

# SNIPPETS OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER BY CENTER FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES



## IN THIS ISSUE

*Fall From Grace:  
1MDB Case*

*New Standards Of Import:  
Is India's Act East Policy  
Under Peril?*

*Facebook's Purge On  
Growing Illegal Wildlife  
Trade In Southeast Asia*

*Duterte's Balancing Act In  
South China Sea*

*The Thai Protests: A Review*

*EU Revokes Cambodia's  
Trade Privileges Over  
Human Rights Violations*

*Changing Political Climate  
In Singapore: General  
Elections 2020*

*China's New Judge Makes  
Place In ITLOS*

*Drug Trade Remains  
Unaffected During Pandemic*

*Vietnam's Thriving Economy  
Suffers Due To COVID*

## AUGUST GALLERY



Picture Courtesy :Reuters



Picture Courtesy : AFP



Picture Courtesy :Reuters

### Pop Culture x Political Protests

The biggest anti-government protests in Thailand this month, saw young protestors make use of several pop culture references to criticise the monarchy. Amongst others here in picture (top to bottom, left to right) : raised 'three fingers' Hunger Game salutes; Pictures of 'Voldemort' from Harry Potter referring the Thai King; Japanese cartoon hamster, Hamtaro.

### NOTE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CSEAS

*It is my pleasure to introduce the first edition of 'Snippets of Southeast Asia' newsletter to readers around the world. Since its inception in 2016, one of the core objectives of CSEAS has been bridging Southeast Asia with the rest of the world through teaching, research and publications. I hope you will enjoy reading the snippets. The CSEAS staff members look forward to receiving your comments and suggestions.*

*Kind Regards,  
Dr. Nehginpao Kipgen*

# FALL FROM GRACE: 1MDB CASE

- Dishant Choudhary

In August 2020, a Malaysian court convicted former PM Najib Razak over several charges including abuse of power, money laundering and criminal breach of trust in the 1MDB case involving more than US\$3 billion. The prosecutors believe the 12-year prison sentence will be appealed to the 'Court of Appeal' and later to the 'Federal Court'. As the story continues to unfold, the high court's resolve in cracking down on the corruption scandal is praiseworthy; given the tremendous influence Najib Razak and his United Malays National Organization (UMNO) party has on the public and government authorities. The outright winners of this trial are the country's rule of law and the judicial system, which have made a concerted effort to hold the public officials accountable for their wrongdoings.

The impact of the judgment on Malaysia's political future remains uncertain, as the political turmoil continues. PM Mahathir Mohammed resigned in February and the ruling coalition Pakatan Harapan broke down following which, King of Malaysia appointed Muhyiddin Yassin, the de-facto leader of current ruling coalition Perikatan Nasional, as the new PM. This verdict disqualifies Najib for future elections which could be called in. On the other hand, it will strengthen current PM Yassin's political position. The reason being, when he was deputy to Najib, he was sacked for criticising Najib's handling of the 1MDB scandal. Eventually, he formed a new party 'Bersatu' in 2016 with Mahathir Mohammed and UMNO rebels. The verdict vindicates Yassin and improves his political standing.



Picture Courtesy :Wikipedia

## NEW STANDARDS OF IMPORT: IS INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY UNDER PERIL?

- Mihika Kothari

Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) India is planning on raising quality standards of imports, imposing quantity restrictions, mandating strict norms for disclosure and increasing frequency of port checks for entry of goods as part of the national plan to increase self-reliance and in a bid to prevent their Southeast Asian trade partners from re-routing Chinese-made goods to India for a little value. These moves, likely in effect from March 2021, primarily target metals, ACs, TVs, toys, and rubber goods, amongst 371 such items popularly imported from China through South Korea and ASEAN countries with whom India has a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). It is believed that the government also plans on reviewing these FTAs as India faces a trade deficit with most of these countries. This is echoed by George Paul, Chief Executive of the MAIT, "Very clearly in ASEAN agreements India has got, in many respects, the bad end of the stick, particularly in the field of electronics where we now find a number of products are being routed through the ASEAN economies to India." Officials believe that an increase in quality standards will have a broader impact than raising duties.

This appears to be a part of a series of retaliatory measures by India over rising tensions with China, which also included ban on popular Chinese apps citing national security concerns. Militarisation has significantly increased in Ladakh at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China following one of the worst clashes between the two countries in decades. These new policies raise questions on India's 'Act East Policy', especially business engagement, and the answers will likely mould future relations of India and the region.

# FACEBOOK'S PURGE ON GROWING ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

- Avirat Parekh

In support of an ongoing crackdown on illegal wildlife trade, the American social media giant Facebook has removed several related advertisements, including one of a civet cat in Yangon, Myanmar. The ad showed a caged cat and described it as “Not too wild, not too-well behaved. If interested, call...” which is alarming for the platform considering its strict ban on sale of animals. According to a report by the World Wide Fund for Nature, illegal wildlife trade occurs across the Southeast Asian region from the remote corners of Myanmar and Laos, to markets in Bangkok and Hanoi. But its center of gravity is the ‘Golden Triangle’, where Thailand, Myanmar and Lao PDR meet. According to a Reuters report, in the past five months alone 2,143 wild animals of 94 species were on sale on Facebook in Myanmar, making it a major source and transit point in the illicit trade network.

The illicit trade of wildlife includes captive breeding and poaching for material extraction such as ivory. Online mediums have become the easiest way for facilitating such transactions given various loopholes in governmental legislation. A surge in illegal animal trade was also witnessed during the last week Bakri Eid celebrations in Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia and Indonesia. It is noteworthy how this unmonitored trade of animals in unsanitary wet markets can become a breeding ground for zoonotic viruses. One case in point is COVID-19 pandemic, which traces its spread to one such market in Wuhan, China.



Picture Courtesy :Reuters

# DUTERTE'S BALANCING ACT IN SOUTH CHINA SEA

- Vikas Nagal



On August 3, 2020, the Defense Secretary of Philippines Delfin Lorenzana told the media that “President Rodrigo Duterte has a standing order to us, to me, that we should not involve ourselves in naval exercises in the South China Sea except our national waters, the 12 mile distance from our shores.”

The Philippines, under the Benigno Aquino III administration, filed the case to the arbitral tribunal in the Hague. In 2016, the tribunal ruled in favor of the Philippines and rejected China’s “nine-dash line” claim as illegal under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), 1982. On the fourth anniversary of the ruling, the US rejected most of China’s claims in the South China Sea as illegal under international law. Under President Duterte, the Philippines has built closer ties with China and pivoted away from the US.

The Philippines wants to settle the South China Sea dispute with China bilaterally. The Duterte regime views US alignment in the South China Sea with skepticism, and therefore, seeks to focus on areas of cooperation with China. Duterte has developed closer ties with China in exchange for loans and economic aid. The US and China's diplomatic tussle is forcing countries in Southeast Asia to take sides. And as of now, the Philippines is clearly moving away from the US-led bloc.

# THE THAI PROTESTS: A REVIEW

~ Avirat Parekh

Bangkok witnessed its largest political demonstration since the 2014 military coup in August 2020, which brought together around 10,000 protesters on the streets. This student-led demonstration calls for revision of the constitution and subsequently a change in the nation's current power structure. An open challenge to the monarchy, however, invites a jail sentence under Thai law. Furthermore, these pro-democracy protests with slogans like 'Freedom over fear' and 'Where is democracy', ask fundamental questions which the political class in Thailand has failed to address. According to a BBC report, one of the protesters said "Lastly, our dream is to have a monarchy which is truly under the constitution."

Another demand is for the current PM Prayut Chan-o-cha to step down, who won a disputed elections last year. It's noteworthy that the protests are in context to the dissolution of the pro-democracy Future Forward Party (FFP), as per a court order in February. However, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the state of emergency, the protests came to an abrupt halt. Things hit the roof when Wanchalearm Satsakit, a human rights activist, living in exile in Cambodia since 2014, went missing. Even though the Thai government has denied any involvement in the matter, the protesters rejected the argument. Additionally, a student leader Parit Chiwarak was arrested on charges of sedition, which has also caused the demonstration to continue. The protests can be viewed with a lens of emerging student-led demonstrations against authoritarian regimes across the world.



Picture Courtesy : Reuters

## EU REVOKES CAMBODIA'S TRADE PRIVILEGES OVER HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

~ Vikas Nagal

On August 12, 2020, the European Union imposed trade sanctions on Cambodia in relation to its flagrant violations of human rights, especially against the political opponents of PM Hun Sen. European Union tariff will hit 20% of Cambodia's exports to the bloc. The punitive measures stem from a year-long review concluded in February of this year. The review was started in 2018, after the main opposition party in Cambodia was banned and its leader Kem Sokha was charged with treason. The review committee recommended partially suspending Cambodia's privilege under the 'Everything But Arms' (EBA) scheme. Under the EBA scheme, the developing nations are granted duty free access to the bloc for all exports except arms and ammunition.

The country is one of the biggest beneficiaries of the EBA scheme and it will particularly impact the nation's US\$10 billion garments and apparel sector. Importers in the European countries will shift from Cambodia to some other suppliers like Bangladesh to avoid paying the additional tariff. European Union Commissioner for Trade Phil Hogan said that the restorations of Cambodia's EBA benefits are dependent on its "substantial improvement" with respect to human and labour rights. The punitive measures will exacerbate unfolding economic crisis precipitated by the coronavirus pandemic and are likely to not improve human rights situation in Cambodia, because PM Hun Sen will not relent in the face of pressure from Brussels. It will only increase Cambodia's dependence on its all-weather ally China.

# CHANGING POLITICAL CLIMATE IN SINGAPORE: GENERAL ELECTIONS 2020

~ Dishant Choudhary

Singapore witnessed a milestone in its political history in July 2020, and observed for the first time, the appointment of an opposition leader to the parliament. This role was designated to Pritam Singh, Secretary-General of the Worker's Party (WP); which has won 10 out of the total 93 parliamentary seats in 2020 general elections. WP is the only other party to hold parliamentary seats besides the ruling People's Action Party (PAP).

Ever since Singapore gained independence in 1965 and even before that, as a self-governing state under British rule, PAP had been the dominant faction. It is only recently, after more than 50 years, that another party has seen some representation in the parliament. It will allow Mr. Singh as the opposition leader to lead the scrutiny against government's stance and actions. He will also get access to certain confidential information on select matters of national security and foreign relations.

It will be crucial to observe the role of Governmental Parliamentary Committees (GPCs), formed in 1987 by the PAP, comprising of its own MPs to play the role of an internal opposition. With the WP assuming that position, GPCs could become obsolete. Even though it does not have the potential to completely alter the political system, a formal opposition is being seen as a "key turning point" in Singapore's democratic journey. It is an assurance to Singaporeans that the political leaders are working towards furthering the goal of collaborative and cooperative governance for their benefit.



Picture Courtesy : Vulcan Post

## CHINA'S NEW JUDGE MAKES PLACE IN ITLOS

~ Akash Sahu



Picture Courtesy : <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3098818/chinese-diplomat-elected-maritime-disputes-tribunal-amid-south>

China's current ambassador to Hungary, Duan Jielong, will be one of the 21 judges at International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), which adjudicates on disputes related to the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Jielong is a law graduate from Columbia University and China Foreign Affairs University. He had an unopposed victory with 149 out of 166 votes where 17 abstained from voting. The US had expressed concern about his candidature earlier and tried to mobilise support. The US Secretary of State later said that his country was under-represented at every level in international organisations. The US accuses China of getting its officials elected to key posts in international organisations, including the UN, in a bid to influence decision-making.

The development is against the backdrop of fast morphing security situation in the South China Sea, where the US and China are at loggerheads over vast Chinese claims in the resource-rich maritime region. China has often been accused of violating the UNCLOS by the US and other claimant countries of Southeast Asia. Judges at ITLOS represent different geographical regions of the world, and five judges are from Asia. China has retained at least one seat since the tribunal was formed in the 1990s. Interestingly, since the US has not ratified the UNCLOS, it is not allowed to nominate its candidate for the tribunal. Perhaps it is time for the US administration to rethink its commitment to international forums that are widely accepted.

# DRUG TRADE REMAINS UNAFFECTED DURING PANDEMIC

~ Akash Sahu

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime reported that COVID 19 has not had an effect on production and distribution of illicit drugs in Southeast Asia, especially the golden triangle where remote areas of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand meet. The seizure of drugs in 2020 has been the same as last year and even more, which indicates either greater production or better enforcement. Considering the prices of these drugs have fallen radically, it is a case of spike in production than better enforcement. For instance, 'yaba' which is a mix of meth and caffeine, has fallen to half its price in 2019 in Cambodia and is available at less than a dollar. Prices for ice and yaba dropped in Thailand as compared to a year before.

The meth market in East and Southeast Asia is estimated at US\$61.4 billion. Meth prices across the region have been the lowest in a decade even though the purity has increased. The production is controlled by militias, often backed by the government, which have transformed the golden triangle into the world's premier meth laboratory from what was already an infamous hub for heroin trade. The drugs from these transnational cartels venture beyond the region of Southeast Asia into lucrative markets of Australia and Japan. Most of the chemicals for the production come from neighbouring China, and since the borders are extremely porous, any sort of lockdown or closure has not had an impact on the logistics.



Picture Courtesy : Pinterest

# VIETNAM'S THRIVING ECONOMY SUFFERS DUE TO COVID

~ Akash Sahu

The coronavirus pandemic has been harsh on the global economy including Vietnam, which has seen its lowest GDP growth in 20 years of 2.4 percent. It had registered a robust growth of 7.2 percent in 2019, owing to its large exports which amounted to US\$264.3 billion. With the global economic crisis, export-led economies have particularly suffered. Sian Fenner from Oxford Economics predicts contraction of global trade by 8 percent, and warns that export-oriented economies will remain vulnerable. The political leaders in Vietnam have signed a number of trade agreements in the past years to make the country an attractive destination for foreign investment. Many international corporations such as Intel and Samsung have opened their units in Vietnam.

Several sectors which had shown substantial growth like garments & apparel, and tourism, have taken a bad hit due to the pandemic. Millions of workers employed in both these sectors have been affected, and as more are laid off, local politicians are worried about social unrest. Consumption has generally declined and people are saving more or trying to get a secondary job. Ralf Matthaes, Managing Director of Infocus Mekong Research, said, "This is the first time since joining the global economic community two decades ago that Vietnam is experiencing a significant economic downturn." However, given that the political class has received appreciation for opening Vietnam to global trade, it is unlikely that any step could be taken to reverse its connectivity to the world.

# AUGUST HIGHLIGHT :

A virtual discussion of a book titled *The Politics of South China Sea Disputes* authored by Dr. Nehginpao Kipgen was successfully concluded on the 13th August, 2020.

Speakers (top to bottom, left to right) :

**Dr. Do Thanh Hai**, Deputy Chief of Mission Embassy of Vietnam in India;

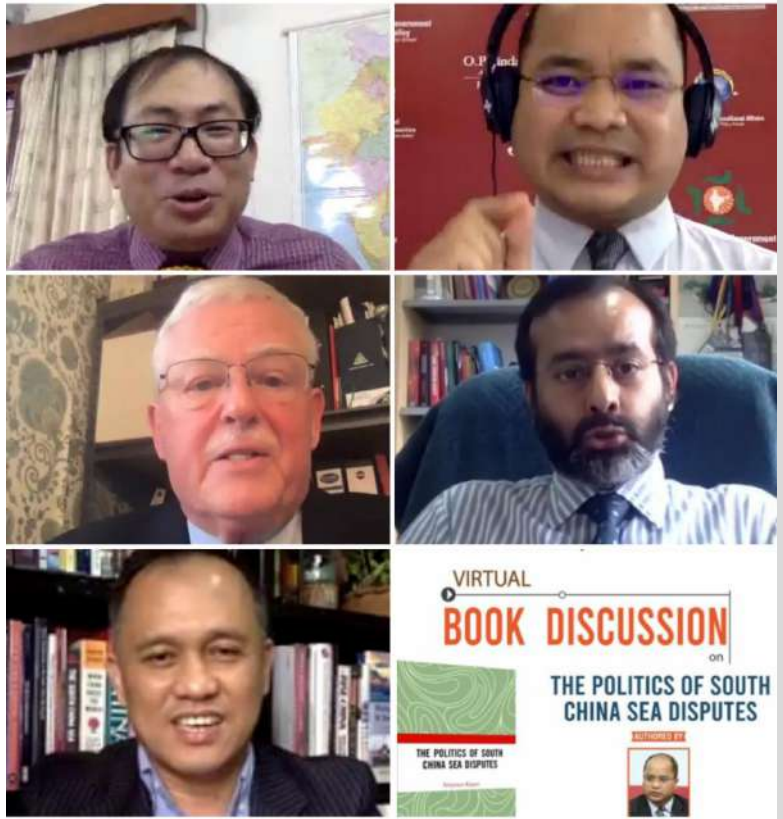
**Prof. (Dr.) Nehginpao Kipgen**, Executive Director, Center for Southeast Asian Studies & Assistant Dean, JSIA;

**Dr. Carlyle (Carl) Thayer**, Emeritus Professor, The University of New South Wales (UNSW) Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra;

**Dr. Jagannath P. Panda**, Research Fellow and Centre Coordinator for East Asia Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), New Delhi;

**Dr. Rommel C. Banlaoi**, Professorial Lecturer, Department of International Studies, Miriam College, Philippines.

Find the detailed report of the [discussion held here](#) and the [recording here](#).



The Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS)  
Jindal School of International Affairs (JSIA), O.P. Jindal Global University (JGU)

cordially invites you to a

**DISCUSSION**

on

**SOUTHEAST ASIA: A STRATEGIC REGION FOR  
COMPETITION AND POWER RIVALRY**

CHAIR



**PROF. (DR.) NEHGINPAO KIPGEN**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES AND  
ASSISTANT DEAN, JINDAL SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS  
O.P. JINDAL GLOBAL UNIVERSITY

SPEAKERS



**DR. SHANKARI SUNDARARAMAN**  
Professor of Southeast Asian Studies  
Centre for Indo-Pacific Studies  
School of International Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University



**DR. STEPHEN R. NAGY**  
Senior Associate Professor  
Department of Politics and International Studies  
International Christian University



**DR. K.V. KESAVAN**  
Visiting Distinguished Fellow  
Observer Research Foundation  
Author of Several Books on Japan



**DR. LINA GONG**  
Research Fellow  
Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies  
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Nanyang Technological University

## PROGRAMME

11:00am-11:05am	<b>Welcome Address</b> by Mr. Akash Sahu, Research Assistant, CSEAS
11:06am-11:20am	<b>India's Act East Policy and the Potential Benefits and Challenges for Southeast Asia</b> by Dr. Shankari Sundararaman
11:21am-11:35am	<b>US Engagement in Southeast Asia</b> by Dr. Stephen R. Nagy
11:36am-11:50am	<b>Japan's Economic Assistance and Ties with Southeast Asian Countries</b> by Dr. K.V. Kesavan
11:51am-12:05pm	<b>China's Policy and Strategy in Southeast Asia</b> by Dr. Lina Gong
12:06pm-12:25pm	<b>Questions &amp; Answers</b>
12:26pm-12:30pm	<b>Vote of Thanks</b> by Mihika Kothari, Research Intern, CSEAS

## UPCOMING EVENT:

**Thursday, September 3, 2020**  
**11:00 AM - 12:30 PM (IST)**

Mark your calendar as Center for Southeast Asian Studies cordially invites you to a discussion on

**Southeast Asia: A Strategic  
Region for Competition and  
Power Rivalry**

We are awaiting you to join us and the exciting panel !

Zoom Link:

<https://zoom.us/j/99539969812>

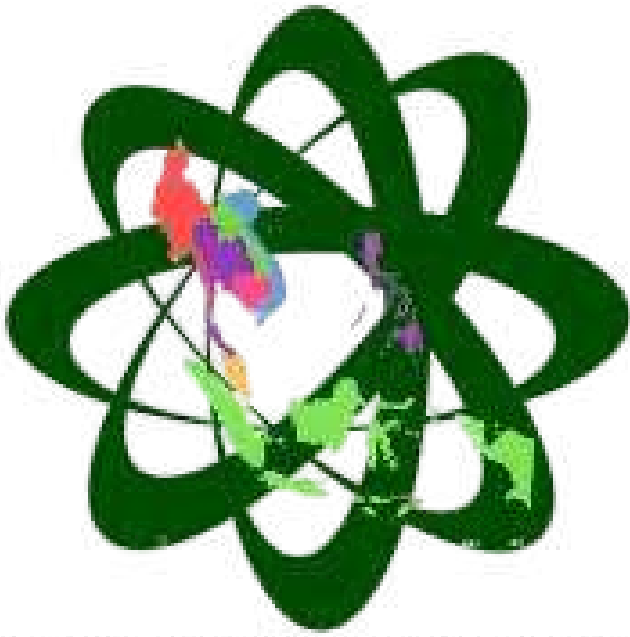
YouTube Live:

<https://youtube.com/jguvideo/c/live>

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