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Editor

Prashant Kumar Singh

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This issue of the *East Asia Military Monitor* covers the preceding two months which have been unprecedented in human history. The COVID-19 outbreak that began in Wuhan in Hubei (China) of which the world came to know on January 23, 2020, with the lock down of Wuhan, eventually led to lock downs all over the world, of course with varying levels of restrictions. This period, which has seen great human misery in terms of human health, meltdown of world economies and huge social-psychological trauma, has ushered the world into uncertainty. At the moment, one is not able to visualise how different the world would look post-COVID-19. At present, the world is just living through the outbreak and struggling to exit from it. However, seeing what has been happening in the world and the region that this newsletter covers, one can conclude that the pandemic leading to a sobering of human nature and international politics being reasonable with moderation, remains wishful thinking. Power politics between the US and China during this period and business as usual in the Taiwan Strait, the East China Sea and the South China Sea, yet again suggests that international politics remains immune to the pandemic. It has infinite capacity to discover new issues and retain old grudges during such crises. Thus, this issue of *East Asia Military Monitor* covers regular military developments and those in response to the COVID-19 crisis and some important and relevant issues of politico-military significance in the East Asian region. The issue also carries a commentary by Opanghmeren Jamir, titled “Attributing China-Myanmar Economic Corridor for Sustainable Development” in the backdrop of President Xi Jinping’s visit to Myanmar in January 2020, just before the outbreak.

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COMMENTARY

ATTRIBUTING CHINA-MYANMAR ECONOMIC CORRIDOR FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



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To achieve the Sustainable Development Agenda, a set of 17 goals associated with eliminating poverty, reducing inequality, tackling climate change and halting loss of biodiversity and ecosystem, several United Nations agencies, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have partnered with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The UNDP believes that the partnership will accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), an integral framework of BRI, signed in September 2018 contained several key projects which if implemented successfully, would have far-reaching economic and strategic implications for South and Southeast Asia, especially if the Chinese ambition of direct access to the Indian Ocean could be achieved.

Indeed, to accelerate the implementation of the CMEC, several bilateral agreements – the establishment of Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zones (SEZs), the New Yangon City, the China-Myanmar Border Economic Cooperation Zone and connectivity projects such as the Muse-Mandalay high-speed railroad and energy – were signed during the Chinese President Xi Jinping’s two-day visit to Myanmar between January 17-18, 2020.¹

However, the successful implementation of projects under CMEC is an uphill challenge as the projects require enormous investment and will likely result in environment degradation, affecting several ethnic communities. This commentary delineates some of the critical challenges, which the stakeholders need to take into account, if they want the CMEC to be truly a force for sustainable development.

China-Myanmar Bilateral Relations under CMEC

The slew of agreements signed with the Government of Myanmar, particularly to promote the implementation of the CMEC during Chinese President Xi’s visit to Myanmar in January 2020 – the first by a Chinese leader in 19 years – is not something new. In fact, a number of these projects were delayed or suspended in the past mainly due to unfair agreements and protests by local communities. For instance, the agreement for the proposed Muse-Mandalay high-speed rail link under the CMEC was signed between Chinese and Myanmar officials in 2011.

¹ “Press Release on the State visit of H.E. Mr. Xi Jinping, President of the People’s Republic of China to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar”, Ministry of Information, The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, January 19, 2020 at <https://www.moi.gov.mm/moi:eng/?q=announcement/19/01/2020/id-20537> (Accessed on February 16, 2020)

But it was suspended by the Myanmar government under President Thein Sein, subsequent to intensive protests by the local population; a tender bid for the development of the deep sea port of Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone was successfully awarded in 2015 to a consortium led by China CITIC. But it was delayed because of the likelihood of its adverse social and environmental impact, expressed by various civil society groups in Arakan state.

Indeed, assessing the progress of Chinese investment in Myanmar under the CMEC, one could claim that, compared to other developing countries, Myanmar is moving more cautiously with Chinese investment. This claim is supported by the following cases: In August 2018, Myanmar officials led by Deputy Finance Minister, Set Aung, successfully negotiated an 80 per cent cost reduction from over \$7 billion to \$1.3 billion for the proposed Kyaukphyu deep-sea port²; the Mandalay Region Finance and Planning Minister, and also a member of the joint committee that over saw the implementation of CMEC projects, U Myat Thu, affirmed that “China proposed implementing about 40 projects” but the Myanmar government approved only nine projects. Affirming the reason for approving only nine projects, U Myat Thu, stated that “it seems... that [the] Myanmar government doesn’t want to place a debt burden on younger generations.”³; and describing the outcome of the bilateral agreement reached during Xi’s latest visit, Dr. Sean Turnell, Special Economic Consultant to the Myanmar State Counsellor, stated, “...given the outcome of the talks, and the way in which Myanmar stood firm in its conviction that all infrastructure projects must meet its own financial, environmental and social criteria, collectively applied under government’s ‘project Bank’ mechanism, the trip was another useful reminder that Myanmar is not a country that can be taken for granted.”⁴

Nevertheless, to accelerate the achievement of SDGs after the implementation of CMEC, addressing the challenges could be critical.

Lack of Transparency

From the beginning, the Chinese government emphasizes the promotion of BRI as ‘Green Development’ which encourages “enterprises to abide by the laws and regulations of the host countries’ environmental protection policies, and concerns about local people and environmental protection demands...”⁵ In reality, however, a contrasting picture prevails.

Maintenance of transparency in the implementation of several projects under the CMEC remains suspect. As a result, dissent, led by several ethnic minorities, political parties and civil societies, continues to prevail inside Myanmar.

² “China Builds in Myanmar’s Conflict Areas”, *The Thirdpole*, November 26, 2019 at <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/2019/11/26/china-builds-in-myanmars-conflict-areas/> (Accessed on February 16, 2020).

³ “China-Myanmar Economic Corridor a ‘Win-Win’”, *The Irrawaddy*, December, 3, 2018 at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/china-myanmar-economic-corridor-win-win.html> (Accessed on February 16, 2020).

⁴ “Interview: Suu Kyi Economic Advisor: National Interest must Come First when Deciding Large Chinese Investment in Myanmar”, *The Irrawaddy*, January 20, 2020 at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/suu-kyi-economic-adviser-national-interest-must-come-first-when-deciding-large-chinese-investments-in-myanmar.html> (Accessed on March 3, 2020).

⁵ “Belt and Road Initiative Helps Promote Green, Sustainable Development: Experts”, *Xinhua*, November 27, 2019 at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/27/c_138585484.htm (Accessed on March 3, 2020).

Until the draft Memorandum of Understanding for the CMEC was officially announced in November 2017, negotiations between the Chinese and Myanmar officials were conducted “behind closed doors and with almost no public consultation.”⁶ The former chief of the economic division in Myanmar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the current economic advisor to the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chamber of Commerce and Industry, U Myint, acknowledged that “Myanmar society is largely not aware of the Belt and Road Initiative, and knowledge of the scheme is limited to government officials and elite engaged in policy research or dealing with China.” Moreover, national newspapers failed to report the detailed discussions between senior Chinese officials and their Myanmar counterparts.⁷

Discrepancy in Public Consultation

Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), an international norm adopted by the United Nations, obliges states to consult ethnic minority groups before any development affecting their land and resources takes place. Moreover, Myanmar’s domestic law, viz., Protection of the Rights of National Race Law and Environmental Impact Assessment Procedures, both adopted in 2015, to ensure the rights of the minorities, has not been implemented in the right spirit.

A case in point is Northern Shan state, which holds a key for Chinese BRI, such as the high-speed railway project of Muse-Mandalay and two cross-border economic cooperation zones in Muse and Chinshwehaw; U Sai Kyaw Nyunt, the Secretary of Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), a prominent political party in Shan state, issued a warning statement that, “They need approval from local people first, and then it is very important to get approval from the relevant parliament” otherwise it will lead to more conflicts in Shan state.⁸

Similarly, U Aung Myto Htun, project officer of the Heartland Foundation, a leading Non-governmental organisation (NGO), which constantly monitors the China-backed BRI project in Shan State, asserted that local people have not been fully consulted on the environmental impact of the BRI project. Though the environmental impact assessment (EIA) of the project has been carried out, it failed to follow a precise process, wherein affected communities were ignored.⁹

Security Challenge

Another contentious challenge is security, where for several decades the corridor is mired by armed conflict between the Tatmadaw (Myanmar army) and alliance ethnic armed groups. The security challenge may be mitigated given China’s desire for the CMEC and its involvement in peace negotiations since 2013. Indeed, the Chinese and Myanmar governments are optimistic that by implementing the CMEC, peace and stability will prevail especially in northern and north-eastern Myanmar. As the Head of the China desk at the Institute of Strategy and Policy

⁶ “The Grand Plan for the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor”, *Frontier Myanmar*, September 26, 2018 at <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-grand-plan-for-the-china-myanmar-economic-corridor> (Accessed on March 7, 2020).

⁷ “As Myanmar Embraces China, Can It Reap the Rewards?” *South China Morning Post*, October 31, 2019 at <https://www.scmp.com/print/week-asia/economics/article/3035585/myanmar-embraces-china-can-it-reap-rewards> (Accessed on February 17, 2020).

⁸ “Popular Shan Party Warns Chinese Projects without Local Consent Risk More Conflicts”, *The Irrawaddy*, January 17, 2020 at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/popular-shan-party-warns-chinese-projects-without-local-consent-risk-conflicts.html> (Accessed on March 8, 2020)

⁹ “Interview: Myanmar Watchdog Criticizes ‘So-called’ Public Consultation Process for China’s BRI Project”, *The Irrawaddy*, December 2, 2019 at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/interview/myanmar-watchdog-criticizes-called-public-consultation-process-chinas-bri-project.html> (Accessed March 8, 2020)

(ISP) Myanmar, Daw Khin Khin Kyaw Kyee states: “Conflict along the CMEC have not dented China’s enthusiasm. They are pushing the Myanmar government very hard to accelerate those projects.” Both the governments of China and Myanmar “believe the ultimate goal of the CMEC is to achieve peace and development at the same time.”¹⁰ Nonetheless, implementation of projects without addressing ethnic grievances such as human rights, social and environmental issues, especially in extremely sensitive ethnic minority conflict zones such as Rakhine, Kachin and northern Shan states, remains a problem for those implementing the projects and for those affected. As the Kachin Peace Network coordinator, Khon Ja, emphasizes, “unless there are negotiations with local people and ethnic groups about the projects, we will see more fighting in those areas.”¹¹ Hence, for the CMEC to succeed with a win-win scenario, both stakeholders need to resolve the issues concerned through meaningful dialogue and negotiation.

Conclusion

To ensure coherence among different policies and institutions and promote action to achieve SDGs, the Myanmar government in August 2018 formulated the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (MSDP).¹² On the other hand, realizing the potential to boost the three key pillars of the SDG 2030: i.e., global economic, environmental and social sustainability, from the BRI, due to its massive financing flows and investments in infrastructure, agencies like the UNDP have partnered on the BRI. However, to provide equitable benefit across all sections of the population by closely aligning the BRI with the SDGs, as stated by Haoliang Xu the UNDP Assistant Administrator, “will be to develop and consistently apply to all BRI projects a set of harmonized environmental, social and economic standards that apply at all stages of the project’s implementation.”¹³ In this context, upholding several international norms laid down by UN conventions, such as on human rights, protection of indigenous rights and environmental concerns, as well as abiding by domestic law, will significantly harmonize BRI standards and thereby benefit the local communities extensively. Indeed, the BRI offers huge opportunities for Myanmar to fulfil its MSDP and development ambitions as well as the 2030 Agenda. By doing this, Myanmar will ensure “no one is left behind”, which is a core objective for the SDGs. Wider stakeholders must be involved in development planning and decision-making processes across Myanmar’s border regions; or else benefits will only be concentrated in the hands of the Myanmar military and economic elite, and existing conflicts will be exacerbated.

¹⁰ “Rebel Strikes Cast Shadow on China’s BRI Project in Myanmar”, *The Irrawaddy*, August 20, 2019 at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/analysis/rebel-strikes-cast-shadow-chinas-bri-projects-myanmar.html> (Accessed on March 10, 2020).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (2018-2030)”, *Ministry of Planning, Finance and Industry*, August, 2018 at <https://www.mopf.gov.mm/sites/default/files/MSDP%20EN%203-9-18.pdf> (Accessed on March 8, 2020).

¹³ “Harmonized Standards can Make Belt and Road a Driver to Attain SDGs”, UNDP China, April 27, 2019 at <https://www.cn.undp.org/content/china/en/home/ourperspective/ourperspectivearticles/2018/harmonized-standards-can-make-belt-and-road-a-driver-to-attain-s.html> (Accessed on March 8, 2020).

MAPPING EAST ASIA

CHINA

Chinese Military Medical Research

- The Academy of Military Medical Sciences of the PLA Academy of Military Sciences is continuing efforts to develop a vaccine for the Covid-19 coronavirus. Major General Chen Wei, who is heading the research team on vaccine development, has made a breakthrough in creating an adenovirus vector vaccine that had started its initial trial in March. The Institute has approved three vaccines for clinical trials and a total of 108 volunteers have completed the first phase.¹ The Academy has collaborated with CanSino, and in phase two of the trial, will enroll 500 healthy participants to check if there are adverse reactions.² These collaborations underscore the civil-military fusion in China and the increasing joint research between civil and military organizations.

Chinese Defence Industry Produces Medical Equipment

- To combat the Covid-19 crisis, China has relied on its defence industries to produce medical equipment. For instance, State-owned companies, including the Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC), the China State Shipbuilding Corporation Limited (CSSC) and the China North Industries Group Corporation Limited (NORINCO) have built machines that can manufacture 100 masks a minute and the companies are producing these machines so that they can then send them to mask factories in China.³ Moreover, as the virus outbreak has affected production lines— including defence industries – the Chinese defence industries have gradually started to open up production lines along with epidemic control measures, to offset the adverse effects of the pandemic.⁴

Global Outreach Activities During COVID-19 Pandemic by Chinese PLA

- Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the Chinese PLA has been playing an important role in fighting against the pandemic. In fact, the meeting of the Central Military Commission (CMC) in March 2020 chaired by President Xi Jinping, reaffirmed the PLA's leading role in fighting the disease. Subsequent to the declaration of medical emergency in Hubei, the CMC has sent more than 10,000 personnels into the area where the PLA was assisted by local governments to control medical supplies to contain the spread of the virus.⁵

¹ “China Approves Three Covid-19 Vaccine for Clinical Trials”, *Xinhua*, April 14, 2020 at http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2020-04/14/content_4863597.htm (Accessed on April 15, 2020)

² Angus Liu, “China’s CanSino Bio Advances COVID-19 Vaccine into Phase 2 on Preliminary Safety Data”, *Fierce Pharma*, April 10, 2020 at <https://www.fiercepharma.com/vaccines/china-s-cansino-bio-advances-covid-19-vaccine-into-phase-2-preliminary-safety-data> (Accessed on April 15, 2020).

³ “Chinese Defense Firm Produces Medical Supplies with J-20 Fighter Jet Technology”, *Global Times*, March 17, 2020 at http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-03/17/content_9770811.htm (Accessed on April 15, 2020).

⁴ “Chinese Arms Companies Race to Keep up with Production Schedule Delayed by Virus Outbreak”, *Global Times*, February 18, 2020 at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1179994.shtml> (Accessed on April 15, 2020).

⁵ “How China’s Military Took a Frontline Role in the Coronavirus Crisis”, *South China Morning Post*, March 17, 2020 at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3075396/how-chinas-military-took-frontline-role-coronavirus-crisis> (Accessed on 25 April, 2020).

- Apart from the role by the PLA domestically, globally as well, the PLA has provided assistance to several COVID-affected nations, especially neighbouring countries. Replying to a query of the PLA providing medical assistance outside China, the spokesperson of the PRC's Ministry of Defence, Senior Col. Ren Guoqiang, stated: "While making all-out efforts to combat it at home, China is actively engaging in international cooperation and providing as much help as possible to other countries and international organizations. This is how (*China*) fulfill[s] international responsibilities and consolidate[s] earlier medical progress."⁶
- In South Asia, in April, the Bangladesh Air Force (BAF) has conducted a special ferry light to fetch home preventive medical aids which include COVID-19 detection kits and personal protective equipment (PPE) from China⁷; In March, eight members of the Chinese military medical teams visited Pakistan to help the country fight the pandemic.⁸ Describing the bilateral relations between China and Pakistan, in the wake of COVID-19, Senior Col. Ren Guoqiang asserts that the two countries are "all-weather strategic partners with a tradition of mutual assistance." Indeed, following the outbreak of COVID-19, both China and Pakistan military chief immediately expressed "their firm determination to help each other and pull through together" Also, both countries are willingly to work together, "strengthening practical cooperation in various, including disease prevention and control..."⁹
- In South East Asia, a six-member PLA medical team reached Myanmar's capital, with test kits and KN95 medical masks to help local military forces. The Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar, Chen Hai expressed optimism that with the arrival of Chinese military experts, China will be able to assist Myanmar in containing COVID-19 and also strengthen bilateral relations¹⁰; another South East Asian state, Laos, also received medical supplies from PLA medical experts.¹¹
- In West Asia, Iran is the first country where the Chinese military dispatched medical equipment to the Iranian armed forces on March 19.¹² On the reason for China's quick response in supplying medical equipment to Iran, Senior Col. Ren Guoqiang stated: "China and Iran are comprehensive strategic partners", where China "will uphold the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind, and continue to carry forward the spirit of helping each other and pulling through together and continue with its efforts to contain the pandemic."¹³ Also, the Chinese Ambassador to Iraq, Zhang Tao, handed medical equipment to the Iraqi

⁶ Ministry of National Defence, the People's Republic of China, "Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defence", March 27, 2020 at http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2020-03/27/content_4862777.htm (Accessed on 25 April, 2020).

⁷ "Bangladesh Fetches COVID-19 Preventive Medical Aids from China", *ChinaMil.Com*, April 20, 2020 at http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-04/20/content_9796681.htm (Accessed on 25 April, 2020)

⁸ "Chinese Military Sends Medical Teams, Aid to Myanmar, Pakistan and Laos to Fight COVID-19", *ChinaMil.Com*, April 24, 2020 at http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-04/24/content_9800387.htm (Accessed on 25 April, 2020)

⁹ Ministry of National Defence, the People's Republic of China, "Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defence", March 27, 2020 at http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2020-03/27/content_4862777.htm (Accessed on 25 April, 2020).

¹⁰ "Chinese Military Medical Personal Arrive in Myanmar to Assist in COVID-19 Fight", *ChinaMil.Com*, 24 April 24, 2020 at http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-04/24/content_9800307.htm (Accessed on 25 April, 2020).

¹¹ Ministry of National Defence, the People's Republic of China, "Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defence", March 27, 2020 at http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2020-03/27/content_4862777.htm (Accessed on 25 April, 2020).

¹² "Medical Supplies from China Arrive to help Iran", *ChinaMil.Com*, March 20, 2020 at http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-03/20/content_9773361.htm (Accessed on 25 April, 2020).

¹³ Ministry of National Defence, the People's Republic of China, "Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defence", March 27, 2020 at http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2020-03/27/content_4862777.htm (Accessed on 25 April, 2020).

Ministry of Defence to fight COVID-19. Elaborating on the two countries fighting against COVID-19, Ambassador Zhang claims, “China and Iraq are good friends and dear partner[s]. When China went through difficulties and challenges over COVID-19, the Iraqi side gave a hand to China. Therefore, when Iraq faces difficulties, we are keen to provide assistance to Iraq.”¹⁴

Chinese Claims in the South China Sea Continue Even During COVID-19 Crisis

- A flurry of Chinese military activity in the South China Sea has been reported and Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines have registered diplomatic protests over them. The Chinese were reported to have been operating in the disputed area — between China, Malaysia and Vietnam that is around 200 nautical miles away from the shores of East Malaysia — which is believed to be rich in minerals, because of which the Malaysian company Petronas began oil exploration in October 2019 in the region. Operations by Chinese Coast Guard and its naval ships were reportedly triggered by Malaysian exploration. Also, China’s *Haiyang Dizhi 8*, supported by other Chinese vessels, was reported to be present in EEZs of both Malaysia and Vietnam in the last few weeks. Further, the Philippines protested against China alleging harassment of the former’s naval ship by the latter’s warship. Moreover, Beijing has formed administrative districts, one each in the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands, under Sansha City’s control. This is another addition to the already long list of acts of its dominance in the region. Additionally, the PLA has conducted military drills in the disputed waters – including anti-submarine drills– soon after Pentagon deployed the *USS McCampbell* for FONOPs.¹⁵

PLA’s *Liaoning* Flexes Muscle in the South China Sea and Taiwanese Coast

- It is reported that PLA’s military drills in the South China Sea were led by Chinese aircraft carrier *Liaoning*, emphasizing the significance of those drills. This comes at a time when the world is coming to terms with the Covid 19 pandemic. The carrier was accompanied with J-15 fighter jets that took off for flight in the Bohai Strait to return hours later, noting its success. Also, the Chinese Navy led by *Liaoning* sailed around the eastern shores of Taiwan as PRC has been displeased with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen’s increasingly strong assertion of Taipei’s self-rule and separate identity recently. Chinese naval actions were also accompanied by drills by PLA’s Air Force.¹⁶

¹⁴ “China Hands Medical Aid to Iraqi Military to Contain COVID-19”, *ChinaMil.Com*, April 23, 2020 at http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-04/23/content_9799546.htm (Accessed on 25 April, 2020).

¹⁵ Dzirhan Mahadzir, “*USS America* Now Steaming Near South China Sea Standoff”, *USNI News*, April 20, 2020 at <https://news.usni.org/2020/04/20/uss-america-now-steaming-near-south-china-sea-standoff> (Accessed on April 27, 2020); Khanh Vu and James Pearson, “Chinese Ship Back in Waters Off Vietnam Amid Coronavirus ‘Distraction’”, *Reuters*, April 14, 2020 at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-china-southchinasea/chinese-ship-back-in-waters-off-vietnam-amid-coronavirus-distraction-idUSKCN21W0CT> (Accessed on April 27, 2020); Neyla Zannia, “Vietnam Condemns China’s Expansion in Disputed South China Sea”, *The Online Citizen*, April 21, 2020 at <https://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2020/04/21/vietnam-condemns-chinas-expansion-in-disputed-south-china-sea/> (Accessed on April 27, 2020); Amanda Hodge, “Chinese Naval Vessel Locked Its Radar on Philippines Ship”, *The Australian*, April 23, 2020 at <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/world/chinese-naval-vessel-locked-its-radar-on-philippines-ship/news-story/d6b84276ba59827c1f5e037dc798937f> (Accessed on April 27, 2020); Richard Javad Heydarian, “China Seizes Covid-19 Advantage in South China Sea”, *Asia Times*, April 01, 2020 at <https://asiatimes.com/2020/04/china-seizes-covid-19-advantage-in-south-china-sea/> (Accessed on April 27, 2020).

¹⁶ Richard Javad Heydarian, “China seizes Covid-19 Advantage in South China Sea”, *Asia Times*, April 1, 2020 at <https://asiatimes.com/2020/04/china-seizes-covid-19-advantage-in-south-china-sea/> (Accessed on April 27, 2020); Yew Lun Tian and Ben Blanchard, “China Rattles Sabres as World Battles Coronavirus Pandemic”, *Reuters*, April 21, 2020 at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-security/china-rattles-sabres-as-world-battles-coronavirus-pandemic-idUSKBN2230GC> (Accessed on April 27, 2020).

The US Showcases Military Capabilities in the South China Sea

- The US Navy has stepped up exercises and drills in the South China Sea as it accused China of “bullying behavior” in the region. USS America (LHA-6) “with at least five Marine F-35B Lightning II fighters as well as MV-22Bs tiltrotors and CH-53 helicopters” were reported to be operating some days ago in the region. However, the US has, at least temporarily, sidelined aircraft carrier USS Roosevelt in Guam due to outbreak of Covid19 among personnel aboard it. So, now USS America is the strongest US naval asset in the sea. While sidelining of USS Roosevelt has caused a lot of strategic ambiguity, the Pentagon has announced that “it will redeploy the USS Harry Truman aircraft carrier from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific to re-enforce its Pacific fleet”. Also, the US Navy’s seventh fleet during the last week of March had announced that “it had fired a missile during a live fire exercise in the South China Sea”. Further, an Australian frigate, the *HMAS Parramatta*, accompanied by the *USS Barry* has joined the *USS America* and the *USS Bunker Hill* near the oil exploration zone, where China’s *Haiyang Dizhi 8* was also reported to be operating.¹⁷

THE TAIWAN STRAIT

Is The PLA Preparing to Invade Taiwan?

- *Global Times*, a Chinese newspaper, carried a story about the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA Army’s) “plan to procure a whopping 1.4 million units of high-quality body armour with plates for a top limit price of about 13 billion yuan (\$1.85 billion) in the coming two years.” The newspaper reported that the plan was to provide “every frontline army soldier” one armour suit, “with extra in reserve.” The newspaper noted that the PLA Army was “holding open tenders to procure 930,000 units of plates for universal bulletproof vests and 467,000 units of plates for enhanced bulletproof vests.” The newspaper provided the specification of the armour as informing, “Each plate unit consists of two bulletproof plates, and the plate manufacturer will assemble the plates into the vests, which are not included in these procurements, before delivery.” The body armours are to be “delivered in batches in the 24 months after contracts are signed.” What is interesting in this news item is that the story sought to infer this purchase as an attempt “to enhance its combat readiness and preparing for military conflicts, potentially against Taiwan secessionists and US provocations.” It based this inference on the speculation on the internet that “the procurement might aim at threat[s] from Taiwan[ese] secessionists and their US supporters [because] armour plates’ effectiveness expires in several years, so buying so many in such a short time period could mean preparations for potential military conflicts against Taiwan[ese] secessionist forces and other imminent threats in coming years,” even as the official statements, the actual source of the news, “did not mention the purpose of the procurements.” The spin the newspaper seemed to give might or might not be a message to Taiwan and the US.¹⁸

¹⁷ Dzirhan Mahadzir, “USS America Now Steaming Near South China Sea Standoff”, *USNI News*, April 20, 2020 at <https://news.usni.org/2020/04/20/uss-america-now-steaming-near-south-china-sea-standoff> (Accessed on April 27, 2020); Richard Javad Heydarian, “China Lays Ever Larger Claim to South China Sea”, *Asia Times*, April 21, 2020 at <https://asiatimes.com/2020/04/china-lays-ever-larger-claim-to-south-china-sea/> (Accessed on April 27, 2020); “US Navy Fires Missile During South China Sea Military Drill”, *Taiwan News*, March 24, 2020 at <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3903253> (Accessed on April 27, 2020); Reuters, “Australia Joins US Ships in South China Sea Amid Rising Tension”, *The Straits Times*, April 22, 2020 at <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/australia-joins-us-ships-in-south-china-sea-amid-rising-tension> (Accessed on April 27, 2020).

¹⁸ “Chinese Army to Procure 1.4 Million Body Armour Units in 2 Years”, *Global Times*, February 23, 2020 at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1180499.shtml> (Accessed on April 25, 2020).

The US Air Force Activities around Taiwan

- In a significant development, the US Air Force activities were noticed around Taiwan in the month of April this year. The RC-135U Combat, a US military reconnaissance plane, was spotted in the Bashi channel area on April 17, 2020. These activities are being interpreted as the US monitoring the Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) activities in the area between the Bashi Channel and the South China Sea. Notably, the plane was detected as it "had its transponder switched on", a move which is being construed as "deliberate and intended." This was perhaps a way of sending a message to China. The media reported this was the ninth time a US military aircraft [was] observed operating near Taiwan" in April,¹⁹ and the 12th time since March 25, 2020.²⁰ In the meantime, "the *USS Barry*, an Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, [also] sailed through the Taiwan Strait from north to south", though the time of its sailing was not reported by Taiwan's Ministry of Defence.²¹ The media carried multiple stories on the sighting of US Air Force assets during the month of April.

The PLA Air Force Performs Manoeuvres near Taiwan

- In early February 2020, the Taiwanese defence ministry reported that some Chinese war planes (J-11 jet fighters, KJ-500 early warning aircraft and H-6 bombers), which were on "a long-distance training mission", flew close to Eastern Taiwan, thus, "encircled half of Taiwan." The planes "flew through the Bashi Channel to the south of Taiwan and into the western Pacific Ocean before returning to their bases via the Miyako Strait to the northeast of Taiwan." Taiwanese F-16 fighter jets closely followed the Chinese planes.²² Later, in the beginning of March, Chinese H-6 bombers flying "over the region before entering the Bashi Channel" and returning "to an unspecified base through the same route" was again reported.²³ Regardless of the current global pandemic, the PLA has carried out several air force manoeuvres during the months under review, all duly reported by the media. It should also be noted that the media has reported that the aforementioned sightings of the US Air Force assets and the sailing of the *USS Barry* was in response to such manoeuvres by the Chinese war planes going back to China from the Bashi Channel.²⁴ In fact, immediately after the incidents in early February, the US had "dispatched two B-52 Stratofortress bombers on southward flights off Taiwan's east coast." Its MJ-130J Commando II multi-mission combat transport plane also "flew over the Taiwan Strait." The *USS Chancellorsville* sailed through the Taiwan Strait too.²⁵

¹⁹ "US Military Plane Flies near Taiwan", *Taipei Times*, April 18, 2020 at <https://taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/04/18/2003734843> (Accessed on April 25, 2019).

²⁰ "US Reconnaissance Aircraft Spotted near Taiwan", *Taipei Times*, April 16, 2020 at <https://taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/04/16/2003734716> (Accessed on April 25, 2020).

²¹ Chen Yun-yu and Emerson Lim, "U.S. Military Assets Seen Near Taiwan Friday, Saturday", *Focus Taiwan*, April 11, 2020 at <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202004110006> (Accessed on April 25, 2020).

²² Matt Yu and Emerson Lim, "Taiwan Scrambles F-16 Fighters to Monitor Chinese Warplanes", *Focus Taiwan*, February 09, 2020 at <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202002090014> (Accessed on April 25, 2020).

²³ "Chinese Warplanes again Fly near Nation to Bashi", *Taipei Times*, March 01, 2020 at <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/03/01/2003731871> (Accessed on April 25, 2020).

²⁴ "Military Manoeuvres: US Warships, Aircraft Follow PLA Jet Sortie", *Taipei Times*, April 12, 2020 at <https://taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/04/12/2003734469> (Accessed on April 25, 2020).

²⁵ "Chinese Warplanes again Fly near Nation to Bashi", *Taipei Times*, March 01, 2020 at <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/03/01/2003731871> (Accessed on April 25, 2020).

Taiwan Accuses China of Waging Cyber War

- The international community's ongoing fight against COVID-19 saw squabbling between Taiwan and China. The former accused the latter of "waging cyber "war" on the island to disrupt its fight against the coronavirus by using fake news, as the island Beijing claims as its own reported a jump in new cases." Taiwan accused "China's "internet army" for spreading misinformation such as "the island is covering up the true number of cases and that members of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party get priority for face masks".²⁶

TAIWAN

Taiwan Begins the Groundwork to Receive M1A2T Abrams Tanks

- Taiwan is in the process of buying a total 108 M1A2T Abrams tanks from the US at the cost of NT\$40.52 billion (US\$1.35 billion). It will receive deliveries from 2023 to 2026. In the meantime, it has begun "setting up facilities to train personnel" for the tanks. The preparations include "training seed instructors, setting up training grounds and bunkers, and purchasing simulators." The US military experts "surveyed several sites" in February 2020. Taiwan's army has identified "168 army officers with foreign language skills and 72 young officers who had been studying in US military schools" for training for the tanks in the US. It "also planning to send 84 personnel to the US in 2023 to train for six to nine months as seed instructors." The M1A2T tanks, under the Sixth Army Corps, will be deployed in northern Taiwan.²⁷

US-Taiwan Collaboration against COVID-19 in the Pacific Island Nations

- The US Department of State has recently been quoted as saying that it was "helping Pacific island nations respond to the COVID-19 pandemic by coordinating assistance with 'like-minded partners', including Taiwan." The US has also lent support of "more than US\$32 million in funding to support pandemic response efforts in Pacific island nations, including more than US\$27.5 million directed to the Federated States of Micronesia, as well as the Marshall Islands and Palau." This is yet another example of the US and Taiwan collaborating to fight the pandemic. This is in line with enhanced US-Taiwan cooperation in the Pacific region in the wake of some of Taiwan's Pacific diplomatic allies switching diplomatic recognition to China.²⁸

The Renewal Process of 'The Compact of Free Association Agreement' Begins

- In another significant development, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has informed that "negotiations have begun with three Pacific island nations to renew a national security agreement [the Compact of Free Association] that would help Washington counter growing Chinese influence in the region." Under the

²⁶ Ben Blanchard, "Taiwan Accuses China of Waging Cyber 'War' to Disrupt Virus Fight", *Reuters*, February 29, 2020 at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-taiwan/taiwan-accuses-china-of-waging-cyber-war-to-disrupt-virus-fight-idUSKBN20N09C> (Accessed on April 25, 2020).

²⁷ "Military Gearing up for New Abrams Tanks", *Taipei Times*, April 16, 2020 at <https://taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/04/16/2003734715> (Accessed on April 25, 2020).

²⁸ Lin Chia-nan, "Virus Outbreak: US Says Working with Taiwan in Pacific Relief Efforts", *Taipei Times*, April 23, 2020 at <https://taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/04/23/2003735150> (Accessed on April 25, 2020).

agreement, “the US military have exclusive access to [the] airspace and territorial waters of the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands and Palau” and the island nations “receive financial assistance” from the US. The agreement will expire in 2024. Given that recent years have seen enhanced Taiwan-US cooperation in the region and the US has enacted The Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2019 to help Taiwan retain its diplomatic allies, this development is an important development for Taiwan. Taiwan has some diplomatic allies in the Pacific Ocean region. The renewed agreement might address Taiwan’s concerns about the further loss of its allies in the region to China.²⁹

Trump Signs TAIPEI Act of 2019

- President Trump has signed the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2019, after the Senate passed it with “a unanimous consent” and the House of Representatives with a majority of 415-0 in its favour. Thus, the Act, which Senator Cory Gardner had introduced in May 2019 in the Senate, enjoys bipartisan consensus. The law aims “at supporting Taiwan’s international presence...” [and] calls for Washington to “reduce its economic, security and diplomatic engagements with nations that take serious or significant actions to undermine Taiwan.” It also “calls on the U.S. government to help Taiwan gain participation in international organizations, either as a member or an observer, and to back Taiwan’s efforts in that regard whenever Washington has bilateral engagements with Beijing.”³⁰

Telecommunications Network between Los Angeles and Toucheng

- The US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has granted Google’s request “to use part of a US-Asia undersea telecommunications network that is to take data to and from Taiwan under the Pacific Ocean ... between Los Angeles and Yilan County’s Toucheng Township.” However, it “was not authorized to use the US-Hong Kong section”.³¹

JAPAN

Developments in the East China Sea

- On March 30, a Chinese fishing boat collided with *JS Shimakaze*, a *Hatakaze*-class guided missile destroyer from Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) east of Zhoushan.³² According to Japanese authorities, *JS Shimakaze* was on regular patrol when it received unspecified physical damage to its hull following the

²⁹ Colin Packham and Jonathan Barrett, “U.S. Seeks to Renew Pacific Islands Security Pact to Foil China”, *Reuters*, August 05, 2019 at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-micronesia-usa-pompeo/u-s-seeks-to-renew-pacific-islands-security-pact-to-foil-china-idUSKCN1UV0UV?il=0> (Accessed on April 25, 2020).

³⁰ Stacy Hsu, Frances Huang, Christie Chen and Ko Lin, “Trump Signs TAIPEI Act into Law (update)”, *Focus Taiwan*, March 27, 2020 at <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202003270004> (Accessed on April 25, 2020).

³¹ Shelley Shan, “US Approves Google Cable Bid”, *Taipei Times*, April 10, 2020 at <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/04/10/2003734345> (Accessed on April 25, 2020).

³² Kosuke Takahashi, “JMSDF Destroyer Collides with Chinese Fishing Boat in East China Sea, Two Injured”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, March 31, 2020 at <https://www.janes.com/article/95216/jmsdf-destroyer-collides-with-chinese-fishing-boat-in-east-china-sea-two-injured> (Accessed on April 26, 2020).

collision. Meanwhile, the Chinese foreign ministry maintained that the incident occurred in the coastal waters of China, endangering the safety of the Chinese vessel. *Hatakaze*-class destroyers are gas-propulsion warships furnished with advanced armaments and sensors. Earlier in the month, Chinese fishing vessel collided with the Taiwanese Coast Guard off the Kinmen Islands.

- Japanese Foreign Minister, Motegi Toshimitsu registered protest with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi on April 21 against Chinese incursions into territorial waters near the contested Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.³³ Chinese vessels have reportedly entered the disputed waters seven times in 2020. Moreover, Motegi also articulated that Japan is closely monitoring the recent developments in the South China Sea and supports upholding the rule of law and peaceful resolution of conflicts based on international law.
- It was also reported on March 30 that the Japanese maritime destroyer, *Shimakaze*, had a collision with a Chinese fishing boat about 650 km west to Yakushima Island, at Kagoshima Prefecture. While no Japanese member was reportedly injured, the Chinese vessel is believed to have been damaged.³⁴

Japan Commissions First Maya-Class Guided-Missile Destroyer

- On March 19, the JMSDF commissioned the first of two Maya advanced Atago-class Aegis-equipped destroyers. *JS Maya*, which cost about US\$ 1.61 billion, is inducted into the Escort Division 1 of the Escort Flotilla 1 at the Yokosuka naval base.³⁵ It is built by the Japan Marine United (JMU) Corporation. The ship will have Standard Missile 3 (SM-3) Block IIA missiles to intercept short- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles. It will also have the Cooperative Engagement Capability (CEC) System, developed by the US, which empowers it to be part of a broader grid of sensors and weapon platforms that share surveillance and information. This will enable Japan to counter threats imposed by North Korean missiles better.

Japan and COVID-19

- Japan's National Security Secretariat has constituted an economic team in April. The Chief Cabinet Secretary, Suga Yoshihide stressed that since the realm of national security is rapidly expanding to economic and technical fields, one of the priority areas for the unit will be to track movement of pathogenic agents during the COVID-19 pandemic to protect the national safety.³⁶ The economic unit will gather information on the international response to COVID-19 and its economic consequences. It will also monitor suspected intellectual property abuses and technology theft by China in addition to cyber-attacks emanating from North Korea.

³³ "Japan Lodges Protest against Chinese Maritime Intrusions near Senkakus", *Kyodo News*, April 22, 2020 at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/04/22/national/japan-protest-chinese-intrusions-senkakus/#.XqahU8gzbiU> (Accessed on April 26, 2020).

³⁴ ANI, "Amid Covid Crisis, China Steps Up Bullying in South and East China Sea", *Yahoo News*, April 24, 2020 at <https://in.news.yahoo.com/amid-covid-crisis-china-steps-bullying-south-east-071310125.html> (Accessed on April 27, 2020); "Destroyer in Collision with Fishing Boat in East China Sea", *The Asahi Shimbun*, March 31, 2020 at <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13259878> (Accessed on April 27, 2020).

³⁵ Kosuke Takahashi, "Japan Commissions First Maya-class Guided-missile Destroyer", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, March 19, 2020 at <https://www.janes.com/article/94978/japan-commissions-first-maya-class-guided-missile-destroyer> (Accessed on April 26, 2020).

³⁶ "New Economic Unit to Join Coronavirus Battle", *NHK*, April 6, 2020 at https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20200406_22/ (Accessed on April 26, 2020).

This unit will work at the National Security Secretariat alongside other teams including the coordination team, strategic planning team, intelligence team and another three teams dealing with regional affairs. This development unfolded as Japan barred Huawei Technologies and ZTE Corp. from getting involved in public procurement contracts as apprehensions regarding alleged espionage intensified. Japan constituted the National Security Council in December 2013 with the objective of carrying out strategic discussions on several national security issues on a regular basis and as necessary.

- To fight the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan amended the Act on Special Measures for Pandemic Influenza and New Infectious Diseases Preparedness and Response, which was enacted in March.³⁷ The objective of this legislation is to support preparation for the worst-case scenario and declaration of a state of emergency. It permits the prefectural governors to issue instructions concerning preventive action, for example, staying at home. The special measures law authorises the prime minister to announce a state of emergency, with a precise timeline and geographic scope, in case the pandemic majorly impacts daily lives and the national economy. Emergency authorises prefectural governors to temporarily take over buildings to accommodate medical facilities, and make producers and retailers supply food and medicine. Successively, when the number of cases increased in early April, Abe has declared a state of emergency, encompassing seven prefectures from April 7.
- Meanwhile, the much-anticipated Tokyo Olympic Games was postponed following the outbreak of the pandemic. The International Olympic Committee (IOC), International Paralympic Committee (IPC), Tokyo 2020 Organising Committee, Tokyo Metropolitan Government and the Government of Japan decided to delay the scheduled Olympics by a year. The Games will now be held from July 23 to August 8, 2021. The decision to postpone the Games was shaped by concerns regarding the health of the athletes in the backdrop of the global pandemic and the international sports calendar.

THE KOREAN PENINSULA

North Korea Convenes Supreme People's Assembly

- The third session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly was conducted on April 12 in Pyongyang. Earlier, on April 11, Korean Worker's Party Politburo meeting was conducted where the focus remained on the budget report. The Parliament reportedly passed a few new laws related to recycling resources, tele-education and improving living conditions for discharged officers.³⁸ A report related to the state budget presented official statistics on the economy. Growth projections indicate that North Korea economy will grow at 4.2 per cent in 2020. Transaction taxes and profits from state enterprises are key sources of revenue which usually account for four-fifths of the total. Moreover, another report related to the Cabinet indicated that North Korea does not have any case of COVID-19. Furthermore, the overall production remained positive

³⁷ “[COVID-19] Press Conference by the Prime Minister”, March 14, 2020 at https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/202003/_00001.html (Accessed on April 26, 2020).

³⁸ Ruediger Frank, “The 2020 Parliamentary Session in North Korea: Self-Criticism and Dubious Optimism Concerning Economic Development”, *38 North*, April 13, 2020 at <https://www.38north.org/2020/04/rfrank041320/> (Accessed on April 26, 2020).

and targets for industrial production were met. It is important to note that one sector which registered high growth was coal production which is a little unanticipated as there is a ban on North Korea's mineral exports. Coal was a key export item before the UNSC Resolution 2397 of 2017. Assuming that China has not violated the sanctions, the only rational justification for this kind of growth can be an augmented allocation of coal to domestic demand, including electricity and steel production and heating.

Speculations over Chairman Kim Jong-un's Health

- Speculations have gained momentum regarding Chairman Kim Jong-un's health in international media.³⁹ His last public appearance was on April 11 the Politburo meeting of the Workers' Party. He was absent during the April 15 event commemorating the birthday of Kim Il-sung, furthered conjectures regarding his health. There are rumours that Chairman Kim underwent a cardiovascular procedure. China has recently despatched a team of medical professionals to North Korea.⁴⁰ Additionally, it is reported that a senior member of the Chinese Communist Party's international liaison department also visited North Korea. Meanwhile, both South Korean and Chinese authorities have remained circumspect in making any assumptions. Also, US President Trump has denied reports that Chairman Kim Jong-un's health is worrisome.

Kim Yo-jong Rising to Prominence

- Kim Yo-jong, younger sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, returned as a member of the political bureau of the central committee. Previously, she has served as Chairman Kim's representative to South Korea during the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in 2018 that unleashed a diplomatic shift in Inter-Korea relations. Additionally, Ri Son-gwon, appointed previously in January as Pyongyang's top diplomat is also elected as an alternate member of the political bureau together with Kim Yo-jong.⁴¹

North Korea Conducts Series of Missile Tests

- On April 14, South Korean authorities confirmed that North Korea fired anti-ship cruise missiles into the East Sea, a day before the birth anniversary of late founder Kim Il-sung.⁴² These projectiles are reportedly surface-to-ship cruise missiles fired from around Munchon. Earlier in March, North Korea tested ballistic missiles four times. Two short-range ballistic missiles were launched on March 21 which were similar to the KN-24 missile. This came after a series of consecutive short-range ballistic missile tests by North Korea. Two missiles were launched on March 2 which were similar to the KN-25 short-range ballistic missile. It also fired three projectiles on March 9 which were KN-25 missiles. North Korea has lately stepped up its defence capabilities following the stalled denuclearisation negotiation with the US. Chairman Kim Jong-un earlier

³⁹ Alex Ward, "The Rumors of Kim Jong Un's "Grave" Illness, Explained", *Vox*, April 23, 2020 at <https://www.vox.com/2020/4/23/21232665/north-korea-kim-jong-un-coronavirus-sick> (Accessed on April 26, 2020).

⁴⁰ Takashi Funakoshi, "China Dispatches Medical Team to N. Korea but Reason Unknown", *Asahi Shimbun*, April 26, 2020 at <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13329552> (Accessed on April 26, 2020).

⁴¹ "Kim Jong-un's Sister Promoted to Key Politburo Member", *Korea Times*, April 12, 2020 at https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2020/04/103_287728.html (Accessed on April 26, 2020).

⁴² "N. Korea Fires Multiple Short-range Anti-ship Cruise Missiles into East Sea: JCS", Yonhap News Agency, April 14, 2020 at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200414006400325> (Accessed on April 26, 2020).

underscored during the plenary meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea that North Korea would build "necessary and prerequisite strategic weapons".⁴³

North Korea Celebrates the "Day of the Sun"

- On April 15, North Korea commemorated the 108th birthday of the country's founder Kim Il Sung, grandfather of Chairman Kim Jong-un. This day is known as the Day of the Sun. This day is usually honoured with enormous military parades exhibiting new weapons but this year, however, the celebrations were relatively low-key to avoid gatherings amidst the global health emergency triggered by COVID-19.⁴⁴ North Korea officially maintains that it has no cases of COVID-19. Earlier as a precautionary measure it shut its border with China.

South Korea Reduces Defence Budget Following COVID-19

- The South Korean 2020 defence budget has been reduced by KRW 904.7 billion (US\$ 738 million), following the outbreak of the global pandemic. Funds are also obtained from other ministries such as education, industry and agriculture. Authorities stated that KRW 7.6 trillion will be given to the national emergency disaster assistance plan to ease the harsh economic impact of COVID-19. The decrease in the defence budget takes away KRW 192.7 billion from operating expenses and KRW 712 billion from military modernisation that comprises procurement and research and development (R&D). Official authorities said new business and contract timetables has been deferred owing to the COVID-19 situation.⁴⁵

Election in South Korea

- South Korea's ruling Democratic Party (DP) emerged victorious in parliamentary elections in April amidst the battle against COVID-19. The results reflected approval for President Moon Jae-in's approach to the pandemic.⁴⁶ The results are expected to further allow him to achieve better governance in the remaining time of his term when he can pursue reforms. It can pass most bills notwithstanding oppositions from the other parties. The DP can quickly pass an extra budget to back the government's emergency funds following the pandemic. For now, the opposition United Future Party (UFP) registered its third setback in the elections, counting the 2018 local polls since the corruption disgrace associated with former President Park Geun-hye. Voter turnout amidst the coronavirus outbreak was 66.2 per cent. This election was steered by the new electoral reform bill approved in December.⁴⁷

⁴³ Julia Masterson, "North Korea Tests First Missiles of 2020", *Arms Control Today*, April 2020 at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-04/news/north-korea-tests-first-missiles-2020> (Accessed on April 26, 2020).

⁴⁴ "N. Korea Marks Late Founder's Birthday Quietly amid Anti-coronavirus Efforts", Yonhap News Agency, April 15, 2020 at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200415001800325> (Accessed on April 26, 2020).

⁴⁵ Jon Grevatt, "Covid-19: South Korea Cuts Defence Budget in Response to Pandemic", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, April 16, 2020 at <https://www.janes.com/article/95556/covid-19-south-korea-cuts-defence-budget-in-response-to-pandemic> (Accessed on April 26, 2020).

⁴⁶ "Ruling Party Wins Landslide Victory in Parliamentary Elections amid Pandemic", Yonhap News Agency, April 16, 2020 at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200415005856315> (Accessed on April 26, 2020).

⁴⁷ "(4th LD) Ruling Party Wins Landslide Victory in Parliamentary Elections amid Pandemic", Yonhap News Agency, April 16, 2020 at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200415005854315> (Accessed on April 26, 2020).

South Korea's Success in COVID-19

- The South Korean model to manage COVID-19 is being appreciated all around the world. The country registered its first confirmed case in late January. Then followed a sudden spike in the COVID-19 cases which led to the government's decision to start widespread testing. It followed a "Trace, test, treat" approach.⁴⁸ Even though the initial thirty cases were controlled effectively, things took a difficult turn with the advent of Patient 31, touted as the super-spreader who visited Daegu and Seoul, attended church, and visited hotels. South Korea implemented an all-government approach and created a task force involving all ministries as well as regional and city governments. Foreign Minister Kang said that the "key to our success has been absolute transparency with the public – sharing every detail of how this virus is evolving, how it is spreading and what the government is doing about it, warts and all."⁴⁹ Testing constituted the key to Seoul's response to the epidemic. Unlike Europe, South Korea did not opt for lockdown but shut down schools. Authorities have stressed that even though the government has managed the first wave well, it will arrange for resources for a probable second wave of COVID-19 later this year.

⁴⁸ Suhasini Haidar, "'Trace, Test, Treat' Mantra Helped Us Control the Virus, Says South Korean Ambassador to India Shin Bong-Kil", March 26, 2020 at <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/coronavirus-south-korean-ambassador-to-india-shin-bong-kil-says-trace-test-treat-mantra-helped-south-korea-control-virus/article31175789.ece> (Accessed on April 26, 2020).

⁴⁹ Sean Fleming, "South Korea's Foreign Minister Explains How the Country Contained COVID-19", World Economic Forum, March 31, 2020 at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/south-korea-covid-19-containment-testing/> (Accessed on April 26, 2020).

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