

Asia

North East Asia

➔ **China/Japan** Amid COVID-19 spread, Japan 5 March said Chinese President Xi had postponed his planned April state visit to Japan. Japanese news sources 11 March reported Japanese navy built its first ocean surveillance ship since 1992, due to be deployed in 2021, in response to concerns over Chinese submarines' activities close to and in Japanese waters, and with a view to monitoring North Korea over its development of sub-marine technology. Japanese warship and Chinese fishing boat 30 March collided in East China Sea; Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said one Chinese fisherman injured.

↓ **Korean Peninsula** North Korea carried out missile tests and military exercises in demonstration of hard-line position announced Dec 2019, while diplomatic activity remained stalled amid COVID-19 pandemic. Pyongyang 2, 8, 21 and 29 March tested short-range ballistic missiles and used multiple-launch rocket systems; moves apparently aimed at reassuring population about North Korean-leader Kim Jong-un's strength amid widely suspected COVID-19 epidemic inside country, by testing missiles without eliciting response from U.S.; in U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee hearing Defense Secretary Mark Esper 4 March said threat from DPRK ballistic missile capabilities "becoming increasingly complicated as they seek to modernize the full range of missile systems", confirmed they would pose a threat to the U.S.; in joint statement, UK, Germany, France, Estonia and Belgium 5 March condemned 2 March missiles test, said launches "undermine regional security and stability". UN Human Rights Chief Michelle Bachelet 10 March reported apparent "systematic human rights violations in detention centres" in DPRK, including "sexual violence against women and girls", which may amount to "crimes against humanity"; said violations appear to be taking place under "direct authority of two Ministries, with likely involvement of higher authorities". U.S. Justice Department 2 March indicted two Chinese nationals for laundering \$100mn worth of cryptocurrency from stolen money by North Korean actors in 2018; U.S. attorney claimed Pyongyang continues to attack virtual currencies "as a means to bypass the sanctions imposed on it". Think tank Centre for Advanced Studies 3 March released report claiming China and North Korea violated 2017 UN Security Council Resolution 2397 preventing DPRK from supplying, selling or transferring, directly or indirectly, "earth and stone", said satellite imagery and shipping databases appear to show hundreds of vessels "dredging sand in Haeju Bay before transporting it to China" March-Aug 2019. U.S.-South Korea tensions continued over future agreement for sharing cost of maintaining 28,500 U.S. troops on Korean peninsula, with negotiators unable to make breakthrough in discussions 17-19 March in Los Angeles, U.S..

➔ **Taiwan Strait** Tensions with China continued over military exercises and disruption to gov't's COVID-19 response. Defence Ministry reported 16 March that Chinese jets including J-11 fighters and KJ-500 airborne flew into waters off coast of south west Taiwan in night time exercises, coming close to Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone, with gov't scrambling fighters in response. Following FM Joseph

Wu 29 Feb accusing China of waging cyber “war” by using fake news in attempt to disrupt Taiwan’s response to COVID-19 spread, govt continued to protest Beijing’s apparent blocking of Taipei from accessing information from World Health Organization; U.S.-based chairman of American Institute in Taiwan 5 March told President Tsai Ing-wen U.S. would “redouble” efforts to “expand Taiwan’s participation on the global stage”. U.S. House of Representatives 4 March unanimously passed the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act (TAIPEI Act), aimed at discouraging Taipei’s diplomatic allies from cutting ties with island in favour of relations with Beijing; U.S. Senate 11 March passed bill, and President Trump 26 March signed act into law.

South Asia

↓ **Afghanistan** Levels of violence in rural areas peaked again after Feb “reduction in violence” period did not extend into March, while intra-Afghan negotiations that could lead to a ceasefire were delayed. Following Feb U.S.-Taliban deal and end of reduced violence period, Taliban resumed intense military pressure on Afghan security forces in rural areas, including 19 March attack in Zabul province (south) that left over twenty Afghan security forces killed; Taliban carried out series of attacks in Balkh province (north), leading to repeated shut down and impact on northern highway; levels of violence in country highest in Kandahar province (south) in first part of March. Insurgents continued to refrain from major attacks in urban areas. Mass abductions reported in Maidan Wardak, Uruzgan, Kunduz and elsewhere. Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) resumed large-scale attacks in capital Kabul including 6 March attack on Shia mosque, targeting Hazara community, with gunmen killing at least 32 people; IS-KP claimed responsibility for five rockets fired 9 March at Presidential Palace during President Ghani’s inauguration ceremony, no major casualties reported, and 25 March attack on Sikh religious complex, killing 25. Domestic political crisis continued with establishment of parallel govts; following controversial 2019 presidential elections, Ghani (whom official results declared as winner in Feb) and his main opponent Abdullah Abdullah (who continued to claim results were fraudulent) 9 March held concurrent inauguration ceremonies in adjacent wings of Presidential Palace complex in Kabul; representatives of international community mostly attended Ghani’s inauguration, while northern and western Afghan powerbrokers joined Abdullah’s ceremony; both figures refrained from action that might escalate political crisis into armed conflict. Amid delay, U.S. Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad conducted diplomatic efforts in attempt to broker compromise between Ghani and Abdullah; Sec State Pompeo 23 March visited Kabul, announcing US\$1bn cut to aid amid deadlock and saying U.S. “deeply regrets” both sides inability to “agree on an inclusive govt”; days after, govt formation of an inclusive negotiating team and govt-Taliban dialogue on prisoners progressed, albeit still limited.

➔ **Bangladesh** Security forces continued to arrest alleged members of banned militant groups while govt temporarily released imprisoned opposition Bangladeshi Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Khaleda Zia. In capital Dhaka, counter-terrorism police 19 March arrested alleged second in command of Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) women’s branch, on charges of online recruitment; paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) 23 March detained three suspected JMB members;

and RAB 30 March arrested suspected online financier of Ansar-al Islam (formerly Ansarullah Bangla Team). In Cox's Bazar, RAB claimed seven Rohingya criminals killed in 2 March gunfight in Teknaf subdistrict; over 50 Rohingya refugees killed in shootouts with authorities in Bangladesh since influx began Aug 2017. Ahead of 17 March centenary celebration of birth of Bangladesh's founder, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Islamist groups including Hefazat-e-Islam and Khilafat Andolon late-Feb held demonstrations in Dhaka, condemning killing of Muslims in clashes in India's capital New Delhi over country's new citizenship law and demanding PM Hasina cancel invitation to Indian PM Modi to attend celebrations; though govt rejected demands, India's external affairs ministry 9 March said Modi's visit was being "deferred" amid spread of COVID-19. Govt 25 March released BNP chief Zia from prison on "humanitarian grounds" for six months on condition she remains at home and does not leave country; hundreds of supporters greeted Zia upon release in Dhaka. Following UN Human Rights Chief Bachelet late-Feb speech at UN Human Rights Council calling for "reform of the Digital Security Act", authorities continued to use controversial act to attack journalists; police 9 March lodged case under act against Daily Manabzamin newspaper editor Matiur Rahman Chowdhury and 31 other journalists.

➔ **India (non-Kashmir)** Authorities continued arrests after Feb Hindu-Muslim violence in capital New Delhi, as govt 24 March introduced country-wide lockdown to combat spread of COVID-19 and Maoists perpetrated largest attack on security forces since 2017. Following major Hindu-Muslim violence which left at least 53 dead, police 1-2 March arrested over 40 people for spreading false rumours of further violent clashes on 1 March; authorities 9 March said Delhi Police had arrested nearly 2,200 people in connection to Feb violence and filed 690 cases. UN Human Rights Chief Michelle Bachelet 2 March submitted application to Supreme Court asking for UN Human Rights office to act as amicus curiae in petition submitted against controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA); govt 3 March rejected move, said "no foreign party has any locus standi on issues pertaining to India's sovereignty". Govt 3 March summoned Iranian ambassador to lodge protest against Iranian FM Javad Zarif's who previous day had condemned "the wave of organized violence against Indian Muslims". Following 23 March lockdown to combat COVID-19 spread in New Delhi, police 24 March forcefully removed anti-CAA sit-in, which had been running since Dec, in Shaheen Bagh neighbourhood. Govt 24 March placed entire country under lockdown for 21 days to combat spread of COVID-19; in Gujarat state (west), police 29 March clashed with migrant labourers attempting to return home and defying lockdown measures, over 90 labourers detained. In deadliest Maoist attack on security forces since April 2017, more than 300 attackers 21 March launched ambush on police commandos in Sukma district, Chhattisgarh state (centre), leaving seventeen policemen killed, and another fifteen injured; officials claimed up to ten Maoists killed during attack; in rare gesture insurgents rebutted claim, published details of three killed. Also in Chhattisgarh, Maoists 14 March killed two security personnel in ambush in Bastar district. Police 4 March arrested two senior Maoist commanders in Maharashtra state (West), including suspected mastermind of deadly May 2019 attack on police commandos in Gadchiroli district, also wanted in 108 cases. In Odisha state (east), eight Maoists from Malkangiri district 18 March surrendered to authorities.

➔ **Kashmir** Tension and clashes between Indian and Pakistani forces along Line of Control (LoC, dividing Pakistan and Indian-administered Kashmir) continued, while new political party emerged within Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Islamabad claimed Indian forces 17 March killed Pakistani soldier in cross-LoC shelling. At South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation virtual summit to develop regional strategy against COVID-19 spread, Pakistani participant 16 March called for lifting of lockdown in J&K, with India's external ministry spokesperson responding summit "not a political platform" and "Pakistan misused it". Within J&K, new political party Jammu and Kashmir Apni (Our Own) launched in Srinagar 8 March; Apni headed by Altaf Bukhari, formerly with Mufti's Peoples Democratic Party, whose head former Kashmir's Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti is currently detained, also includes defectors from other major Kashmiri parties; Apni delegation led by Bukhari 14 March met PM Modi in New Delhi and declared support for Aug 2019 revoking of J&K special constitutional status, while Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah promised to revive J&K's statehood in future. Leader of opposition in upper house of parliament 14 March met with Farooq Abdullah, former chief minister released previous day after charges under Public Safety Act were revoked, called on govt to release all Kashmiri political prisoners and dismissed Apni as creation of Indian intelligence agencies. Former Kashmir chief minister Omar Abdullah 24 March released after eight months in detention. Militant-related insecurity continued; militant attack in Baramulla district killed two including police officer 4 March; security forces 15 March killed four suspected Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and Hizbul Mujahideen militants during clash in Anantnag district; suspected militants 27 March shot dead civilian in Kulgam district.

➔ **Nepal** COVID-19 fears dominated political discourse with Nepal Communist Party-led govt coming under criticism for sluggish preparedness and for not stemming spread of misinformation regarding coronavirus. Govt declared countrywide lockdown 24 March following second confirmed positive case – first one was in Jan; govt also closed borders with India and China 23 March, and banned all incoming flights starting 22 March. COVID-19 related measures introduced as local officials called for attention to lack of clear directives from federal govt, forcing them early March to issue separate directives for constituents to take precautions. NGO Human Rights Watch 31 Mar called out govt for denying migrant workers based in India right to return home, also drew attention to Nepali migrant labourers stranded in Gulf. As PM KP Oli underwent a second kidney transplant 4 March, concerns over his health further increased.

➔ **Pakistan** Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) govt continued to use corruption charges against opponents and attempted to position itself in key role in Afghan peace process. Govt targeting of opposition and critics through controversial anti-corruption National Accountability Bureau (NAB) remained issue of political concern; NAB 23 March arrested Mir Shakilur Rehman, owner and editor-in-chief of Jang-Geo media group, on charges related to real estate transaction; journalist unions held countrywide demonstrations, calling arrest attempt to silence media, while opposition parties Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam 18 March criticised decision and jointly filed petition against it and crackdown on Geo TV in Islamabad High Court. High courts granted bail to various top opposition leaders detained by NAB including former PML-N railways minister on 17 March, and former PML-N PM Abbasi on 25 March.

Amid COVID-19 spread, PML-N president and parliamentary leader of opposition Shahbaz Sharif 18 March criticised govt for lack of preparedness in dealing with fast spreading of coronavirus. Internationally, govt welcomed U.S.-Taliban deal, claiming credit for success of negotiations and insisting on an active role in intra-Afghan negotiations; FM Qureshi 1 March acknowledged Afghan govt mistrust of Pakistan due to Islamabad's longstanding support to Taliban but called on Kabul to talk to govt, said Pakistan had convinced Taliban to "put forward an authoritative delegation that has the capacity to implement" U.S.-Taliban deal; Qureshi 3 March called on Afghan President Ghani to "show magnanimity" and Taliban to "show flexibility" amid stalled negotiations over prisoner releases. Militant violence continued, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province: army colonel killed during operation against militants in Dera Ismail district 9 March, Pakistani Taliban killed four soldiers in North Waziristan tribal district 18 March, same day, militant attack on police station in Orakzai tribal district killed two officers.

➡ **Sri Lanka** Election Commission postponed April parliamentary elections in light of global COVID-19 pandemic, while govt introduced measures to tackle growing public health and economic crisis. Citing health risks associated with running an election amid COVID-19 spread, Election Commission 19 March postponed indefinitely planned 25 April parliamentary elections. Opposition leaders 25 March called for parliament to be reconvened until new election date set, contested authority of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to govern alone and reliance on ad hoc committees headed by military and Rajapaksa family members. Govt took series of measures to contain COVID-19, including border closures to internationals 18 March, quarantine of residents returning from overseas, widespread deployment of military, and rolling curfews across country to enforce "social distancing". In 5 March media interview, Rajapaksa reiterated desire for stronger presidential powers, calling for "an environment where the President could function without an obstruction". Govt 18 March signed \$500mn ten-year loan from China to improve foreign currency reserves. Split in main opposition United National Party (UNP) confirmed 19 March when faction led by UNP deputy leader Sajith Premadasa submitted separate list of candidates for elections under newly formed Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB). Three prominent Sinhalese nationalist monks 16 March formed new political party, Ape Jana Bala Pakshya ("Our People's Power Party") and submitted nominations for upcoming election, to campaign on explicitly Sinhalese nationalist and anti-Muslim platform. Govt 2 March criticised findings of Feb report by UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief; report highlighted ongoing insecurity faced by Muslim communities and need to end impunity for attacks on religious minorities. Attorney General (AG) 11 March wrote to presidential commission established to investigate alleged "political victimisation" by previous UNP-led govt against officials and supporters of the 2005-2015 Rajapaksa govt, AG argued commission has no authority to suspend or interfere with ongoing criminal cases. President 26 March pardoned former army Sgt Sunil Ratnayake, sentenced to death in 2015 for 2000 murder of eight Tamil civilians during civil war, one of few successful prosecutions of war-related atrocities.

South East Asia

➔ **Indonesia** Eight gunmen 30 March attacked a PT Freeport gold mine office in Timika, Papua province, killing one miner and wounding six others; separatist armed group, West Papua Liberation Army, same day claimed responsibility for attack. FM 31 March announced decision to suspend foreign arrivals to curb spread of COVID-19; govt same day declared state of emergency and intention to release about 30,000 prisoners who have served two-thirds of their sentences.

➔ **Myanmar** Major fighting between Arakan Army (AA) and military continued in Rakhine State as authorities 23 March designated group as “terrorist organisation”, further diminishing prospects of any negotiated settlement; meanwhile, security forces launched series of raids on illicit drugs trade in Northern Shan state. As military attempted to break AA blockade of Paletwa township, southern Chin State, and take control of strategic Kaladan river route linking Paletwa town with Kyauktaw town, AA from 10-11 March attacked major govt military base that overlooks the river in Rakhine state, killing dozens and capturing 36 troops from elite unit of 77th Light Infantry Division, including the battalion commander; civilians fleeing area left at least 20 villages deserted following air attacks. In first part of March, military launched series of raids on illicit narcotics production and storage facilities in Kaungkha area, Northern Shan state, dismantling three laboratories and seizing large quantity of precursor chemicals and manufactured drugs, worth a total of over US\$200 million on local market; military 24 March raided Kaungkha Militia which controls the area (previously known as Kachin Defence Army and nominally under military command), seizing over 1000 weapons and detaining leaders.

➔ **Philippines** Amid COVID-19 outbreak, ceasefire was declared between army and communist rebels, while violence continued in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). President Duterte 18 March declared unilateral ceasefire with communist insurgency 19 March-15 April, ending all offensive operations; founding chairman of Communist Party of the Philippines, Jose Maria Sison, 23 March recommended to all communist rebels to declare unilateral truce in direct response to UN’s call for global ceasefire to address COVID-19 epidemic; New People’s Army rebels 24 March declared they would observe ceasefire until 15 April. Several clashes took place early March between govt and communist insurgents in Luzon killing three rebels and injuring one soldier; ambush on Negros Island injured four soldiers. Congress 24 March granted country-wide emergency powers to Duterte to fight COVID-19 spread. In the South, clashes 2-6 March between Dawlah Islamiyah Torayfie Group (DITG) of Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and military left at least 14 BIFF members killed and four soldiers dead in Maguindanao province. Feud between warring commanders of Moro Islamic Liberation Front 14 March re-erupted in Datu Saudi-Ampatuan village, Maguindanao. Unknown gunmen 16 March killed Maguindanao town councillor. Following 4 March meeting on “state of return for residents of Marawi city” between Senate’s Special Committee on Marawi City Rehabilitation and President Duterte, latter ordered the Budget Department to hasten the release of funds and called for establishment of a second military camp in Marawi, also vowed to visit Marawi regularly and monitor progress; while decision to have new military camp not yet final, resumption of idea could trigger tensions among local population.

➡ **South China Sea** Following U.S. claim in late Feb that Chinese military warship fired military grade laser at U.S. Navy P-8 surveillance aircraft flying over Pacific Ocean, Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Ren Guoqiang 6 March stated that U.S. statement do not “accord with reality”, accused U.S. plane of “long-period circling reconnaissance at low altitude despite repeated warnings from the Chinese side”. Chinese Communist Party newspaper 11 March said that Chinese military expelled a U.S. guided-missile destroyer “trespassing” into Chinese waters near Xisha (Paracel) Islands; U.S. warships also reportedly in South China Sea, including for expeditionary strike force drills, 12-13 and 15 March. During meeting in Vietnam’s capital Hanoi, Chief of Staff of Japan’s Self-Defence Force General Koji Yamazaki and Vietnamese Deputy Minister of Defence Phan Van Giang 2 March agreed to bolster bilateral ties through promotion of existing cooperation mechanisms and strengthening of bilateral defence cooperation activities. U.S. Embassy in Hanoi 11 March announced second aircraft carrier visit to Vietnam. Amid COVID-19 pandemic, apparent spread of virus on U.S. carriers signalled potential significant reduction in U.S. power-projection capabilities in Western Pacific; U.S. Navy reported 30 March that more than 40 sailors aboard the Nimitz class aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt tested positive for COVID-19, the carrier docked at Guam on 27 March following operations in South China Sea. Philippines 6 March sent *note verbale* to UN Secretary-General Guterres rejecting Malaysia’s Dec 2019 claims over Kalayaan Island Group and China’s Dec 2019 claims of “historic rights in the South China Sea”.

➡ **Thailand** Student protests following Feb dissolution of opposition Future Forward Party (FFP) paused in the wake of concerns over COVID-19 spread, while Thai officials and Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) representatives met for second round of formal peace dialogue on ending conflict in deep south. Hundreds of students 13 March marched, carrying signs critical of govt and calling for new constitution. Protesters have since halted political gatherings due to concerns about COVID-19. Election Commission 10 March announced filing of criminal charges against FFP party founder Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit for “applying to be an MP candidate knowing he was not qualified” based on his holding of shares in defunct fashion magazine when he ran in March 2019 general election. Former FFP executives Piyabutr Saengkanokkul and Pannika Wanich, and MP Pita Limjaroenrat, leader of Move Forward Party, 16 March answered five charges related to Dec 2019 protest, including conspiring to hold gathering without notifying authorities. Thai officials and BRN representatives 2-3 March met for second round of formal peace dialogue in Malaysia’s capital Kuala Lumpur. Violence however continued in deep south: insurgents 7 March killed one police officer, wounded two in Sri Sakhon district, Narathiwat; gunmen 8 March killed assistant village headman in Yarang district, Pattani; military operation against militants 17-18 March left three militants dead after gunfight broke out on border between Pattani and Yala provinces, renewed clashes 18-19 March killed one militant and one soldier. Meanwhile, militants 17 March wounded 30 in vehicle-borne IED attack in front of Southern Border Provinces Administration Center in Yala town.

Pacific

➔ **Papua New Guinea** Following Dec non-binding referendum in which Bougainville electorate overwhelmingly voted for independence from Papua New Guinea (PNG), talks between Bougainville govt and national govt of PNG on what steps needed before referendum outcome negotiations can start progressed slowly. Talks on referendum consultation process took place in capital Port Moresby mid-March, resulting in decision for justice departments of both govts to work on clarification of term “ratification”. Meanwhile, at least nine people including three children reportedly killed in attack in Porgera valley on around 12 March; according to police, incident may be retaliatory attack for July 2019 deadly violence which resulted in dozens killed. UN in PNG 17 March condemned “massacre” and called “for immediate intervention to bring the perpetrators to justice”.