling for release of jailed protest leaders, amendment of lèse-majesté law and reform of monarchy. Protesters 1 March set ablaze police vehicle following march from Victory Monument in Bangkok. Around 1,000 protesters 6 March gathered outside of Criminal Court to reiterate demands; four smaller protests took place same evening. Several hundred protesters 13 March marched from Victory Monument to Government House. Over 1,000 protesters 20 March converged next to Grand Palace and clashed with police, leaving 13 police officers and at least 20 civilians injured. Over 3,000 protesters 24 March rallied peacefully at Bangkok’s Rachaprasong intersection. Court 8 March indicted 18 people for role in pro-democracy protests, using various charges including lèse-majesté, sedition and organising illegal gatherings; at least 72 people charged under lèse-majesté law since Nov. Police 28 March launched raid on protesters encamped outside Government House since 13 March; at least 99 people arrested. Meanwhile, Constitutional Court 11 March ruled that parliament has authority to amend constitution providing referendums are held both to approve reform effort and new constitution once drafted; opposition criticised ruling, citing lack of reference to referendum in constitution; parliament 17 March rejected amendment bill proposing constitution drafting committee that passed second reading in Feb. Violence in deep south rose again for second consecutive month, leaving three dead. In Narathiwat province, gunmen 10 March killed Malay-Muslim defence volunteer in Bacho district; 28 March killed assistant village headman in Bacho district. In Yala province, IED attack 19 March wounded eight defence volunteers in Muang district. In Pattani province, insurgents 19 March ambushed team of rangers patrolling in Thung Yang Daeng district; motorcycle-borne gunmen 20 March killed Malay-Muslim defence volunteer in Khok Pho district. Armed group Barisan Revolusi Nasional 13 March criticised govt’s economic development programs for southernmost provinces as insincere and exploitative. Supreme Court 3 March sentenced six Malay-Muslim men to death for bombings in Pattani in 2016.