

# SNIPPETS OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER BY CENTER FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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## NOVEMBER GALLERY



Picture Courtesy: Vietnam Economic News



Picture Courtesy: CTV News

### MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CSEAS

Greetings...

In this edition, we are happy to introduce an interview with Dr. Do Thanh Hai, Deputy Chief of Mission at the Embassy of Vietnam in India, to discuss Vietnam's ASEAN chairmanship and UNSC's presidency. Since its inception in 2016, the core objective of CSEAS has been bridging Southeast Asia with the rest of the world through teaching, research and publication. We would like to thank our readers around the world for sharing your invaluable comments on our previous newsletters, and we look forward to receiving them in the future.

I hope you enjoy reading the snippets.

Sincerely,  
Dr. Nehginpao Kipgen

# ASSESSING VIETNAM'S LEADERSHIP IN 2020

*With Vietnam's chairmanship of ASEAN for 2020 coming to an end, we had Sanjana Dhar, Research Assistant at CSEAS, interviewed Dr. Do Thanh Hai, Deputy Chief of Mission at the Embassy of Vietnam in India, to discuss how the chairmanship has been for Vietnam, and the impact of other global and regional events on the country. Research for the interview was done by Sanjana Dhar and Hariharan Chandrashekar, also Research Assistant at CSEAS.*



Photo: Dr. Do Thanh Hai

*Since taking over the chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) from Thailand earlier this year, how far has Vietnam been able to achieve its five priorities for 2020, and adapted its theme 'Cohesive and Responsive'?*

Vietnam assumed the chairmanship at the outbreak of the pandemic, and I think it is quite a challenging term, and the theme 'Cohesive and Responsive' was set before. It was not at the time when the COVID-19 pandemic happened, and it was not anticipated of course. It was not just about the pandemic, but also increased uncertainty caused by great power rivalry and also the changing security landscape that made ASEAN adapt to that. Briefly what ASEAN has achieved during Vietnam's chairmanship, as you refer to the five priorities set in late 2019, has gradually been worked on over the past year. The first priority is about the ASEAN Community and Identity Building, where we are about to complete the mid-term review of ASEAN Community Vision 2025, the review of the implementation of the ASEAN Charter of more than ten years of implementation, and there will be discussions on the post-2025 ASEAN Vision. Also, a number of measures have been discussed about increasing the ASEAN visibility in terms of using the ASEAN platform amongst the ASEAN member states.

Regarding the maintenance of peace, security and stability in the region, given the meetings across the year between ASEAN countries, we have discussed a variety of regional affairs, including the South China Sea (SCS) which Vietnam calls the East Sea, the Rakhine issue and the Korean peninsula and developments elsewhere which have potential destabilizing effects on the region. I think that, especially for the SCS issue, ASEAN achieved a significant consensus on the importance of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, considering the convention as the most important basis for maritime activities and claims, and I think it is critical for strengthening rules-based order in the region.

As part of its responsiveness, ASEAN also quickly reacted to strengthen the fight against the pandemic, and it is scheduled to launch an ASEAN Regional Reserve of medical supplies for public health emergencies and also put up the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework and its implementation plan. So now, Vietnam has to work toward negotiating among the members to work out a framework, so that ASEAN can act as a community rather than individual states. Also, the connectivity has strengthened and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) has been signed.

Last but not the least, the ASEAN centrality has also been enhanced, with the admission of a number of countries, namely Colombia, Cuba and South Africa through the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. This shows that ASEAN is very relevant and plays a key role in the regional architecture in one way or another. We also see a number of partnerships, and I think that ASEAN had a successful year, given that the group faced a lot of difficulties and challenges due to the pandemic. Of course, many face-to-face meetings have been cancelled, but we managed to timely shift to the virtual mode to adapt to the needs of the circumstances. Despite that, we managed to negotiate a huge number of documents among many members and partners, to make 2020 a fruitful and successful chairmanship.

*The appointment of Vietnam for the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) presidency was a major step in the country's image as a power to reckon with. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected Hanoi's plans and priorities in the council?*

Vietnam assumed very important roles this year, both ASEAN chairmanship and also the non-permanent member of the UNSC. For the UNSC, we have striven to become a responsible member of the United Nations by making active and constructive contributions to the organization's affairs, trying to focus both on the traditional and non-traditional security threats. Of course, UNSC is basically dedicated to the traditional security and Vietnam has, by one way or another, reiterated and actively contributed and adhered to the UN Charter and its principles, and we have worked relentlessly with other countries to find solutions to regional conflicts and global problems.

But we will also work on the non-traditional security issues, which have the potential to exacerbate the existing traditional problems, especially Vietnam has actively participated in the debates on climate, security, the pandemic, the challenges of sustaining peace, and also on the post-pandemic global governance, because we really think that more attention should be shifted to these topics as they have a huge impact on the security and stability of different communities across the globe.

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We also have actual and substantive contributions to a range of documents and resolutions within the UNSC framework, especially in the importance of climate change, peace, security and stability and also the role of women in peacekeeping operations. We have also hosted some meetings on the security of critical infrastructures against cyber-attacks. Most importantly, Vietnam and Indonesia joined hands to connect the UNSC with ASEAN and we have conducted the joint session between ASEAN and the council, which was very productive.

*Following the implementation of the 'Joint Vision Statement on Vietnam - India Defense Cooperation for the period of 2015-2020' in 2018, what are your thoughts on Vietnam's position vis-à-vis India's Act East Policy (AEP)? What does the future entail for the bilateral relations of the two countries?*

Vietnam considers India as a comprehensive strategic partner, which tops the hierarchy of partnerships with Vietnam. India is at the top echelon, and it shows that we attach great importance to the bilateral relations.

Vietnam is also a strong supporter of India's AEP and also facilitates India's active and constructive role in the regional affairs. We support India's engagement with ASEAN for the sake of maintaining peace and stability and rules-based order in the region.

I think the relations between the two countries are in the strongest position ever and will continue to be stronger in the near future. The defense cooperation is one of the most important pillars and is an area which is the most promising, with a great potential for further cooperation. So far, the two countries have cooperation in most of the areas, such as defense training, military education, maritime domain awareness, defense industries and peacekeeping operations, but most of all we have regular talks amongst defense leaders and also the commanders of different services. I think given the strong foundations of the two countries, and also given the convergence of strategic interests, the future of the relations is bright. We hope to expand cooperation with India, not only in defense and security areas, but also in trade, investment, infrastructure developments, science and technology, and people-to-people ties. We continue to cultivate and improve the relations to make it stronger and for the advancement of both countries' interests.

*Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's visit to Vietnam was a high-profile affair, given it was his first foreign trip since taking office. What does this imply to the bilateral relations of the two nations, given the shifting dynamics of the Indo-Pacific and the SCS dispute?*

The foundation between Vietnam and Japan is always strong, and the relations have been growing over the past few decades, not only economic relations but in defense and security realms as well. Japan and Vietnam also have similar views on issues concerning the regional security as well as a focus on maintaining peace and stability across the region. The visit of Prime Minister Suga indicates that Japan considers Vietnam as one of its most important partners in the region. I think that given the pandemic and the increase in rivalry among great powers, the visit indicates a need for closer cooperation and stronger collaborations among the middle powers of the region, to cope with uncertainty and to work toward the common goal of maintaining peace, stability and rules-based order in the region. We know that we not only need peace, but also rule of law. A power-based order is in no one's interests.

*What are your views on the shifting of Japanese supply chains from China to Vietnam, and its significance toward Vietnam's economy amid the increasing engagement following Suga's visit?*

I think the shifting of supply chains is not only happening to Vietnam, but also to other countries. In cases of shifting manufacturing chains, there is a natural tendency of the global economy, because China is climbing up the value chain, so the costs for labor and investment have become more expensive. China has put on more restrictions of various kinds, so companies now have to pay more to adapt, and therefore, in seeking greater profit they will move elsewhere, of course to Vietnam, India, other Southeast Asian nations and many countries are beneficiaries from these kinds of trends.

It is not only that. We have also witnessed growing distrust among nations, the securitization of economic ties, the trade war which has complicated the trade flows as well, altogether makes a combination of different factors. But I don't think that we should dramatize the shifting of the value chains and production chains from one country to another, because I think it is a normal restructuring of the global economy and it is a chance for other countries to catch up with each other, especially the developing countries like Vietnam and India, and have a chance to attract manufacturers.

There is the risk that receiving countries suffer from greater dependence on foreign direct investment and foreign resources for development, also a greater risk for environmental pollution, along with the manipulation from multinational corporations as well. Thus, it is a combination of a variety of factors and it is not just about political drivers behind the supply chain restructuring.

*Given the developments in QUAD this year, including ministerial level meetings between the four countries, common efforts at diversifying supply chains, and Australia's addition into the Malabar exercises, do you think Vietnam will risk diluting ASEAN centrality by joining the QUAD in the future?*

I think the formation of QUAD and also the rise of the Indo-Pacific visions in the foreign policy of different countries in the region is a natural response to the shifting of power in the region. There are increasing concerns about the unlawful and illegitimate activities in the maritime domain, especially from China. I also think that countries are concerned about the uncertain future and unpredictable developments across the region. The undermining of rules-based order has made certain countries to move closer to each other.

But I do not see the institutionalization of the QUAD in the near future and I am also not sure about Vietnam's desire to join the QUAD. So far, Vietnam has been strongly committed to ASEAN and its processes, and we will work our way to boost the ASEAN centrality in the region. We are aware of the challenges to ASEAN; we are aware of its limitations to many issues, especially the SCS issue and other things. However, we still see that ASEAN is necessary, is relevant and is resilient in the shifting dynamics of the region, because ASEAN is the only regional organization that can offer a place for all major powers to come and discuss other regional issues. Even though there are difficulties, ASEAN is still very relevant and is a strong force for stabilization and for strengthening rules-based order in the region. We have trust in ASEAN's future, but of course we also welcome the constructive and positive positions and contributions of other countries as long as they help uphold peace, stability and rule of law. Therefore, in one way or another, I think there are many complimentary trends happening at the same time.

*With 2020 coming to an end soon, do you think Vietnam's leadership in ASEAN and UNSC has done or achieved enough to showcase itself as a regional power in its own right?*

We know that nothing is enough but of course we have tried our best and have achieved so many things in a challenging year. It is fair to say that the agility and our ability to cope with the shifting circumstances have not only been because of our own efforts, but also because of the support and cooperation of many partners and friends across the region.

To be frank, I have not seen Vietnam considers itself a regional power, but we see ourselves more as an active and responsible member of the regional and international community. We work hard to contribute to resolving regional and global problems. We try to showcase our goodwill and efforts; we play by the commonly accepted rules and norms, and we will also contribute to the adjusting and shaping of rules and norms for the sake of the collective interest. We try to sustain a peaceful and stable environment for socio-economic development, and we work with our own effort and also with others to achieve that. We think that we are part of the larger communities, rather than a power which has a desire to work on its own. We think that together we can go far. We can go fast alone, but in order to go far and to build a sustained peace and long-term prospect for prosperity, we need to work together.

That is the way we approached our ASEAN chairmanship and the UNSC membership, so that we will be able to contribute and work with others. It is not only to advance our own interests; we see our interests as part of the collective interest.

# MALAYSIAN MAN ESCAPES THE DEATH SENTENCE IN SINGAPORE

- Harsh Mahaseth

The Apex Court of Singapore has overturned its own decision in a case of drug importation of an indicted Indian-Malaysian man Gobi Avedian who worked as a security guard. Quite surprisingly, he escaped the gallows for a second time after the Apex Court setting aside the capital punishment, but still convicting for attempted drug importation with a lesser sentence.

In dire need of money for the operation of his daughter, Gobi agreed to deliver the drugs to Singapore from Malaysia. He was informed that the drugs he carried are “not serious” but disco drugs - “ordinary” per Singaporean laws which would entail a fine or small punishment if caught. He also checked with his friend who worked in a disco as to whether these were drugs known as “disco drugs” and was assured that they were not dangerous. On eight to nine different occasions, Gobi delivered the drugs from Malaysia to Singapore. In 2014, he was caught at the Woodlands checkpoint and given a death sentence for importing 40.22-grams of heroin.

In 2017, Gobi contented before the High Court that he thought that he was carrying just a mild form of “disco drugs” and was not aware of the contents of heroin in the drug. Agreeing with Gobi’s contention, the High Court convicted him on a reduced charge of attempted importation of a Class C drug and sentenced him to 15 years of jail and 10 strokes of the cane. However, in 2018 on an appeal filed by the prosecution, a three-judge bench of the Court of Appeal convicted him for the death penalty stating that he had failed to deny the presumption of knowledge as per Section 18(1) of the Misuse of Drugs Act, 1973.

In 2019, in Adili’s case, the Court had decided on the doctrine of willful blindness and that legal concepts of actual knowledge and willful blindness were “separate and distinct.” On this legal position, Gobi appealed to get his decision reviewed on the death sentence, and a five-judge bench of the Court of Appeal overturned the decision. The death sentence was set aside, and Gobi was given a backdated sentence of what he was given by the High Court in 2017.



Picture Courtesy: Malaysia Now

## HIGHLIGHTS OF 37TH ASEAN SUMMIT 2020

- Dishant Choudhary

The biannual summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), chaired by Vietnam’s Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, took place online on November 12, 2020, and ended on November 15, 2020. The summit was held via video conference due to the pandemic.

In his opening remarks, the prime minister highlighted that the obstacles posed this year is unprecedented that has led to a global health crisis and regional instability. He also indicated that despite several attempts over the past decades, peace and security has been a critical issue in the region. He attributed these challenges to major power rivalry and political differences amongst global powers that are continuously reshaping the international multilateral system.

To this end, he called for unity and solidarity among nation-states to maintain security and stability in the region at a time when the world is still struggling to recover from the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Major themes discussed in the summit were the tensions in the SCS as China has asserted its claim over most of the disputed waterway with other ASEAN member states and tackle plans for economic recovery in light of the pandemic. Although after much hue and cry, not much has finalized and implemented on actual terms with regards to the two agendas. However, a free-trade agreement, namely, RCEP was signed at the end of the three-day summit by ASEAN members, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. This deal will bolster the economic co-operation and ease of doing business in the Asia-Pacific region.



Picture Courtesy: asean.org

# MALAYSIA BUDGET 2021: 'RESILIENT AS ONE, TOGETHER WE TRIUMPH'

- Mihika Kothari

The 2020 pandemic has called for countries around the world to revamp their economic outlook and innovatively implement a new methodical and structured budget for the upcoming financial year. Malaysia is one such country that had its economy uprooted due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. An IMF forecast predicts the Malaysian economy to shrink by 6 percent making it one of the worst economic performances in Asia.

As a result, the Yassin administration has come up with the most inclusive, extensive and largest budget the country has ever seen, Budget 2021. The budget, worth a total of RM322.5 billion (US\$78 billion), with the theme 'Resilient As One, Together We Triumph' was presented by the Perikatan Nasional Government on November 6, 2020. It aims to make a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth from 4.5 in 2020 to between 6.5 and 7.5 percent in 2021, and is praised for its strategies focusing on the overall well-being of the people, along with extensive measures to revive the economy.

The budget announced the establishment of the National Employment Council, which will help the government streamline job opportunities and skill enhancement to tackle the unemployment problem. The budget also introduces social protection benefits which are in sync with the International Labour Organisation Convention 102 on Social Security. The country has also formally accepted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development along with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, aiming to promote and learn from the best international practices while giving legislative significance to competition laws and personal data protection.

The budget also reflects the growing significance of recovery via digitalization with almost RM1 billion (US\$242 million) allocated for high-tech and value-added investment incentive packages. The budget has its own shortcomings. The health ministry has only seen a 4.3 percent increase in budget allocation, which is less than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's average benchmark at 7 percent of the GDP. The government has invited suggestions from the opposition leaders for the 2021 budget, making it the most inclusive and united budget the country has ever seen. The budget is far from perfect but needs to be applauded for the targets the country aims to set and meet. The only thing left to do now is to wait and see the execution of these goals.



# AUNG SAN SUU KYI-LED NATIONAL LEAGUE OF DEMOCRACY (NLD) WINS ELECTION IN MYANMAR

- Shivangi Dikshit

Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD won a landslide victory in Myanmar's general election held on November 8, amidst the international community scrutinizing her government for failing to provide justice to the Rohingya crisis. Despite international criticism, Suu Kyi managed to win the election as she seems to be the only leader who can bring a concrete change in the country. Following the electoral victory, Suu Kyi now has to choose the president since she is ineligible herself. A majority in the parliament will allow her to build a system in place which can potentially bring peace to the conflict-torn states, including Rakhine.

The military-backed opposition party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, has raised questions on the election result and demanded a re-run in some polling stations. Suu Kyi needs to be assertive and continue her rule, and at the same time maintain a warm rapport with the leader of the opposition in the parliament. In its second-term, the NLD government needs an open-minded foreign policy to maintain its relations with the West, while also maintaining ties with China. Although Suu Kyi is no longer seen as an icon of democracy internationally, the people of Myanmar do not want deeper military involvement in politics, and therefore, have chosen NLD to bring peace and stability in the country.

Some ethnic parties did quite well in their own areas. This reveals that other political parties are gradually emerging in Myanmar, and the country is slowly moving with its democratization process. This development can play an important role in the country's stability in the long-run. The economy was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is now for Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD government to pave the roadmap for economic and political reforms.

# THE ASEAN TRAVEL BUBBLE

- Hariharan Chandrashekar



Picture Courtesy:  
Manorama Online

As the world is still reeling through the havoc created by COVID-19 pandemic, arrangements to re-instate air travel has been made in the form of Air Travel Bubbles. These travel bubbles enable a travel corridor as a means of an exclusive partnership between countries. As a region that depends upon regional integration and mobility for its rapid growth, ASEAN is also planning to establish a regional bubble in hopes to rekindle economic activity. While no official statement has been announced, it is vital for the dwindling economies, such as Indonesia which entered into recession for the first time since 1998. Its President Widodo, pinning his hopes to the idea and the possibility of it coming to fruition by the first quarter of 2021, has indicated that talks were conducted on the same during the November 12, 2020 ASEAN meeting.

However, currently, only Singapore has established a bilateral travel bubble arrangement known as “green lane” with Hong Kong and countries such as Brunei, Malaysia and Japan, that came into effect from November 22, 2020. This agreement enables travel provision that exempts travellers from quarantine or stay-at-home requirements. Additionally, to establish stability within the region’s largest economy, Singapore has agreed to enter into a special arrangement with Indonesia known as “reciprocal green lane” that exclusively focuses on business and official travel between the two countries.

Promising as they seem, challenges lie ahead toward the execution, given the over-optimistic timeline of 2021. As the pandemic largely being at a standstill condition in Thailand and Vietnam, and with a possible resumption of the second wave of cases, Indonesia and the Philippines continue to combat the raging crisis among its larger populations. Such a situation has also brought down political instability coupled with the economic downturn, much akin to the levels of the 1997-98 crisis, with desperate needs for a breathing room for integration. Moreover, differing domestic political stance on the issue will also affect the possible negotiations and outcomes.

In all, even though Air Travel Bubble seems to have started a new form of diplomatic partnership, it is yet to see its potential, given the recent bubble burst of Hong Kong-Singapore, forming another hurdle for ASEAN to pass upon to retain its regional economic identity.

# MELAKA STATE SCRAPS THE CHINESE LED PORT PROJECT

- Vikas Nagal

On November 16, 2020, the Melaka state authorities scrapped a \$14 billion port project, off the coast of Melaka. The state authorities said that developers of the Melaka project failed to complete the reclamation work after three years as contracted. The scrapping of the Melaka port project is a major setback to China's ambition in Malaysia.

The Melaka port project was signed by former Prime Minister Najib Razak during his state visit to China in 2014. But after the 2018 general election, Razak lost power to Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition, led by Mahathir Mohammed. The PH government scrapped or renegotiated several projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) including the East Coast Rail Project. The Melaka port project was also scrapped, but the PH government later allowed it to continue.

Melaka port project was to include a deep seaport, international cruise terminal, hotels, condominiums, international cruise terminal and theme parks. The port project was launched with an aim to overtake Singapore, as the largest port in the region. But due to political instability and COVID-19 pandemic, the port project failed to take off.

The BRI had faced many hurdles in the past. The lack of transparency and fear of "debt trap" in the BRI projects had given the opportunity to its detractors to project it as China's plot to dominate the world. The PH government came to power on a promise to remove corruption from the government and to review unnecessary and economically non-feasible projects. But the collapse of the PH coalition government in February 2020 and COVID-19 pandemic further plunged the Malaysian politics into a deep abyss.



Picture Courtesy: Straits Times

# WHAT WILL A FORTHCOMING BIDEN ADMINISTRATION MEAN FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA?

- Avirat Parekh



Picture Courtesy: CNN

With Joe Biden being declared as the winner of November 3 election, the former Vice President is set to assume office following his inauguration on January 20, 2021. America being a global powerhouse, its policy position in terms of its ever-evolving foreign policy has global implications. So, what Biden administration will mean for Southeast Asia? Firstly, we will witness greater coherence and fewer contradictions which means that internally the American foreign policy will function in a more well-oiled mechanism, thereby resulting in better implementation of the same. The Trump era, as we understand, was full of haphazard decision-making based out of leveraged situations. The forthcoming administration will be a lot more organized in its approach and restore a sense of predictability in policy endeavors, especially in Southeast Asia.

Secondly, there will be greater investment in diplomatic relations. The Trump administration apparently believed in its own interpretation of diplomacy. Unlike his predecessor, Biden who has served on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, would revive the State department and most likely revive Obama's "pivot" or "rebalance" policy. Although greater diplomacy does not necessarily mean greater effectiveness, this would ensure that American policies are reliably telegraphed by Southeast Asian capitals.

Thirdly, the Biden presidency, centered around understanding of human rights, will continue its full-court press against Beijing thereby targeting them on issues such as Hong Kong, the treatment of Uighur Muslims, and the freedom of navigation operations in the South and East China seas. The Biden administration will likely face a challenge in pushing through democratic values and liberal policies. Nevertheless, the administration will make major advances if it addresses the challenges pragmatically. Finally, the Biden administration will possibly be wrought by longstanding contradictions of liberal ends and liberal means with respect to its Southeast Asia policy.

# THE POLITICS OF 'NEW COOPERATION' OF THE US AND INDONESIA

- Hariharan Chandrashekar

On October 27, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Indonesia as part of his five-nation tour of Asia. He reiterated then to cooperate with Indonesia in the SCS and the latter's claims in the region by supporting Jakarta's action to protect its sovereignty on the waters near the Natuna Islands. Indonesian Foreign Minister, Retno Marsudi said both countries would enhance defence cooperation.

Economic cooperation was also stressed upon, reminding the US of Indonesia's "free and independent" economic foreign policy and its will to establish economic ties with China. Indonesia tried to dissuade the US not to downgrade it from the Generalised System of Preferences facility. This point was accepted by the US at the beginning of this month (November), followed by Indonesia retaining its position within the GSP system, which came as a positive news amidst its economic downturn. It also coincided with the recent RCEP deal, and as a means to improve and establish the US presence.

Indonesia's demands are more development-oriented because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It scoured around the world to gain access to vaccines and finally gained support from the Chinese. It had equally demanded the same from the US, by rejecting their offer for a surveillance aircraft, in favor of vaccines and economic investments by US businesses into the outer regions, such as the Natuna Islands.

While recent developments indicate a theatre of great power politics, it also underscores Indonesia's precautious position of being a middleman, by not only exploiting US support on its claims in the Natuna Islands and by demanding economic investment in the region (thereby pulling the US further into the conflict against China), but also deepening its economic ties with China through the RCEP deal and attempting to secure access vaccines from both countries. It is yet to be seen how this cooperation will pan out in the coming months, given the incoming changes in the US administration after the recent election.



Picture Courtesy:Vox

# CHINA-LED RCEP TRADE AGREEMENT IS SIGNED IN CHALLENGE TO THE US

- Vikas Nagal

On November 14, 2020, the RCEP trade agreement was signed by fifteen Asia-Pacific countries. The RCEP trade agreement was signed after years of painstaking negotiations by participating countries. The RCEP trade agreement was an initiative launched by the ASEAN countries to reduce tariff and non-tariff barriers and to further integrate Asia-Pacific economies. Initially, India participated in the negotiation rounds but eventually pulled out, largely because of concerns for domestic industries' survival from foreign competition, especially from China.

The trade deal includes the ten ASEAN countries, Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. The agreement will increase economic integration and will reduce tariff and non-tariff barriers on a large number of goods. In times of COVID-19 pandemic and the US-China trade war, this agreement will decrease economic uncertainty and spur growth in the Asia-Pacific region. But the agreement is portrayed as China-centric. The lack of provisions related to state subsidies, protection of intellectual property, environmental standards, labor standards and dispute resolution mechanism in the trade agreement, shows that China's preferences are largely taken care of. It will further integrate the Chinese economy with the other Asia-Pacific economies. In the future, RCEP will make it difficult for the US to lay down the rules of trade in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement was signed by the US and other Asia-Pacific economies like Japan, Australia, Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore, etc. The TPP agreement contains provisions like curbing state subsidies, protection of intellectual protection rights, environmental and labor standards, rules related to e-commerce. But the Trump administration pulled out of the TPP in January 2017. When the TPP agreement was signed in 2015, President Obama said that "the US, not China, must write trade rules for Asia."But the Trump administration's lack of respect for international organizations like the World Trade Organization and the trade war with China has increased economic uncertainty and caused a lot of damage to the world economy. The signing of RCEP trade agreement shows that China is writing the rules of trade in the Asia-Pacific region and the US economic leadership is nowhere to be seen.

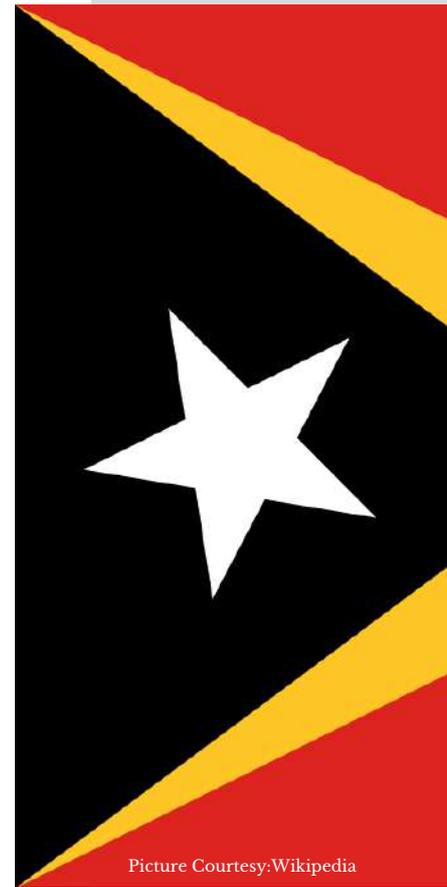
# TIMOR-LESTE'S OCTOBER ECONOMIC REPORT 2020

- Dishant Choudhary

The World Bank group for Asia-Pacific region released its biannual report on November 9, 2020, on the economic outlook of Timor-Leste (also known as East Timor), a small Southeast Asian nation occupying half the island of Timor. The report suggested that the economy is headed for a contraction by 6.8 percent this year. It is seen as the biggest decline in two decades owing to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the incessant political turmoil that has been brewing since 2017.

The report highlights that the legislature's failure to deliver on this year's budget has led to challenges in public spending at a time when public spending is considered to be a lifeline for many households and businesses. In February this year, the governing Alliance for Change and Progress coalition collapsed following Xanana Gusmao's National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction's withdrawal from the alliance. This also prompted a resignation offer from Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak, who is from the People's Liberation Party. Subsequently, when the virus began to spread, the renewed political disorder left the country without a national budget.

The report further discloses that the country's tourism industry has been hit due to COVID-19, and aviation operations were mostly limited to relief flights, delivery of medical supplies and for repatriating citizens. This has severely diminished the hopes of securing the goal established in the National Tourism Policy. Exports and imports have also declined by 46 percent and 20 percent, respectively. The report has rightly identified the potential threats and challenges posed to the country's economy. The report calls for strengthening health infrastructure and resolving political disputes that will act as an agent for a robust and sustained economic recovery.

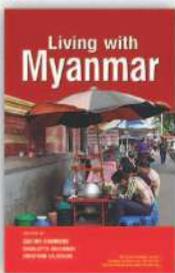


Picture Courtesy:Wikipedia

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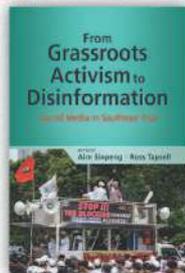
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Since 2011 Myanmar has experienced many changes to its social, political and economic landscape. The formation of a new government in 2016, led by the National League for Democracy, was a crucially important milestone in the country's transition to a more inclusive form of governance. And yet, for many people everyday struggles remain unchanged, and have often worsened in recent years. Key economic, social and political reforms are stalled, conflict persists and longstanding issues of citizenship and belonging remain.

2020 386 pages  
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This book reflects on the role of social media in the past two decades in Southeast Asia. It traces the emergence of social media discourse in Southeast Asia, and its potential as a "liberation technology" in both democratizing and authoritarian states. It explains the growing decline in internet freedom and increasingly repressive and manipulative use of social media tools by governments, and argues that social media is now an essential platform for control.

2020 225 pages  
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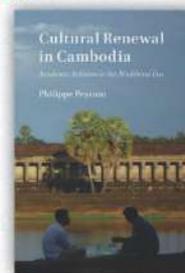
**new**



The cocktail of capitalism, globalization and technology has turned toxic, causing disruptions and cracks in the global economy and societal structures. Economic globalization is being replaced by a mixture of globalization, regionalization and economic nationalism. Neither the United States nor China will in the mid-2030s possess the strength to be a global leader. Power will mainly rotate around a regional axis instead of globally. The existing political systems and institutions governing the global system see their primogeniture challenged.

2020 195 pages  
Soft cover **US\$19.90**  
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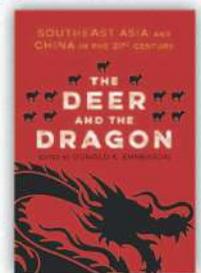
**new**



This book is about cultural work in torn-up societies. It narrates the establishment of an academic project in contemporary post-war Cambodia, when the country became the largest recipient of international aid. It depicts a Southeast Asian country at the crossroads of conflicting imaginaries of development through the lens of an independent organization that emerged out of the turmoil.

2020 297 pages  
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ISBN 978-981-4459-94-5  
(Koninklijke Brill NV / ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute)

**new**



Will the nations of Southeast Asia maintain their strategic autonomy, or are they destined to become a subservient periphery of China? This book's expert authors address this pressing question in multiple contexts. What clues to the future lie in the modern history of Sino-Southeast Asian relations? How economically dependent on China has the region already become? What do Southeast Asians think of China? Does Beijing view the region in proprietary terms as its own backyard?

2020 315 pages  
Soft cover **US\$29.90**  
ISBN 978-981-4951-16-6

(Shorenstein APARC / ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute)

# NOVEMBER HIGHLIGHT:

## DISCUSSION

on

# KUKI NATIONALISM AND POLITICAL ASPIRATION



**CHAIR**

**PROF. (DR.) NEHGINPAO KIPGEN**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES AND  
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O.P. JINDAL GLOBAL UNIVERSITY

### SPEAKERS



**DR. JANGKHONGAM DOUNGEL**

Professor  
Department of Political Science  
Mizoram University



**DR. SEILEN HAOKIP**

Spokesperson and Negotiator,  
Kuki National Organisation (KNO)



**MR. AARON KIPGEN**

General Secretary, Kuki National Front (KNF)  
Spokesperson, United People's Front (UPF)



**DR. MALEM NINGTHOUJA**

Independent Researcher, Editorial Member of  
Revolutionary Democracy, and  
Member of International League of  
Peoples' Struggle



**MR. PAOJEL CHAOBA**

Investigative Journalist and  
Executive Editor of The Frontier Manipur  
Former Executive Editor of Imphal Free Press

A virtual discussion on the topic *Kuki Nationalism and Political Aspiration* chaired by Dr. Nehginpao Kipgen was successfully concluded on November 12, 2020.

Speakers:

**Dr. Jangkhongam Doungel**, Professor, Department of Political Science, Mizoram University;

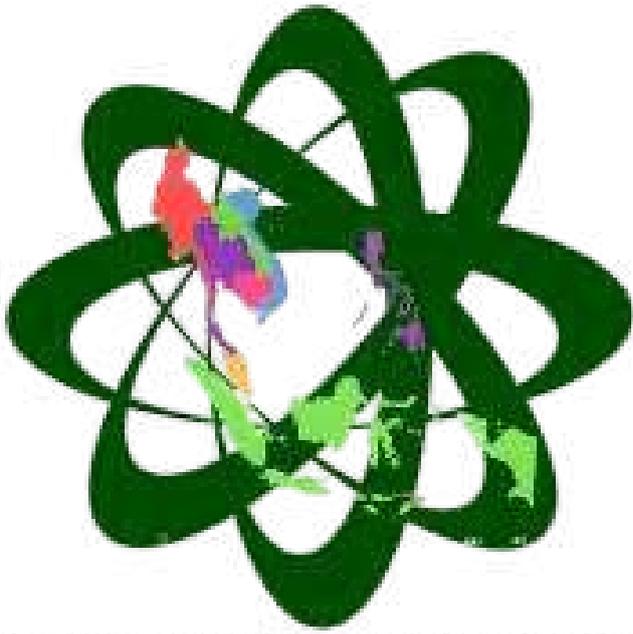
**Dr. Seilen Haokip**, Spokesperson and Negotiator, Kuki National Organisation (KNO);

**Mr. Aaron Kipgen**, General Secretary, Kuki National Front (KNF), and Spokesperson, United People's Front (UPF);

**Dr. Malem Ningthouja**, Independent Researcher, Editorial Member of Revolutionary Democracy, and member of International League of Peoples' Struggle;

**Mr. Paojel Chaoba**, Investigate Journalist and Executive Editor of The Frontier Manipur, and Former Executive Editor of Imphal Free Press;

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



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