

Conflict Weekly

An initiative by NIAS-IPRI and KAS India Office

A brief review of conflict and peace processes across the world

STATE OF PEACE & CONFLICT IN 2021

MILITARY COUPS
YOUTH PROTESTS
FAMINES
ETHNIC VIOLENCE
GENDER PROTESTS
CLIMATE CHANGE
COVID-19
MIGRATION
TERRORISM
RESOURCE CONFLICTS
CEASEFIRES
PEACE PROCESS

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02 December 2021, Vol.2, No.35
Unrest in the Solomon Islands, and the 12 million missing children in China

Adhwin Ansumal Dhanushan and Avishka Ashok



Civilian unrest flares up in the Solomon Islands. Image Source: Jane Tsiapetaki/REUTERS

Solomon Islands: Continuing civil unrest and the growing process in the islands

In the news

On 26 November, the government in the Solomon Islands announced that the ceasefire in the capital - Honiara would continue indefinitely. Australian Defence Force (ADF) troops arrive in Honiara with the Royal Australian Navy patrolling from HMAS Anzillotti to the island Papua New Guinea also deployed a security team to the island.

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28 October 2021, Vol.2, No.30
Coup in Sudan, Pressure on Myanmar's military regime, and the Migrant game by Belarus

Muhammad Azeel Ummer, Apurva Bhattacharjee, and Joanna Cox Matthews



Military dissolved civilian leadership of the transitional government in Sudan. Image Source: The Guardian/Muhammad Abu Ghadi/EPA

Sudan: Tensions flare-up as the military dissolves the civilian government

In the news

On 25 October, General Abdel Fattah Burhan, head of Sudan's armed forces, in a televised broadcast announced that the civilian leadership of the transitional government has been dissolved due to radical inflation which can lead to a civil war. Prior to the announcement

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4 November 2021, Vol.2, No.31
One year of Ethiopian conflict and UK-France fishing row

Apurva Subhakar and Soorina Biji



An Ethiopia marks one year of the conflict in the cabinet has declared a state of emergency

Ethiopia: One after a year of

In the news

On 4 November, Ethiopia marked one year of the conflict in the cabinet has declared a state of emergency

On 1 November, the Ethiopian cabinet

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Europe's other migrant crisis, and Protests in Cuba and Thailand

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On 18 November, a group of migrants arrived in Italy

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14 October 2021, Vol.2, No.29
ISIS violence in Afghanistan, and J&K

Alqab Siddiqi Feroz and Adhwin Ansumal Dhanushan



A series of targeted killings in J&K, attacking members of the minority communities. Image Source: AP/Thelindo

Afghanistan: Over 50 people killed in ISIS-K suicide bomber attack

In the news

On 9 October, a suicide bomber attacked a Shiite mosque in the northern Afghan city of Kunduz, killing over 50 people and wounding more than 150 others. The Islamic State (ISIS-K) claimed responsibility for the attack. In a statement carried by the British

Agency news agency, the group said that the attacker was an ethnic Uyghur and that the attack

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18 August 2021, Vol.2, No.26
France: One year after Samuel Paty's beheading

France remembers Samuel Paty, a school teacher beheaded in October 2020 by a radical. Image Source: Reuters/Eric Gaillard



France remembers Samuel Paty, a school teacher beheaded in October 2020 by a radical. Image Source: Reuters/Eric Gaillard

France: One year after Samuel Paty's beheading

In the news

On 18 October, the French Prime Minister commemorated in Paris the schoolteacher, Samuel

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22 September 2021, Vol.2, No.27
Pride marches in Europe, Jail term for Hotel Rwanda hero, and continuing Houthis-led violence in Yemen

Joanna Cox Matthews, Muhammad Azeel Ummer and Jishi Samal



Annual Pride Marches in Kyiv, with Belgium during 17-19 September 2021. Image Source: REUTERS/Vahagn Oganesyan

Europe: Pride Marches in Serbia and Ukraine

In the news

On 18 September, hundreds joined Serbia's annual Pride parade in Belgrade. Celebrating 20 years since their first parade, organizers committee member Miroslav Petrovic said "In the past 20 years the situation has improved LGBT noticeably but not drastically. The participants of this year's Pride demanded a law on same-sex unions. We want this to be the last Pride that we don't have this law."

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18 August 2021, Vol.2, No.26
Return of the Taliban and the fall of Afghanistan

D Siba Chandra



Within a week, the Taliban managed to capture the major provincial capitals of Afghanistan, and take over Kabul and its Presidential Palace. Image Source: NYT-Zaharwan-Ary

Afghanistan: After two decades, the Taliban returns with ease, as the political, military and militia leaderships melt without resistance

In the news

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban captured Kabul, ousted the Presidential Palace, Ashraf Ghani, who was then the President of Afghanistan, fled the country earlier. He was quoted to have said in a social media posting "The Taliban here was with the judgement of their words and guns, and are now responsible for the honour, property and self-protection of their countrymen... They are now facing a new historical era. Either they will preserve the name and honour of Afghanistan, or they will give priority to other forces and interests."



State of Peace and Conflict in 2021

In 2021, the world, amid bearing the brunt of the COVID-19, the world witnessed several conflicts which took precedent over the pandemic. Several conflicts, from Southeast Asia to the Americas, were shaped by anti-State sentiments. Military coups seemed a norm in Africa; the youth took up the responsibility on themselves to push for democracy in Hong Kong, Thailand, and Eswatini; abortion laws sparked protests in the United States, Poland, and Honduras. Meanwhile, in the Western world, citizens placed importance on individual rights over collective good and demonstrations were held against COVID-19 restrictions in Australia, France, Germany, and other European countries.

Among all developments, a common thread bound them all, a need for individual freedoms and a sense of security. As Conflict Weekly releases its 100th issue, the editorial team hopes for a better world and hopes to cover more peace than conflict in the forthcoming volumes.

About Conflict Weekly

The Conflict Weekly an academic endeavour to bring every Wednesday/Thursday a weekly analysis of the conflict and peace processes in the world; aiming to look at the larger peace picture. It is published by the NIAS-IPRI in collaboration with the KAS India Office. Each issue of the Conflict Weekly provides a brief coverage of developments on three or four conflicts from different regions in the world AND also provides an overview of updates from across the world.

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*An initiative by NIAS-IPRI and KAS-India
Office*

About International Peace Research Initiative (IPRI)

The International Peace Research Initiative (IPRI), initiated in 2018 at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), is a part of the Conflict Resolution and Peace Research Programme at the School of Conflict and Security Studies. IPRI undertakes research on various issues relating to peace with special emphasis on radicalisation, sustainable peace, gender roles in peacebuilding and global protest movements.

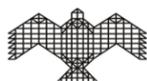
The Editorial Team

The Conflict Weekly editorial desk is headed by Professor D. Suba Chandran. Prof Chandran is the Dean of School of Conflict and Security Studies at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bengaluru. He is the Head of Conflict Resolution and Peace Research Programme, and the Science, Technology and International Relations Programme at NIAS.

Abigail Miriam Fernandez is a Project Associate at the School of Conflict and Security Studies at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bangalore. Her areas of interest include peace and conflict in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Caucasus. As a part of her research focus at 'Pakistan Reader' she looks at issues relating to gender, minorities and ethnic movements.

Apoorva Sudhakar is a Project Associate at the School of Conflict and Security Studies at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bangalore. Her research focus includes conflict and politics in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. As part of her research for the Pakistan Reader, she studies issues relating to environment, gender, minorities and ethnic movements in Pakistan.

National Institute of
Advanced Studies



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Myanmar: 18 dead as security forces open fire to suppress pro-democracy protests

Aparupa Bhattacharjee, 4 March 2021

In the news

On 28 February, according to the United Nations, Myanmar's security force killed 18 and injured 30 in their attempt to clampdown the protest.

On 27 February, the government removed Myanmar's ambassador to the United Nations for his speech in the General Assembly where he had sought international assistance to restore democracy.

On 2 March, in a video conference court hearing, there were two more new charges against Aung San Suu Kyi. These charges will extend Suu Kyi's prison term to a total of nine years. Also, the former President and former mayor of Nay Pyi Taw were charged with breaching Article 505 (b) of the Penal Code.

On 3 March, the ASEAN foreign ministers concluded a virtual meeting on Myanmar. Brunei, the ASEAN chair, officially stated: "We express ASEAN's readiness to assist Myanmar in a positive, peaceful and constructive manner."

On 3 March, the United Nations stated more than 38 people were killed by Myanmar's security force. These attacks have been vehemently condemned by the UN, Japan, Canada and the EU.

Issues at large

First, the increase in violence as a new strategy by the military. The pro-democracy protests did not witness an immediate retaliation; there was no use of force during the first week.

Since the second week, reprisal by the security forces in the form of firing live bullets, attacks on the protestors by pro-regime monks, and goon attacks on civilians, started. The larger purpose of these attacks is to create fear and

suppress any kind of antagonism against the new government.

Second, the growing anger across the country against the regime. The killings and the attack by the military have failed to suppress the protest. On the contrary, the repression has fuelled public anger. The protests are not limited to a few cities; it has spread across Myanmar including the areas controlled by the ethnic armed groups. The pro-democracy protests are demographically and ethnically diverse and also includes minority religious communities.

Third, the new legal cases aimed at silencing democratic leadership and dissent. Since the detention of the Suu Kyi and the former President, there have been three to four charges against them. The lack of fair trial and the nature of the charges are aimed at extending their imprisonment. Apart from Suu Kyi and the President, several other higher rank NLD leaders also face similar absurd charges. Journalists, students, activists and artists amounting to more than thousands have been detained.

In perspective

First, the increasing charges against the NLD leaders seem to be a part of the larger preparation for the promised election next year. The election promised by General Hlaing will ensure the return of USDP. Hence it is essential to curtail any opposition that would challenge that strategy.

Second, the protests seem to continue and also inspiring the pro-democracy protests in Thailand. The pro-democracy movement started in Thailand in 2020 got subdued due to the COVID-19. However, on 28 February the protests seem to have resurged, inspired by developments in Myanmar.

New Zealand: Pacific communities receive a long-overdue apology

Avishka Ashok, 4 August 2021

In the news

On 1 August, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern

represented the government and formally apologized to the Pacific communities for the relentless "Dawn Raids" which targeted individuals from the Pacific islands of Samoa, Tonga, Fiji and more. While addressing the crowd gathered at the Auckland town hall, she said: "The immigration laws of the time were enforced in a discriminatory manner and that Pacific peoples were specifically targeted and racially profiled when these activities were carried out."

Issues at large

First, the Dawn Raids. The Dawn Raids refer to the crackdown on the Pacific communities by the Labour government in the mid-1970s. In 1974, the police in Auckland, equipped by the government, started conducting raids in an attempt to deport outsiders who were overstaying their work permit. The raids were conducted at dawn to catch overstayers before they left for work. This move was initiated due to the economic downturn which led to heightened unemployment and jobs scarcity. There was a growing anti-foreigner sentiment as New Zealanders were increasingly losing out to Pacific Islanders on economic opportunities. The Dawn Raids were problematic because the raids intentionally targeted people who did not look like "White New Zealanders." Even though both, Pacific communities and the Europeans, represented one third of the overstayers each, the rate of deportation was 86 per cent for the Islanders while that of Europeans was five per cent. Second, the Pacific communities in New Zealand. The Pacific Islanders include people from Hawaii, Samoan Islands, Tokelau, Tahiti, Tonga and other Micronesian and Melanesian islands. This populace has steadily evolved in New Zealand; from 2200 people in 1945 to 2,95,941 people in 2013 which is almost 7.4 per cent of the total population. The Islanders starting moving to the country in big numbers in 1950s during the industrial boost. However, this minority community is often subject to discrimination which had been covertly institutionalized in the 1970s. The 2013 National Statistics prove this discrimination as the group of Islanders earned lesser than the national average and over 28 per cent of the children belonging to the community lived in poor conditions. The Recognized Seasonal Employer Scheme (2007) further propagates

this discrimination as it allows for the agricultural sector to employ foreigners for seasonal work; thereby exploiting the Islanders as cheap and disposable labour and also limiting their right to live permanently in the country.

Third, intolerance in New Zealand. Despite being considered as a tolerant country, New Zealand has also had a history of discriminatory policies against select groups of individuals. It imposed a poll tax on Chinese immigrants in the early 20th century and there have been numerous instances of discrimination against Samoan communities. A small part of the population in the country continues to see Islanders as secondary citizens who drain the economy. Fourth, the Polynesian Panther's demands. The Polynesian Panthers Party ignited a movement to protect their community's rights and improve their quality of their life in New Zealand. They also pushed for the national apology in April 2021 and demanded schools to educate students regarding the unfair discrimination and provide scholarships for students from the community. The party aims to end the prejudice against the Pacific Islanders by enlightening the people regarding the conduct of the government instead of brushing it off.

In perspective

New Zealand's apology to the community comes after half a decade but is a positive step towards accepting Islanders as a part of the country. The apology also comes at a time when there is a growing indigenous movement, not just in the Pacific Ocean region but also across the world in Canada, the US, Mexico and more.

Hong Kong: 47 pro-democracy activists charged with security crime

Sukanya Bali, 4 March 2021

In the news

On 28 February, Hong Kong police confirmed that 39 men and eight women pro-democracy campaigners were being charged on account of

a “conspiracy to commit subversion”. The group of pro-democracy activists include former lawmakers, academicians, social workers, and youth activists. Jimmy Sham, one of the 2019 protest organizers said, “Democracy is never a gift from heaven. It must be earned by many with a strong will.”

On 1 March, hundreds of protestors gathered to show their support outside the West Kowloon court complex. Protestors held banners and raised slogans saying, “Liberate Hong Kong, a revolution of our times.”

Issues at large

First, China’s continuing arrests of pro-democracy activists. In June 2020, China imposed the National Security Law which criminalises acts deemed to subversion, secession, terrorism, and collusion with foreign forces. Those charged could also face life imprisonment. China has described it as an attempt to restore stability in the city. Young protestors like Joshua Wong, Ivan Lam and Agnes Chow Ting were convicted for unlawful assembly, in December 2020. Over the last few months, many political leaders have been arrested on charges of "contempt" and "interfering" with the city's Legislative Council. Jimmy Lai, the founder of Apple Daily was recently denied bail for the third time by the Hong Kong High Court. He was arrested last year in August, on suspicion of colluding with foreign powers and was arrested under the new security law.

Second, the extensive use of National Security Law. On 6 January, 50 pro-democracy protestors were arrested. The protestors were accused of organizing and participating in the unofficial “primary election” of 2020. The polls aimed at selecting the strongest candidates for the legislative council election. Hong Kong officials described the primary as “the strategy to violate the security laws, ban and attempt to derail government functioning and pose a threat to national security.” Since 2020, police have arrested more than 10,000 people, out of which more than 2,400 have faced charges and 100 have been arrested under the national security law.

Third, the changing nature of the protests - from the streets to court halls. After the outbreak of COVID-19, the protestors on the

street dwindled. For the first since January 2020, the supporters gathered outside the court hall. More than 100 police officers were deployed. Hong Kong Judiciary called the situation “very crowded.”

Fourth, increasing international response. The international community showed solidarity and condemned China's action in Hong Kong. The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken tweeted, “We condemn the detention of, and charges filed against pan-democratic candidates in Hong Kong’s elections and call for their immediate release. Political participation and freedom of expression should not be crimes. The US stands with the people of Hong Kong.” Nanaia Mahuta New Zealand’s Foreign Minister also tweeted saying, “the charges marked an escalation in the application of the national security law and New Zealand is concerned and would be monitoring the situation.”

In perspective

The extensive clampdown of the pro-democracy protests under the National Security Law indicates that the space for dissent or democracy is narrowing in Hongkong and China's hold on Hong Kong is tightening, effectively eroding the one country's two systems.

Japan: Plan to release Fukushima's contaminated water ignites opposition

Lokendra Sharma, 21 April 2021

In the news

On 20 April, South Korea's foreign ministry announced that it would participate in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safety verification efforts to address concerns regarding the release of contaminated water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant in Japan. On the same day, more than 30 students protested by shaving their heads in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul.

On 18 April, US climate envoy John Kerry backed Japan's plans during a visit to Seoul. He said: "We think we have confidence in the ability of IAEA and Japan and our relationship with the agency".

On 15 April, in a joint statement, three UN human rights experts expressed concern on the release. They said: "The release of one million tonnes of contaminated water into the marine environment imposes considerable risks to the full enjoyment of human rights of concerned populations in and beyond the borders of Japan".

Issues at large

First, Japan's plan to release water. On 12 April, Japan announced that it would start releasing 1.25 million tons of contaminated water stored at the Fukushima nuclear plant into the Pacific Ocean after two years, that is, 2023. Water used to cool down the reactor units destroyed by the Tsunami in 2011 is being stored in huge tanks at the plant site. Costing a billion dollar to maintain, the storage tanks are also running out of space. According to the plant operator Tepco and Japan's Prime Minister Suga, releasing the water will also aid in the decommissioning process of the Fukushima plant. Before release, Tepco will first filter the radioactive isotopes present in water and then dilute the water (to reduce the level of tritium, an isotope of hydrogen that cannot be filtered). The process of water release is expected to take decades to complete.

Second, the opposition to release. Japan's plans have received widespread opposition, including UN experts, environmentalists, and fishermen from neighbouring states. China, South Korea, North Korea, Russia and Taiwan have all raised objections to Japan's plans, arguing that it will lead to environmental pollution in the ocean and affect their populations' health and livelihood. Fishermen and environmentalists in Japan and across the neighbouring countries opposed this move. Their primary opposition stems from tritium (and other radioactive particles) in the filtered water. According to a 2014 Scientific American study, tritium can cause cancer if ingested. To address radioactive contamination, Environmental groups have suggested constructing additional storage tanks and allowing the radioactive particles to decay before releasing the water.

Third, Japan's mixed record. The Fukushima nuclear disaster was followed by anti-nuclear protests in Japan and worldwide, with a

significant decline of trust in Japan's nuclear power industry. There were significant safety lapses at Fukushima. Then, in 2018, Tepco admitted that the filtered water stored at Fukushima contained radioactive particles, including cobalt and strontium, in 71 per cent of the tanks. This admission cast severe doubts on Tepco, which for years maintained that these particles were removed. Notwithstanding poor record, Japan claims that it will work with IAEA and meet international standards before releasing water. It also insists that tritium will be diluted to one-fortieth of what is permitted in drinking water.

In perspective

The Fukushima water release issue has resulted in rare convergence in a very divided region, with all of Japan's neighbours opposing the move. Despite the backing by the US, Japan would find it difficult to ignore the opposition not just by neighbours but also by environmentalists and fishermen. Given Japan's poor record, beginning with the safety lapses that lead to the Fukushima accident in the first place, it is imperative that Japan takes everyone along on this sensitive issue, ensures utmost transparency and meets all regulatory standards.

Xinjiang: Amnesty International report on mass internment and torture

Dincy Adlakha, 16 June 2021

In the news

On 10 June, Amnesty International released a report titled "Like we were enemies in a war" on China's mass internment, torture and persecution of Muslims in Xinjiang.

The report uses testimonies from 128 people, of which 55 were former detainees in the internment camps. The majority of the interviewees were Kazakhs, a minority were Uyghurs, and Kyrgyz or Han Chinese were even fewer. Gruesome illustrations have been included in the entire report demanding instant attention and fear from the readers.

The report finds that the Chinese state has been trying to 'erase Islam' by demolishing

mosques and terrifying the practitioners of Islam.

Issues at large

First, the increased concern over Xinjiang. This report is another card in the deck of reports covering the atrocities committed on the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. The BBC covered a series of documentaries focusing on the experiences of a Uyghur woman in a detention camp. The Human Rights Watch released a report in April 2021 titled "Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots." The Australian Strategic Policy Institute is working on 'The Xinjiang Data Project' that releases research reports and press investigations on the condition of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.

Second, major findings of the AI report. The report assesses that the Chinese government is guilty of multiple crimes against humanity including torture and persecution. It also finds China guilty of violating human rights and basic liberties. Other reports have also covered similar accounts. Curtailment of economic, political, religious and social freedoms has been highlighted in all these reports.

According to these reports, the Muslims in Xinjiang are monitored through high-tech surveillance methods, are deprived of economic opportunities and are also forced to discard their religious identities. The reports create a larger picture of the Chinese oppression in Xinjiang.

Third, China's denial. Time and again, China has refuted these reports and called them a part of the western propaganda to destabilize the Chinese province. They have even claimed that the region is a 'wonderful land' and that all minorities in China enjoy equal rights and status. China has repeatedly asked external groups, organizations and countries to avoid interference in the internal matters of China.

In perspective

First, the Chinese narrative. China has referred to these internment camps as "vocational education and training" camps which address the problems of extremism and terrorism existing in the region. Even schools for the children of detainees are created which "eradicate" the problematic thinking patterns from their minds and "correct" their behaviour to be better citizens. All these measures are a part of a larger effort by the Chinese government to forcibly assimilate the

minorities into the Chinese culture. Suppressing their individual and cultural identities will help China in creating a unified country with lesser domestic opposition.

Second, the western obsession with Xinjiang. A major part of the fight against Chinese cruelty is led by western forces, especially by the US. European countries are excessively concerned with the forced labour and human rights violations in Xinjiang as their law also opposes such crimes. Although the liberal values and protection of human rights have been core to these western countries, there is also an ulterior motive. Xinjiang is a strategic region for trade and connectivity, the two most significant strengths of China.

China: The first White Paper on Xinjiang's demographic and economic development

Avishka Ashok, 30 September 2021

In the news

On 26 September, the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China released its first white paper focusing on the population dynamics in the Xinjiang region. The 20-page report displays the fast demographic development over seven decades and boasts of a 99.96 per cent enrolment rate in primary education in the region.

The spokesperson of the Xinjiang regional government Xu Guixiang said: "Xinjiang is a book with profound content. A few days staying here would only let people know its cover while its content, characteristics, and spirits need longer time to ponder over."

Issues at large

First, major takeaways from the report. The latest white paper released by the government is the first of its kind that focuses on demography by referring to data collected from the seven national census reports. According to the paper, the ethnic population in the Xinjiang region has reportedly increased from 3.61 million in 1953 to 11.62 million in 2020. The report sheds light on China's efforts towards national rejuvenation, all-round development, exploring prosperity through

hard work and the benefits of China's prosperity for the rest of the world. The report claims to have de-radicalized the extremism in the region through various anti-terrorism measures. The regional government also asserts that there have been no terrorist attacks since 2017, and populace is more united when compared to half a decade ago. The report also praises the Chinese government for successfully improving the people's standard of living, increasing life expectancy, and modernizing the region quickly.

Second, the yardstick to measure discontent. The report claims to have zero terrorist activities in the country's eastern frontier in the past five years. Other than China, many other countries also believe that not having violent outbursts in a steady-state signifies the real sentiments of the population. However, the yardstick to measure peace and stability in a region cannot be the lack of violent events.

Third, shortcomings of the report. The report fails to mention exactly what measures were undertaken to reach the current state of peace and harmony in Xinjiang. The report, as well as the authorities, mention "anti-terrorism" and "de-radicalization" measures taken by China in the region. However, the existence of re-education camps has not been mentioned in the report anywhere. The camps were one of the foremost criticisms from the West against the suppression of minorities. Even though the paper showcases a steep rise in the Uighur population, it fails to provide a comparison to the increase in the Han migration and settlement in Xinjiang.

Fourth, China's response to external pressures. China rejected the earlier accusations of genocide. Other than denying the allegations at international forums and counter-sanctioning Western countries, China did not make any efforts to provide substantial evidence to back their denial. The report comes when there is heightened international criticism against China for the repression of minorities in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. On 8 July, the US imposed sanctions on numerous officials of the Chinese Communist Party for violating the human rights of the Uighur community in Xinjiang. Along with the US, Canada, United Kingdom and the European Union have also sanctioned Chinese officials for the forceful "Hanification" of the ethnic Uighurs in

Xinjiang. The report denies all charges of suppression by showcasing a happy, bright and jolly populace pursuing their culture and traditional identities and abiding by the Chinese principles and the national identity.

In perspective

The report is aimed at dismissing the discourse by Western countries which accuses the Chinese administration of destroying the Islamic culture and traditions of the Uighur community by forcefully engaging them in activities against their faith in re-education camps. The report seeks to contest the claims made by foreign governments and tries to propagate a peaceful and strong Chinese state.

Myanmar: A coup d'état; Military returns takes over power, detains Suu Kyi

Aparupa Bhattacharjee, 4 February 2021

In the news

On 1 February, in a military coup, the Myanmar army retook control. It has declared an emergency and has formed a new government headed by the Senior General Aung Myin Hlaing and former Vice President U Myint Swe. An 11-member cabinet of retired army personnel and USDP (Tatmadaw's proxy) members has been formed.

On 2 February, it released most of the leaders who were detained earlier; however, Aung San Suu Kyi and Myint Win are still in detention. On 3 February, Sui Kyi was also charged with breaching import-export law.

On 3 February, the UNSC met on the subject; however, a joint statement could not be made, as China blocked the move calling the coup as an internal matter of Myanmar.

Issues at large

First, the military's de facto control. It has been in power since the 1962 coup under the leadership of Ne Win. The period was marked by complete closure from the world and nominal economic growth. However, by 2010 under mounting economic slowdown, sanctions, public unrest and international

pressure, the army merely heeded to the idea of democracy with a power-sharing arrangement of its own. The 2008 Constitution enabled 25 per cent reservation for the military in both the Houses. And in 2011, the USDP formed a government winning an election boycotted by opposition such as NLD, to convince the world about its democratic bid. In 2015, when NLD won through landslide votes, Tatmadaw still retained vital positions. The democratic government completed its five-year tenure due to Suu Kyi's appeasement policy, which garnered her worldwide criticism. But the November 2020 election had threatened this control, and the Tatmadaw took over the de facto power in the coup.

Second, the larger intention of the military. Although the army retained the 25 per cent of the seats in both the Houses, the USDP requires a minimum of 167 in the total 621 seats to retain control. However, it could secure only 39 seats. This would give the NLD adequate control to make legislative changes; starting from 2019, the NLD has been pushing constitutional amendments to reduce the military's footprint in the Parliament. Tatmadaw is against any amendment that would reduce its role. General Hlaing was to retire in 2021; perhaps, one of the coup's objectives is to prolong his control.

Third, the overt and covert support to the coup. It has received a lukewarm response from the region and its neighbours. There has been no condemnation from China - Myanmar's largest investor and trading partner. At the UNSC, China has a history of being the closest ally to the Junta.

In perspective

First, the current Junta government promised to end the emergency within a year and call for a new democracy. But it is juvenile to believe in this promises and democracy seems to be a far-flung idea for the country.

Second, there is a growing expectation of public protests starting with the medical staff going into a civil disobedience movement as announced on 2 February. But given the history, the protests are not enough to remove the power monger Tatmadaw from power.

Myanmar: The anti-coup protests begin, but the military stands undeterred

Aparupa Bhattacharjee, 11 February 2021

In the news

On 9 February, General Min Aung Hlaing, issued a long public statement for the first time since coming to power. He justified the necessity of the coup as the 2020 November election was “unfair.”

On 8 February, the NLD lawmakers formed a committee called the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) as an alternative Parliament body, denouncing the coup as illegitimate.

On 6 February, the street protests started and continue to gain momentum. However, beginning from 9 February the Tatmadaw started taking action against the protestors on the grounds of violation of the martial law and the ban on the assimilation of more than five people.

On 9 February, New Zealand declared to sever all ties with Myanmar. On the same day, the coup and the other developments in the country were discussed by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the US President Joe Biden over a telephonic conversation.

Issues at large

First, the flawed rationale and the real reasons behind the military in staging the coup. General Hlaing's speech and his reiteration that the 2020 election was fraudulent are not enough to justify the coup. The military's statement of fraud is without any evidence; the Union election commission and international observers disagreed on this blame. The military, that came to power under General Ne Win's leadership, was never keen to give up its power. The 2010 shift to democracy was because of international pressures through sanctions, crippling economy and widespread anger from the people.

Second, the military's control despite the two elections in 2010 and 2015 and the new danger post-2020 elections. In 2010, the USDP, a military proxy came to power as NLD boycotted it. The 2015 elections, though

brought the NLD to form the government, the military had sufficient leverage. The 2008 Constitution enabled the military to have 25 per cent reservation in both the Houses; along with the USDP, the military to continue the façade of democracy through these two options. The 2020 election threatened this arrangement, as the USDP was unable to get minimum votes required. Hence the coup.

Third, the history of protests in Myanmar and what is new in February 2021. Myanmar has witnessed massive and organised protests against the military governments in 1988 and 2007. The 1988 protests were started by the students with demonetisation triggering it. The 2007 protests (referred to as the Saffron revolution due to the participation of the monks), was also instigated due to economic reasons. However, in 2021 protests are different; the desperation for democracy is evident in the zeal to fight against the Tatmadaw.

In perspective

Internally, the military is consolidating, as could be seen from Gen Hlaing's speech. On the other side, the protests against the coup have also started. The next few weeks, there would be instability in the streets.

Externally, countries like New Zealand, that do not have major investments in Myanmar, cutting ties will not affect the military. Unless countries like Japan, South Korea, and the immediate neighbourhood makes a stand, the coup leaders would face less pressure. The silence to the coup from the region and ASEAN is shocking. There have been several strong condemnations across the globe, but none from the region. It appears Southeast Asia decided to keep it low. This could be due to the Chinese influence; Beijing considers the coup as an internal matter. China is an old ally of the military and also one of the largest foreign investors in Myanmar along with the rest of Southeast Asia.

Myanmar: The Aung San Suu Kyi trial begins

Vibha Venugopal, 16 June 2021

In the news

On 14 June, the trial of Myanmar's ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi, begun. The lawyers of Suu Kyi said they struggled to gain access to their client and expect that the trial will wrap up by 26 July.

It was initially only for five out of six charges; however, on 10 June, she was handed corruption charges against her over illegally accepting USD 600,000 in cash and approximately 11kg of gold which sums up her charges to seven in total. The hearing took place inside the capital Naypyidaw's council compound, where no media presence was allowed, and only heavy police presence was permitted to guard.

The leader of her legal team, Khin Maung Zaw, in a statement to Al Jazeera, said the latest accusation is "absurd" and "groundless." "She might have defects, but personal greed and corruption is not her traits," he said, calling her "incorruptible."

Issues at large

First, the charges against Aung San Suu Kyi. They include corruption, violation of the official secrets act, illegally owning walkie talkies, breaching the country's telecommunication law, violating the natural disaster law, and inciting public unrest. In addition, the military looks at piling more cases on her to ensure that she would not participate in any election in the distant future.

Second, the charges against the NLD. The military has detained other members of the party, including President U Win Myint, cabinet ministers, chief ministers of various regions, opposition politicians, writers, and activists. The military has been accusing the NLD of vote fraud in the past and now have again accused them of weapons arsenal, stating that they are either grooming terrorists or training civilians on using them.

Third, the inadequate international responses. The UN deputy spokesman said: "We want her and all top members of her administration to be freed." In a similar statement the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, warned that more violence is on the way in Myanmar and urged the international community to hold the regime accountable. The G7 countries have

pledged their "support to those advocating peacefully for a stable and inclusive democracy" and warned of pursuing "additional measures should they prove necessary," hinting at the possibility of additional sanctions. However, these responses have not made an impact within Myanmar so far.

Fourth, the regime's refusal to yield to international pressure. Despite multiple statements, warnings and sanctions, the regime has not yielded to any of them. Instead, it has increased its grip and expanded its actions to curb the return of democracy in Myanmar.

In perspective

The international responses have not impacted the ground, and the regime continues to go ahead with its agenda. For the ousted leader Suu Kyi and the other senior members of the party, time is running out. Most of them are in their 70's; any long jail term, or the prolonging of military rule would impact the return of democracy and independent leadership. Perhaps, that is what the military is looking at - buying time to perpetuate its hold over Myanmar.

Myanmar: New UNGA resolution

Anju C Joseph, 23 June 2021

In the news

On 18 June, United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution titled "The Situation in Myanmar" after 119 countries voted in favour, 36 abstained from voting, and one country voted against. The revised draft of the resolution was introduced by Liechtenstein and cosponsored by 58 other countries. The US, UK, and EU, who had earlier responded with sanctions, joined the list of countries that voted in favour. In addition, five ASEAN countries and Myanmar's UN Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun voted for the resolution. Among countries that abstained from voting were China, Russia, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Iran, and Egypt. Belarus is the only country that voted against it.

Issues at large

First, major issues discussed in the resolution. The resolution starts with expressing grave

concern about the declaration of the state of emergency in Myanmar. It endorsed constructive engagement of ASEAN and reiterated the central role of a five-point consensus to bring a peaceful solution. It condemned the use of lethal force and violence against peaceful demonstrators and members of civil society. The democratic transition in Myanmar, concerns regarding the human rights situation of the Rohingya Muslim minority, the ongoing conflict in Kachin, Kayin, Rakhine, Shan, and the southern Chin States, immediate and unconditional release of President Win Myint, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, other government officials, and politicians were other critical issues raised. The resolution was initiated by the Assembly following a briefing by the UN Special Envoy on the situation in Myanmar on 26 February; it was later revised after ASEAN countries disagreed with some draft provisions in May. Second, explanation for not favouring the vote. Majority of Asian countries, mainly from South Asia and Southeast Asia, abstained from voting. Among the countries who explained abstaining from the vote, most importantly, Bangladesh said: "It fails to recognize in its operative part, the urgent need for creating conditions for the safe, voluntary and sustainable return of the displaced minorities of Myanmar, particularly the Rohingyas." Russia cited: "The draft resolution is notable for its politicized character, and its individual passages are openly tendentious or out of touch with reality". Unsurprisingly, China has also maintained its non-action stand on the Junta government. In its explanation of the vote, India did not comment on its abstinence but said it welcomes the ASEAN initiative. Belarus commented: "it does not accept country-specific resolutions... Such documents are always biased, carry one-sided interpretation of events & facts, and also lead to aggravation of the situation in the targeted states, interfering in their internal politics." Third, the ASEAN response. The ASEAN divide on the resolution was notable after Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Vietnam voted "yes" along with the Myanmar government-in-exile's representative at the UN. At the same time, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand abstained. The non-ASEAN, Southeast Asian country, Timor Leste, also abstained from the vote. However, all ASEAN countries

positively responded to the resolution's call upon Myanmar to swiftly implement the five-point consensus reached at the Leaders' Meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations held on 24 April 2021. ASEAN envoys earlier this month visited Myanmar to seek the swift implementation of the consensus to which the Myanmar Junta has agreed to cooperate. However, opponents of the Junta and many people in Myanmar have a fettered hope in the

consensus.

In perspective

Given the non-binding nature of the UNGA resolution, the move is unlikely to influence the ongoing situation. Nevertheless, the resolution signifies the overwhelming global consensus on the issue. As the UNGA reiterates and calls upon the Junta to implement a five-point consensus, the move might positively impact the current slow implementation process.

Myanmar: Regional and domestic pressure on the military regime

Aparupa Bhattacharjee, 28 October 2021

In the news

On 26 October, the first of the three-day annual ASEAN summit witnessed a collective expression of concern regarding the internal situation in Myanmar. The ASEAN invitee from Myanmar, a veteran diplomat, did not attend the summit as Senior General Min Aung Hlaing was not invited. Hun Sen, the Cambodian Prime Minister, said: "... ASEAN did not expel Myanmar from [the] ASEAN framework. Myanmar abandoned its right." Indonesian President Joko Widodo said, "ASEAN's decision to invite Myanmar's representatives on a non-political level to the summit was a tough decision, but one that had to be done." The ASEAN chair's statement called the regime to accomplish its commitment to the five-point consensus that the regime agreed to implement previously.

President Joe Biden, who virtually attended the summit joint the others in the expression of concern requesting to end the violence. He promised support to ASEAN in any of their

efforts to hold the regime accountable to the five-point consensus.

Internally, on 27 October, 25 were arrested in the Mandalay region following a bomb attack on 25 October. On the same day, a regime appointed administrator was killed in Naypyitaw, which could be a revenge attack for a man's death in detention. The bombardments and shellings have forced more than 8000 people to flee their homes in the Sagaing region, Shan and Chin state.

Issues at large

First, the ASEAN stand against Myanmar. The regional group has been blamed previously for inaction in several issues such as the Rohingya crisis or the South China Sea feud. Hence, this decision is uncommon. It is a result of continuous pressure from members such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. This decision has been vehemently opposed by the Myanmar regime as expressed in several official statements. Apart from foreign intervention, Myanmar's Foreign Minister blamed that the decision "was done without consensus and against the objectives of ASEAN." Myanmar also went ahead with the release of 5600 detainees, which was seen as appeasement; however, most of them were later re-arrested.

Second, ASEAN's decision on the debate over the policy of non-interference. Malaysian Foreign Minister on 21 October has requested ASEAN to do "soul-searching" regarding the need for this policy given the current situation of Myanmar. However, some members may not be on the same page, as evident from Joko Widodo's statement on 26 October, stating, "It is important for us to honour the principle of non-interference."

Third, the implications of internal conflicts within Myanmar. They are aggravating two larger problems within Myanmar. The fight against the regime and protests are happening during a pandemic situation. This has increased the numbers affected with COVID-19 and the situation has worsened due to lack of medical aid and strong governmental policy. The regime has claimed an effective vaccination drive which is impossible given the clashes and as citizens are fleeing the situation. The other problem is the depleting

economy leading to fuel price hikes and forcing factories to shut including the Chinese invested ones.

In perspective

First, although celebrated, the ASEAN strict stand against Myanmar will lead to an expectation of action in every conflict affecting the member countries which is marred with several internal conflicts. Also, such action will further push Myanmar, closer to its allies, China and Russia.

Second, the economic condition and fuel price hike will soon push the country into a food crisis. This will be catastrophic given the internal conflict and lack of good governance. But this could also trigger a change, similar to cyclone Nargis in 2008 leading to the road to democracy in 2010.

Myanmar: The protests and the violence both escalates

Aparupa Bhattacharjee, 11 March 2021

In the news

On 7 March, a massive number of protestors joined the 'general strike' despite the night raids and detention of more than 41 people on 6 March. 18 labour organisations participated in the protest and called for the closing of shops, banks and factories. The military retaliated by opening fire and throwing tear gas, has killed three and injured many. On the same day, the state-run Global New Light of Myanmar newspaper printed an announcement threatening "action" against anyone who directly or indirectly works for the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). It mentioned the committee to be illegal and had committed "high treason".

On 8 March, the Ministry of Information has revoked the publishing licence for 7Days News, Myanmar Now, Mizzima, DVB and Khit Thit Media. Apart from 7Days News the rest of the four newspapers have announced to continue their work independently.

On 8 March, the Chief Minister of Mizoram in India announced that his State will support the Myanmar refugees with food and shelter. Since the end of February, several have

escaped to the neighbouring countries of India and Thailand. To date, there are more than fifty refugees including eight police officials in the north-eastern states of India. Similarly, on 9 March, Thailand extended its support to the refugees who have escaped the crackdown.

Issues at large

First, fear becomes the tool for this government to sustain itself. Since the coup, on 1 February, the surge in violence has not assisted the government to control the protests all across the country. This government may have enforced itself, but is yet to gain legitimacy among the citizens and several sections of the international arena. The growing civil disobedience movement and the success of the general strikes despite the rampant violence make it evident. Several diplomats appointed by the government have resigned in defiance and all the NGOs across the countries have also refused to collaborate with the government.

Second, the protests continue to gain momentum, even after a month of their inception. The 'fear' seems to not work and instead works as a catalyst for the protests. To date more than 60 people have been killed, more than thousands have been detained and two deaths have been recorded in detention. But these facts have not deterred the protestors, which has not only continued but have increased its dimension. On 7 March, unlike the previous weeks, most of the deaths happened not in Yangon or Mandalay but happened in Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State. According to the Irrawaddy, more than 60 Police officers have joined the civil disobedience movement from all across the country except for the Rakhine state.

Third, history repeats itself, several escapes to the neighbouring countries. Similar to the 1988 and 2007 protests, the violent crackdown has forced several to escape to India and Thailand. In both countries, the shared ethnic linkages with the people have garnered sympathy and support for those who have sought refuge. The growing clampdown on the journalists and media houses may force them to shift their base to these countries as done previously before 2015.

In perspective

First, currently, the protests seem to escalate parallel to the violence. But given the atrocities the unilinear growth of the protests or the ‘spring revolution’ (as it has been renamed) in the coming months is questionable. As of now, violence acts as a trigger but the continuation of the same is doubtful.

Second, in the coming months, the growing refugee influx from Myanmar is going to be a chronic problem not only for India and Thailand but for the entire region. The number is going to increase rather than diminish in the coming years.

Myanmar: The protests and the violence both escalates

Aparupa Bhattacharjee, 11 March 2021

In the news

On 7 March, a massive number of protestors joined the ‘general strike’ despite the night raids and detention of more than 41 people on 6 March. 18 labour organisations participated in the protest and called for the closing of shops, banks and factories. The military retaliated by opening fire and throwing tear gas, has killed three and injured many. On the same day, the state-run Global New Light of Myanmar newspaper printed an announcement threatening “action” against anyone who directly or indirectly works for the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). It mentioned the committee to be illegal and had committed “high treason”.

On 8 March, the Ministry of Information has revoked the publishing licence for 7Days News, Myanmar Now, Mizzima, DVB and Khit Thit Media. Apart from 7Days News the rest of the four newspapers have announced to continue their work independently.

On 8 March, the Chief Minister of Mizoram in India announced that his State will support the Myanmar refugees with food and shelter. Since the end of February, several have escaped to the neighbouring countries of India and Thailand. To date, there are more than fifty refugees including eight police officials in the north-eastern states of India. Similarly, on 9 March, Thailand extended its support to the

refugees who have escaped the crackdown.

Issues at large

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Myanmar: The military to ban its biggest rival - the National League of Democracy (NLD)

Aparupa Bhattacharjee, 24 May 2021

In the news

On 21 May, the military government-appointed election commission chair said that the NLD party should be disbanded. The regime accused the NLD of fraudulent behaviour in the 2020 election. He also suggested NLD leaders should be prosecuted as "traitors."

On 24 May, the defence lawyer of Aung San Suu Kyi quoted her saying: "... the NLD party was founded for the people and it will continue to exist as long as the people are there." This was said during her first in-person meeting since the coup that took place ahead of a court hearing. On the same day, the hearing for the former President and Naypyitaw Council Chair was also held.

Earlier, on 17 May, new sanctions were levied by the US, the UK and Canada against the military leaders and the economic conglomerates associated with them. According to the Association of Political Prisoners, more than 800 are killed, and approximately 4300 are detained, of which more than 73 are journalists.

Issues at large

First, the political significance of Suu Kyi's NLD vis-a-vis the military supported USDP. The NLD - National League for Democracy, founded in 1988, is the most prominent

political party of Myanmar, with Suu Kyi, as its chairperson. In the 1990 elections, it won more than 55 per cent of the vote and a majority of the seats. In the 2015 and 2020 elections, the NLD secured 80 per cent and 83 per cent of votes respectively. On the contrary, the Union Solidarity and Development Party established in 2010 with the military's support could only secure 30 and 26 seats out of the total 440 seats respectively in these two elections. With the NLD contesting, the UPDP's chance of securing reasonable seats in any forthcoming election is remote. Hence, the regime wants to keep the NLD away.

Second, the political significance of Aung San Suu Kyi, as the symbol of democracy for the masses. Suu Kyi is referred to as 'amay' (mother) and has always been people's hope for change. She is the daughter of the father of the Myanmar nation - Aung San, and has been revered by multiple ethnic groups despite differences. She has a popularity that the regime cannot match, hence want to keep her away from politics.

Third, the role of external sanctions in pressurizing the regime. As mentioned by the governmental spokesperson to CNN, sanctions do not impact the regime as its leaders have learned to live with it. The sanctions imposed on Myanmar until 2012 were ineffective to deter the ruling elite; instead it negatively impacted the people and Myanmar's economic development.

In perspective

First, the change in regime's strategy and its fallout. It has shifted from killing on the streets to detentions since April. This could be an outcome of the ASEAN summit on 24 April. This highlights the regime's intent to hold on to power.

Second, none of the international sanctions and appeal will impact this government's resolution. The businesses of these leaders or their families are not dependent on western countries, and they have their allies to support them.

Peace and Conflict in 2021

South Asia

Northeast India: NSCN(K) faction intends to join the Nagaland peace process, AFSPA

Sourina Bej, 7 January 2021

In the news

On 30 December 2020, the Ministry of Home Affairs extended the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), 1958, in Nagaland thereby designating the state as a "disturbed area" for another six months. The extension is a routine affair as the state has been under AFSPA for almost six decades and the last such extension was on 30 June. The extension follows amid ongoing peace talks.

On 23 December 2020, the Niki Sumi faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-SS Khaplang (NSCN-K) or NSCN-GPRN announced their intent to join the peace talks and revive the ceasefire with the Government of India. The faction further added they expect the government to respond positively and honour their decision.

Issues at large

First, second split in NSCN(K) and takeover by Yung Aung faction. Niki Sumi has been the most-wanted militant on the National Investigation Agency's list who controlled NSCN(K)'s extortion networks and jade mines in Myanmar. His intention for peace talks completes the division of NSCN(K) along national lines. Sumi's group emerged in July after differences with Yung Aung, the nephew of Khaplang and torchbearer of the Nagas in Myanmar. Since the death of Khaplang in 2017, NSCN(K) operating in Sagaing division of Myanmar, has split twice over the leadership tussle with Yung Aung. The first split in 2018 led Khango Konyak, a Mon from Nagaland, to join the NNPGs. The second split came in July 2020 when camps of Niki Sumi, Nyamlang Konyak Naga, Starson Lamkang Naga, all hailing from Nagaland, were attacked and subsequently purged out the NSCN(K) by Aung.

Second, the impact on the Naga peace process. Niki Sumi has not yet declared his intention to join the NNPGs, unlike its predecessor Khango Konyak; nevertheless, its presence will make the talks inclusive. The Naga peace talks reached a stalemate when differences emerged between the NSCN(I-M) and interlocutor Governor Ravi on the ground of "shared sovereignty." On the other hand, NNPGs, a group of seven Naga insurgent groups, has continued with its dialogue since it signed the 'Deed of Commitment' in 2017. In 2015, when the government signed the framework agreement with NSCN(I-M), one of the criticisms to the process has been the absence of NSCN(K). With Konyak and Sumi, the factions from NSCN(K) representing the Indian Nagas will have a seat in the talks.

Third, the State's response and extension of AFSPA. In October 2020, the coordinated counter-insurgency operations by Assam Rifles, Indian Army and Tatmadaw targeting the Niki Sumi group have also led Sumi, Starson, and 50 other cadres to surrender or come overground. The security agencies have worked on Sumi's return to India with an eye on concluding the Naga peace deal. The COVID-19 restrictions on cross border movement, operational challenges and infighting with Yung Aung have conclusively forced the leadership to rethink their future course. Simultaneously even though the peace talks and ceasefire continue, it has not translated into the revoking of the AFSPA.

In perspective

Nimmi Suki's intention to join would strengthen the ongoing peace process. It took more than three decades to come out of the woods to the table and yet the NSCN (K-Yung Aung) remains on the outside. In protracted conflicts, the surrender policy has been such that it permits insurgent groups to surrender but also opt to keep arms in reserve, thereby ensuring an option to return if favourable gains are not achieved in the peace process. It remains to be seen whether Sumi joins the NNPGs and it is likely to follow once he is assured of 'no arrest.'

Pakistan: After a weeklong protest, the Hazara mourners finally bury the dead coal miners

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 14 January 2021

In the news

On 9 January, 10 coal miners from the Hazara community were laid to rest at the Hazara Town, Quetta, after being brutally killed in an attack earlier this month. The decision to bury the slain coal workers came after relatives and protesters from the community who had earlier refused to bury the deceased unless Prime Minister Imran Khan visited them and addressed their concerns reached an agreement with a government team. Following this, Prime Minister Imran Khan arrived in Quetta and met with the families of the slain coal miners and members of the Hazara community.

On 3 January, 11 coal miners were kidnapped and killed, when armed assailants entered their residential compound in the Mach coalfield area of Balochistan. The militant Islamic State (IS) group claimed responsibility for the attack.

Issues at large

First, the relentless targeting killing of the Hazara community. According to a National Commission for Human Rights report, religious extremists have killed more than 2,000 Hazaras between 2004 and 2018. The Hazaras have been the victims of ethnic and sectarian cleansing through target killings, suicide attacks and bomb blasts inflicting harm to their daily lives, education and business activities of roughly half a million Hazaras living in Quetta. Hazaras have been the target of multiple terrorist attacks over the recent years, with Quetta's Hazara community at the front line of Pakistan's battle with violent extremism. This is owing to their small population, distinct facial appearance and limited territory making them soft targets for militants. The most concerning aspect of this issue is the Hazara community's isolation. They have been forced into ghettos in two Hazara neighbourhoods in Quetta's Marriabad and Hazara Town, restricting their movement.

Second, the inadequate response and ineffective strategy of the State. The repeated targeting of the Hazaras irradiates the failure of the State. Despite the initiation of the National Action Plan, sectarian militant groups continue to operate in Balochistan. Moreover, the state has failed to bring perpetrators of sectarian violence to justice. Repeated attacks on the Hazaras have gone unpunished. Further, legal pursuit of these cases has been a challenge with the judiciary unable to deliver justice due to the gap in the FIR reports that fail to identify perpetrators.

Third, the increasing presence of militant groups. The Islamic State's reach, which has joined hands with Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan and other sectarian groups, has increased in Balochistan, with the former declaring war on minority Shiites. Apart from the IS, other groups like the outlawed Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and the Taliban have also targeted the Hazaras over the years in Balochistan. The LeJ has carried out various attacks against the community because of its anti-Shia and anti-Iran ideology. Further, the strengthened nexus between the sectarian group in Balochistan with militants gives them better leverage.

Fourth, the larger systemic issues inside Balochistan. The Hazara community's issue is a manifestation of the larger systemic issues inside Balochistan, which is Pakistan's largest and poorest region, rife with ethnic, sectarian and separatist insurgencies.

In perspective

The repeated persecution of the Hazara community in Pakistan highlights two larger issues.

First, sectarianism exists unabated throughout Pakistan as the country continues to foster sectarian groups resulting in the loss of countless lives. The Hazara community's persecution is an apt case for they have been solely targeted because they are Shia; thus, the motive is sectarian and sectarian groups have historically carried out the killings. As long as such groups can exist freely, they will continue to threaten minorities across the country.

Second, the lack of attention to Balochistan. As a province, Balochistan has much to offer. However, when it comes to giving back to the locals, especially the minorities in the region,

there seems to be a gap. Much of the issues in Balochistan stem from the flawed political and economic development policies and strategies from within the province and the federal government.

India: Supreme Court stays farm bills amid continuing protests

Alok K Gupta, 14 January 2021

In the news

On 12 January, the Supreme Court in India stayed the implementation of the farm laws as impasse continued between the protesting farmers and the government. The three-judge bench of the Supreme Court responded to the petitions challenging the constitutional validity of all the three farm laws. The court also ordered a four-member expert committee to examine the farm laws and submit a report within two months. The bench urged the farmers' unions to go before the committee and resolve the dispute. It also asked the Attorney-General to confirm by filing an affidavit before the court along with Investigation Bureau's records, in response to the application alleging help and support being extended by banned organisations to the protesters.

Issues at large

While reflecting on the conundrum, the Chief Justice of India, Justice SA Bobde, highlighted the following four aspects: the farm laws cannot be kept in abeyance for nothing; there must be some progress towards resolving the impending issues over the farm laws; women, children and old were exposed to cold and COVID-19, and many have lost lives due to illness and suicide; and, the court does not want to stifle a peaceful protest, rather want to save lives and want protestors to return to their livelihood. These observations are of great significance, given the claims of farmers' unions and government.

First, as reported, farmers' unions said that they would not go to any apex court-appointed panel to resolve disputes. They are firm on the repeal of farm laws, sans any amendment to it.

Second, all the committee members have been pro-farm laws in their opinion expressed in media and elsewhere. Hence, their neutrality has been challenged at the inception itself.

Third, the government has been adamant throughout that they may accommodate amendment to protect the interests of farmers being jeopardized, if any, without repealing the laws.

Fourth, the apex court also seems to be quite pressurising when the bench reiterated that they are forming a committee to have a clear picture. That they do not want to hear arguments that the farmers will not go to the committee.

Fifth, the laws have been stayed by the Court to calm protestors and convince them to discuss the legislation with the government. On the one hand, the stay has angered the government, and on the other farmers are unsatisfied as they are demanding repeal, hence critical of the committee formed without consulting them.

Sixth, the constitutional validity of all three laws has been challenged in the Court, which it is yet to hear. Hence, how the Court would handle those petitions is ambiguous. The court's endeavour to locate a mid-way through Committee smacks of politics more than the justice.

Last, a stay means a delay in the final decision. Delay would lead to rotting of crops and produce. Farmers once again would be at receiving end.

In perspective

The stay incapacitates the Centre with any executive action to implement the same. The farmers' protest that began on 26 November 2020 on different national capital borders witnessed several rounds of fruitless negotiations between the farmers' unions and government. A continued stalemate prompted the Supreme Court to intervene to bring farmers to the negotiating table.

However, negotiations have been happening, but the will to resolve has been missing on both sides. Farmers and government are stuck on two extremes; hence reaching a middle ground will be too challenging.

The adequacy of the 'decision' remains questionable. It may have given a reprieve to the government, but the fate of laws still hangs. Farmers are also divided within, which government is aiming to capitalize upon.

How far the committee, thus constituted, would create a congenial atmosphere and improve the trust and confidence of the farmers, is difficult to predict.

India: Farmers' protest turns violent with a political game of double-speak

Alok Gupta, 28 January 2021

In the news

On 26 January, the farmers' protest turned violent on New Delhi's streets, after two months of their commencement. The outrage was massive and unprecedented; reportedly, 200,000 tractors were mobilized against the permission of 5,000 tractors for the rally and flouted the routes specified by the administration. The protestors and the police clashed after protestors removed the barricades to enter Central Delhi. They successfully entered Delhi, destroyed public property, injured police personnel, stormed the historic Red Fort, and hoisted their two different flags scaling iconic monuments' walls.

Farmers, while entering Central Delhi, were continuously requested to maintain law and order by the Delhi Police. Reportedly, a tractor overturned leading to the death of a farmer who was driving. When police approached to help and rescue, they were attacked, hence left the scene. Following which the farmers turned violent, and hooliganism began.

The Delhi Police registered FIR against several farmer leaders and has also detained nearly 200 farmers to be arrested. 86 police personnel got injured as reported. According to Police, farmers used swords, lathis and other weapons during their attacks. Hence, police booked them under IPC sections like 395, 397 and 120(b).

Issues at large

The farmers' unions are being accused of double-speak: promising peaceful march to the administration and resorting to violence when allowed in good-faith. Thus, it has led to blame game raising several issues.

First, the police must have had intelligence report if the attack was a planned-one. The administration must be aware of the number and quality of the protestors scheduled to enter Delhi for Tractor Rally, as the matter was under consideration for last two weeks. Under such circumstances, police would have made adequate arrangements to restrain any untoward incident and would have regulated the entry. Calling off participation in Tractor Rally by Samyukt Kisan Morcha on January 26 itself suggests, farmers may be in full-knowledge of such plans.

Second, one incident of tractor accident and death of farmer may have enraged the protestors. Even if the violence was a consequence of some spontaneous happening, Delhi Police and administration must have had preparation for immediate interventions and containment of its escalation. Then, why it continued destroying huge public property?

Third, the Home Minister, Government of India, must have maintained a strict vigil on the entire episode. Responsibility for maintaining law and order in the wake of proposed tractor rally lies on him. Opposition parties also have blamed it on the government. The Home Minister is being castigated as the weakest Home Minister of India and is being asked for his resignation, taking responsibility for failure to contain it.

Fourth, the government has been on an offensive towards the movement since the beginning. It has been highlighting external funding to the movement, external agencies and branding the protestors as Khalistanis. This smacks of government's mishandling of the movement and lack of capacity to resolve after several rounds of negotiations.

Fifth, some farmer unions pulled out of the protest movement because of the vandalism in Delhi. The Rashtriya Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan, All India Kishan Sangharsh Coordination Committee and the Bhartiya Kisan Union (Bhanu) condemned it as unacceptable. This suggests that the crack

within the movement evident on many occasions is now obvious and has deepened. Protestors are likely to lose the support of civil society.

Sixth, Abhay Singh, MLA of Indian National Lokdal reached Haryana Assembly on a tractor and tendered his resignation to the Speaker from membership of Assembly in support of farmers protest in Delhi. Speaker subsequently accepted the resignation. Since the beginning, attempts have been made at politicization of the movement. Present violence reveals that the political parties are now trying to gain political mileage out of the movement.

In perspective

The farmer's leaders may not have envisaged that the tractor rally would witness such incidents. The violence questions the control of the leaders over the movement. It may have degraded their 'good cause' in the eyes of the civil society; some may even opine, that the violence has served the very purpose of the government. Vested interests may have been eyeing to defame the protest movement and were successful in their endeavour.

Government has entire state machinery at its disposal. Therefore, the onus of restraining and containing such episodes of internal conflict lies upon the Government. Political game of one-upmanship must not be played at the cost of public property.

India and China: The border disputes expand, despite the ninth round of military talks

Sukanya Bali, 28 January 2021

In the news

On 24 January, India and China held its ninth round of Corps Commander meeting. Following the meet, on 25 January, both sides released a joint statement; it said: "The two sides agreed that this round of meeting was positive, practical and constructive, which further enhanced mutual trust and understanding. The two sides agreed to push for an early disengagement of the frontline troops. They also agreed to follow the important consensus of their state leaders,

maintain the good momentum of dialogue and negotiation, and hold the 10th round of the Corps Commander level meeting at an early date to jointly advance de-escalation."

On 25 January, India Today reported a new military standoff in Sikkim in which "around 20 soldiers were injured on the Chinese side and four on the Indian side." However, the Global Times has replied, the above report on injuries of both PLA and Indian soldiers as "fake". It said: "There is no record of this incident in the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) front line patrol logs".

Issues at large

First, the border standoff remains unresolved and, worse, is getting aggravated. Despite the multiple rounds of negotiations since 2020, the border standoff is expanding from the western sector (Ladakh) to the others in Arunachal Pradesh. In 202, the death of 20 Indian soldiers' and an unspecified number of Chinese casualties raised concerns over the border escalations seen since 1962. In November 2020, NDTV revealed China had created a new village in the Arunachal Pradesh. The satellite imagery shows new structure built verifying it with empty hillside two years ago. Now, the latest report of another standoff in Sikkim region. On 20 January, a face-off between Indian and Chinese soldiers wounded soldiers on both sides. Reuters reported that India army had clarified "it was a minor face-off at Nakula which was resolved by local commanders as per established protocols".

Second, the political gap between the two countries, not limited only to the border talks. Despite the Wuhan and Mahabalipuram summits between the two counties during the recent period at the highest levels, there is a political gap. Furthermore, the gap is increasing and should be worrisome.

Third, the rising sentiments against the other, fanned by media. Recent statements would reflect this. Global times has accused Indian media of hyping Sinophobic sentiments. It said that the Indian media's habitual "rumormongering" may hurt New Delhi's interest. In the recent clash at Nakula, Indian media claimed that China suffered five times more casualties in the latest round in an attempt to show preparedness and valor. Qian

Feng, Director of the research department at the National Strategy Institute at Tsinghua University, said fanning anti-China flames and confusing people will, in the end, harm their own reputations and India's national interests.

In perspective

The multiple dialogues over the recent border standoffs have not yielded results, and the larger political dialogues at the summit levels, also have not brought the two countries any closer. Both the developments should be worrisome for the bilateral relationship.

The immediate need should be to prevent/avoid any further standoff along the border or to expand the theatre of confrontations. With jingoism on the rise, a military confrontation may further the polarization between the two countries. With the immediate focus on COVID vaccination and economic recovery, both countries cannot afford their resources being pulled off on other directions.

Afghanistan: Surging targeted killing amid troop withdrawal discussions

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 18 February 2021

In the news

On 17 February, the Taliban published an open letter urging the United States to remain committed to the Doha agreement regarding the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan. The letter signed by Taliban's deputy leader Mullah Abdullah Abdul Ghani Baradar stated, "We are fully confident that the Afghans themselves can achieve the establishment of an Islamic government and enduring peace and security through intra-Afghan dialogue." Similarly, in a message to the NATO leaders, the Taliban said, "Our message to the upcoming NATO ministerial meeting is that the continuation of occupation and war is neither in your interest nor in the interest of your and our people."

On 15 February, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in a pre-ministerial press conference reiterated that the presence of the alliance's troops in Afghanistan is "conditions-

based," saying "we will not leave before the time is right." On the same day, Abdullah Abdullah, the chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, stated, "At this moment, the Taliban has taken a hard stance, which unfortunately is not helping the situation."

On 15 February, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) released a report in which it stated that 65 journalists, media professionals and human rights defenders were killed in Afghanistan between 1 January 2018 and 31 January 2021, with 11 losing their lives since the start of negotiations in September 2020. Further, the report also documented a "changing patterns" of attacks as it identified the recent killings as an intentional, premeditated and deliberate targeting of individuals with perpetrators remaining anonymous.

Issues at large

First, the question of troop withdrawal. Presently, there are roughly 8,000 NATO troops and nearly 2,500 US troops in Afghanistan. While the Taliban has voiced its strong opposition to the presence of international troops in Afghanistan, the Afghan government expects the continued support of the alliance in its train, advice and assist mission. However, as the new US administration under President Joe Biden is reviewing the Doha agreement signed with the Taliban in February 2020, according to which the US pledged to withdraw all international troops by April 2021, the question of complete troop withdrawal remains in question.

Second, surging violence and targeted killing. Despite the ongoing negotiation, violent conflict continues unabated across Afghanistan. Apart from the UNAMA report, TOLO News, a local news agency has stated that 340 people were either killed or wounded in security incidents in Afghanistan since the start of February 2021 as a result of magnetic IEDs, roadside bombs and targeted killings.

Third, the stalled intra-Afghan negotiations. The negotiations in Doha been stalled for almost four weeks as both sides have not held meetings on the agenda of the second phase of the Intra-Afghan dialogue which started on 5 January. The Taliban's missing presence in Doha is one of the main reasons behind the

deadlock.

In perspective

First, the presence of international troops has not curbed the surge in violence, however, this does not mean that the troops should leave. The continuing presence of the US and NATO forces has helped prevent the Taliban from tilting the balance of power on the ground in its favour. Further, it has also helped curb hard-line armed groups from exploiting the security vacuum that may arise. Thus, the Biden administration will have some difficult decisions to take, however, it is unlikely that there will be a complete withdrawal of troops given the situation in Afghanistan and the status of the negotiations.

Second, violence is a manifestation of the stalled negotiations that have seen limited progress and vague statements from both sides. Further, it shows that the two sides have failed to reach a consensus on the most important and first agenda of the talks which is the call for a reduction in violence.

Third, the US-Taliban agreement and intra-Afghan negotiations provide a singular opportunity to bring peace to war-torn Afghanistan. However, with the Taliban prioritising the Doha agreement over the intra-Afghan talks the opportunity seems to be slipping away.

Sri Lanka: The UNHRC resolution calls for reconciliation and accountability

Akriti Sharma, 25 March 2021

In the news

On 23 March, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution titled "Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka" in the forty-sixth session. The resolution was drafted by a Core Group including the UK, Germany, Canada, Malawi, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. It was co-sponsored by 40 other countries including the US, France, and Italy. The resolution was put to vote through an e-voting system for the first time.

The resolution expressed concern regarding "policies that adversely affect the right to

freedom of religion or belief; increased marginalization of persons belonging to the Tamil and Muslim communities; surveillance and intimidation of civil society; restrictions on media freedom, and shrinking democratic space". Further it raised concerns regarding "the prevailing marginalization of and discrimination against the Muslim community, and that cremations for those deceased from COVID-19 have prevented Muslims and members of other religions from practising their own burial religious rites, and has disproportionately affected religious minorities and exacerbated distress and tensions." On 23 March, Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena tweeted: "we welcome the majority of 25 of 47 members in the council to have expressed not to vote against SL, amidst heavy lobbying & unsubstantiated statements".

Issues at large

First, the UNHRC resolutions on Sri Lanka since the end of the civil war. This is the eighth one; the previous resolutions were passed during 2009, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, and 2019. In the latest resolution, 47 countries voted. Twenty-two voted for the resolution including the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Uruguay, Czech Republic, Denmark, Fiji, Argentina, Armenia, Austria, Bahamas, Brazil, Bulgaria, Côte d'Ivoire, Malawi, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Ukraine, Netherlands, and Poland. Eleven countries voted against the resolution include Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, Russia, the Philippines, Eritrea, Venezuela, Bolivia, Somalia, Uzbekistan, and Cuba. Fourteen countries abstained include the following: India, Japan, Nepal, Indonesia, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Gabon, Bahrain, Libya, Mauritania, Namibia, Senegal, Sudan, and Togo abstained from voting.

Second, the regional divide. The countries who voted in the favour of the resolution are predominantly American and European countries. The countries who voted against the resolution are predominantly Asian and African countries. In South Asia, two countries (Nepal and India) abstained from the voting and two countries (Pakistan and Bangladesh) voted against the resolution.

Third, Sri Lanka and the indifference towards the UNHRC. Sri Lanka views the UNHRC

resolutions as interference in domestic affairs. Despite the several efforts of UNHRC to check human rights, the government has remained ignorant towards the human rights abuse of minorities. On 27 January 2020, Sri Lanka announced its withdrawal from co-sponsorship of Resolution 40/1 on 'Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka'.

In perspective

First, the special provision of the resolution. The resolution recognizes the importance of preserving and analyzing evidence relating to violations and abuses of human rights. It also mandates the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights "to collect, consolidate, analyze and preserve information and evidence and to develop possible strategies for future accountability processes for gross violations of human rights or serious violations of international humanitarian law in Sri Lanka." This will enhance the monitoring and scrutiny of human rights abuses in the country.

Second, the resolution renews the hope for providing long-awaited justice to the victims of thirty years of civil war, which ended in 2009. There had been a renewal in the human rights abuses in the country after the Rajapaksas came to power in 2019.

India: Another Maoist attack in Chhattisgarh

D. Suba Chandran, 7 April 2021

In the news

On 3 April, there was an encounter between a special police force led by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and the Maoists in the Sukma district of Chhattisgarh State. The encounter resulted in 22 members of the paramilitary getting killed, with one commando kidnapped.

On 5 April, the Home Minister of India commented on the killings as "an act of desperation by the Maoists", and the "the loss of lives of jawans will not be in vain."

Issues at large

First, the occasional deadly attacks by the Maoists with a huge casualty, despite the decline in Maoist violence during the last decade. According to a report by the Hindu, during recent years, there were more than five big attacks since 2017 in the Sukma district in Chhattisgarh. In March 2017, 12 members of the CRPF were killed in an ambush; and in March 2020, 17 members of a police force were killed in another ambush. Last month, in March 2021, another police team suffered casualties when five of them got blown by a bomb.

Second, the concentration of Maoist violence in the Sukma district in Chhattisgarh. The topography, geography and demography of the district have played a crucial role in the region, remaining one of the last bastions for the Maoists. With a strong forest cover and far from the state capital, Sukma remains a periphery within the State, and a Maoist haven. Though there has been an emphasis on development activities, the district is yet to feel the fruits that would prevent the local population from joining or being sympathetic to the Maoist cause. Along with the neighbouring Bijapur district, Sukma shares the border with four States - Maharashtra, Telangana, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh. Given the practical issues, this remains a nightmare for the police and paramilitary forces. Demographically, the district has a tribal population in the majority, with one of the lowest literacy rates in India.

Third, the State sees violence as a part of Maoists' last stand. The State believes strengthening the police force with special and focussed units would ultimately neutralize the Maoist threat. The State is moving in large numbers into the erstwhile Maoist areas; it believes that the Maoist movement is on the decline and pursues a one last push strategy. On the other hand, the Maoists want to disprove the State narrative that their movement is on a decline. Despite a numerically strong force, due to the geography and innovative Maoist strategies, the security forces get ambushed in larger numbers by the Maoists.

Fourth, the mixed balance sheet – whether the State has been successful in addressing the Maoists presence. The State would present

statistics on a comparative note regarding the situation during the last ten years; the data would hint at the decline of Maoist violence during the last ten years. However, recurring violence in the district would also underline the persisting Maoist issue.

In perspective

The Maoists are rhetorically strong; the State, despite its development narrative, has not succeeded in ensuring that the youths do not get attracted by the extremist ideology and slogans. Second, despite the government's tall claims, inequality still exists in the region and in Chhattisgarh. The State believes in large force and a bulldozer strategy in clearing out the Maoists. The latter believe in targeted ambushes but continue the guerrilla warfare. Given the geography and demography, the State is in for a long haul.

Pakistan: Government bans the TLP after violent protests against France

Rishabh Yadav, 21 April 2021

In the news

On 15 April, the Pakistan government banned the fifth largest political party Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), under anti-terror law, after the protest by TLP workers turned violent across the country. Earlier, on 12 April, security agencies arrested Saad Hussain Rizvi, leader of TLP, to obviate the organization's long-march and sit-in in Islamabad for demanding the expulsion of the French Ambassador and severing ties with France. The arrest sparked a countrywide protest, which turned violent as TLP activists clashed with law enforcement agencies. The protestors were also able to take hostage 11 police officers and made government come back to the negotiating table with the banned group.

Issues at large

First, the four demands of the TLP. It includes: the expulsion of the French Ambassador, the Release of the party chief Saad Rizvi, the removal of the ban on the party, and the release of all arrested activists. On 20 April,

the government released Saad Rizvi, and agreed to withdraw all cases against TLP workers and is currently having a debate in National Assembly over the expulsion of the French Ambassador.

Second, the TLP and the issue of blasphemy. This is not the first time TLP activists have taken to the streets and created mayhem across the country over blasphemy. In 2017, they held a demonstration against the re-wording of the electoral oath that they found blasphemous. Similarly, in 2018, they held a protest against the Supreme Court's verdict on acquitting Aasia Bibi on the issue of blasphemy. In both these cases, the government had to accommodate their demands to diffuse the situation. These demonstrations have increased the group's popularity by making it the fifth largest political party. The impunity enjoyed by the group and its rising popularity hinged on demonstrations to safeguard 'Islam' provides it with the confidence to disrupt civil administration over the issues of blasphemy.

Third, Imran Khan's catch-22 situation. He was one of the first leaders to criticize the French government over the issue of controversial cartoons. While the demands of TLP are untenable and inimical to the interest of the Pakistani state, flatly refusing them will make him contradict his position and call into question his popular support. Also, the electoral success of TLP helps PTI by undercutting the votes of PML-N in Punjab. Therefore, Imran Khan finds appeasing TLP more pertinent than taking any punitive actions against them.

Fourth, non-state actors challenging the writ of the state. If the monopolization of violence is indispensable for internal sovereignty and independent foreign policymaking is a display of external sovereignty, the actions of TLP challenges both. The ability of TLP to pressurize the government in signing an agreement on the issue of expulsion of the French Ambassador and create chaos on the streets without facing any effective resistance from the state machinery underscore the state's weak capacity to enforce writ on its territory. The ability of various non-state actors to challenge the state's monopoly over violence underlines the crisis and challenges of state-building in Pakistan.

In perspective

The ban on the group will not achieve anything. Numerous fundamentalist groups exist in Pakistan's polity because of the patronage given by the establishment. There is a strong current of political appeasement while dealing with any religious group, which invariably boost their confidence and popularity. The need for the state is to rethink its approach in dealing with religious groups and religious issues and not let them invalidate the democratic structures of the state. To stonewall sensitive issues only allow the state to postpone crises and not eliminate them.

Afghanistan: Government discusses the US troop withdrawal, calls for Loya Jirga

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 21 April 2021

In the news

On 19 April, a cabinet meeting led by President Ashraf Ghani discussed the government's preparations for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan. At the meeting, Ghani stated that the decision to pull the troops out of Afghanistan does not mean a cut in Afghanistan-US ties but opens a new chapter in relations. The implementation of bilateral and multilateral agreements after the withdrawal of US forces and empowering the security and defence forces were also discussed. Further, the cabinet called for a Loya Jirga to be held in which the status of permanent impartiality of Afghanistan could be considered after withdrawal.

Earlier, on 15 April, Ghani said the Afghan government "is not at risk of collapse" as the US announced to withdraw foreign forces. He said: "The narrative of the Afghan government falling apart is a false narrative," adding that the Afghan commandos, special forces and air force "have trained among the best, they are among the best in the region, as long as this force stays, there is no risk of state collapse."

Issues at large

First, the government's position on withdrawal. Following the announcement of withdrawal, Ghani said that Afghanistan respects the US decision. He said that the Biden administration's decision to withdraw forces from Afghanistan "is no surprise" for him, adding that the decision "clarifies a lot of things and it allows us to move forward so the right decision will have the consequences of making Taliban think seriously." Additionally, he clarified that he does not believe in his previous comments that the country will fall in six months after the withdrawal of foreign forces, adding that he has brought reforms in Afghan forces which will help them to defend the country against any type of threat.

Second, the government's apprehensions of the Taliban. Since the announcement, the Afghan government has called on the Taliban to become more proactive in the negotiations stating: "If they (Taliban) engage in war, they would have lost a golden opportunity and I hope that they don't do that." Ghani said: "The ball is in the Court of the Taliban. We are fully prepared for Istanbul. There is a consensus on this, national and within the government. We will see now whether the Taliban opt." He said: "The key is that the political committee does not represent, unfortunately, the military committee or the commanders. They (Taliban) have not socialized peace yet, but it's a jolt that they need to absorb because they could not think that the United States will withdraw."

Third, the surge in violence over the past year. Violence continues to go unabated, hinting that the call for withdrawal might be early. In the last six months between October 2020 and March 2021, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) recorded a 38 per cent increase in civilian casualties compared with the same period in 2020. It attributed the surge in violence to both the Afghan army and the Taliban, with the Taliban responsible for 43.5 per cent of all civilian casualties and the Afghan national army responsible for 17 per cent.

In perspective

First, the government's ability to counter the fallouts of the troop withdrawal. With the support of all foreign troops coming to an end,

it is likely that the Afghan forces alone with not be able to counter the fallouts of withdrawal even though the government claims otherwise.

Second, the withdrawal both a boon and a bane for the government. The withdrawal becomes a leveraging point for the government to try and bring the Taliban to the negotiating table; however, it also leaves the government in a challenging position as it would have to counter the Taliban and any insurrections by themselves.

Pakistan: Meetings with Afghan leaders

Rishabh Yadav, 29 April 2021

In the news

On 22 April, COAS Gen. Bajwa met Afghan Ambassador Najibullah Ali to discuss the Afghan peace process, bilateral security and defence cooperation. On the same day, an Afghan daily, Tolo News, reported that Taliban's chief negotiator Mawlawi Abdul Hakim had travelled to Pakistan from Doha to seek guidance from the Taliban leadership on the US-backed Istanbul dialogue.

On 23 April, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi attended the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Turkey trilateral meeting that issued a joint statement calling all parties, mainly the Taliban, to recommit to the political settlement. In an interview with the Anadolu Agency of Turkey, FM Qureshi also remarked that there is a fear of going back to the 90s if there is no political settlement.

On 24 April, Pakistan's special envoy to Afghanistan, Mohammad Sadiq visited Kabul to discuss the peace process, transit trade and counterterrorism measures. Tolo News reported that the Pakistan delegation had assured the Afghan government of the Taliban's participation in the peace process and subsequent agreement on reduction in violence and a ceasefire.

Issues at large

First, Pakistan as a stakeholder in facilitating Afghan negotiations. The Deep State within Pakistan has nurtured and supported the

Taliban in the Afghan civil war. Quetta Shura operates from Pakistan. Islamabad played a key role in brokering and facilitating the Doha dialogue. However, with the Biden administration shifting the date of troops' withdrawal, the Taliban has refused to participate in any dialogue. Now, there is increasing pressure on Pakistan to bring back the Taliban to the negotiating table.

Second, the fear of Afghanistan returning to the violent 90s. The intra-Afghan dialogue under the Doha process has produced a stalemate. The Taliban and Afghan government have failed to reach a consensus on the common political framework. Pakistan worries that the US withdrawal sans political accord between the Taliban and Afghan government will increase the upsurge in violence, whose likely fallout will be the influx of refugees into Pakistan. Islamabad realizes its precarious situation in the immediate post-withdrawal scenario and therefore is attuning itself to work closely with the Afghan government to deter any negative fallouts.

Third, security challenges' emanating from the Durand Line. The Quetta bomb blast was the handiwork of the TTP, which involved an Afghan national. The TTP, which is currently operating from Afghanistan, has regained strength in the last few months after uniting with its disgruntled factions. Therefore, Pakistan is not only worried about the internal situation in Kabul but its effects on the western front too. The presence of Afghan national in the ranks of the TTP becomes a concern, as there may be possibilities of disgruntled Afghan fighters joining the Pakistani Taliban. Therefore, coordination in counter-terror measures in the immediate after-effects of withdrawal becomes imperative for Pakistan to prevent the violence spiralling into its territory.

In perspective

The popular perception is that the victory of the Taliban is a success for Pakistan. There is no doubt that Pakistan has invested heavily in the Taliban and will like to see it at the helm of power in Kabul, providing a strategic depth to Islamabad. However, the US withdrawal without any agreement multiplies economic and security concerns for Pakistan. An

uncertain and unstable Afghanistan dilutes any dividends that Pakistan could gain from the US withdrawal. Taliban claiming victory from the US departure will also embolden extremist groups in Pakistan. The descent of violence in Afghanistan bereft of any political settlement will spill over into Pakistan.

While Pakistan is trying to redefine its geography, from geostrategic space to geo-economic space, and gain the advantage of connectivity to Central Asia, its success depends on a secure western border, and a stable Afghanistan immediate future looks bleak.

Islamabad acknowledges the precarity of the situation, and therefore, the recent visit was an attempt to spur the stalled intra-Afghan negotiations

Afghanistan: The US troops begin final withdrawal amid enduring violence

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 5 May 2021

In the news

On 30 April, a suicide truck bombing struck a guest house in Pul-e-Alam, the capital of Logar province, leaving 26 people dead and over 100 injured. The Presidential Palace condemned the attack as a crime against humanity and a terrorist attack against the people of Afghanistan. No group has so far claimed responsibility for the attack. However, the Afghan government has blamed the Taliban for the blast.

On 2 May, General Austin S. Miller, the head of the US-led coalition in Afghanistan, announced that the US military has begun its complete withdrawal from Afghanistan, saying: "We will conduct an orderly withdrawal from Afghanistan, and that means transitioning bases and equipment to the Afghan security forces." Also on the same day, General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, hinted that there could be all possibilities following the exit of American troops from Afghanistan, including "really dramatic, bad possible results," adding, "there are a lot of variables to this, and it's not 100

per cent predictable." Meanwhile, Abdullah Abdullah, the chairman of Afghanistan's HCNR said: "because of the vacuum that the withdrawal leaves, it may be able to take advantage of that situation, that emboldens the position of the sides...And that's the concern, that the Taliban position might get further emboldened."

Issues at large

First, the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan. President Joe Biden announced the withdrawal of US troop saying that the main objective of ensuring that Afghanistan would not be a launching pad for terrorism had been achieved and that it was time for American troops to come home. Similarly, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg also announced the withdrawal of NATO and allied forces, thus marking the formal end to the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan.

Second, the continuation of violence. Violence has been raging unabated across the country. Both the UNAMA and SIGAR have reported an increase in violence. According to TOLONews, 226 Afghan civilians and military personnel have been killed in alleged Taliban attacks following the announcement of the withdrawal of US troops on 15 April.

Third, the withdrawal in the absence of a ceasefire and stalled intra-Afghan negotiations. This withdrawal is taking place without any accountability measures, such as a ceasefire, in place. It is also taking place when the intra-Afghan negotiations and other diplomatic efforts are already in a deadlock despite being in their nascent stage.

Fourth, the Afghan government's readiness. Although the government claims that the Afghan commandos, special forces and air force have trained among the best and can defend the country, without the support of foreign troops, the government and its forces remain unprepared to counter any fallouts from the withdrawal.

In perspective

First, the end of American troops in Afghanistan. Over the last 20 years, the US has spent both money and blood in Afghanistan. Apart from the political

investment, a substantial amount has been spent on counter-insurgency and civilian assistance to Afghanistan. Conversely, the US forces have suffered more than 2,300 deaths. However, the cost of this withdrawal looks to be on the path of being worse.

Second, the likelihood of spiralling violence. Although violence has continued, recent attacks have taken place closer to Afghan urban towns and cities. These attacks had ceased following the US-Taliban agreement and now Afghans fear that could again become the case once foreign forces withdraw.

Third, the Afghans prepare for further uncertainty. Given the violent nature of previous power transitions in the country, the Afghans have little assurance of a peaceful settlement. More importantly, Afghan women are preparing themselves for a difficult road ahead.

Afghanistan: A week of violence, Taliban's three days ceasefire and the mirage of peace

D. Suba Chandran, 12 May 2021

In the news

On 08 May, in a targeted massacre on the girl children, three bombs placed in front of a school killed more than 80 people, with most of the victims in their teens. The attacks took place in a Shia neighbourhood in Kabul; the School was having classes in two separate shifts for the girls and boys. Though the Taliban denied its involvement, President Ashraf Ghani has blamed the militants. According to a statement from the US State Department: "This is a pivotal moment for the Taliban and Afghan leadership to come together and take responsibility for the future of their country."

On 10 May, the Taliban announced a three days ceasefire for the Eid al-Fitr; depending on the sighting of the moon, the Taliban ceasefire, according to news reports, will start either from Wednesday or Thursday. The Taliban ceasefire was aimed at celebrating Eid; according to its spokesman Suhail Shaheen the ceasefire aims at the following: "to provide a peaceful and secure atmosphere to our

compatriots ... so that they may celebrate this joyous occasion with a greater peace of mind." However, on the same day, there was an IED attack on a bus in the Zabul province that killed 11 people.

Also, on the same day, on 10 May, a meeting in Brussels amongst the foreign ministers of the EU discussed the nature of Europe's presence and support to Afghanistan. The Washington Post quoted the German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas stating: "After the terrible attacks of recent days, it is all the more important for the EU to make very clear that Afghanistan and the Afghan government can continue to count on Europe's support... We will continue to make available sufficient funding for civilian reconstruction, and we will do everything we can so that the ongoing peace negotiations reach a conclusion." However, last week, the EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell was quoted to have stated: "The decision has been taken and what we have to do is to face the situation that is going to be created... The violence in Afghanistan is increasing, and it's clear that once the US will withdraw, the European Union troops will not be able to stay."

On 6 May, a journalist who was earlier a presenter with the Tolonews, and associated with the Finance Ministry's media office, was killed in a targeted assassination. A Taliban spokesman was quoted to have issued a warning against the Afghan journalists to face the consequences for providing "one-sided news in support of Afghanistan's intelligence." On 07 May, the New York Times, in its regular casualty report on Afghanistan, referring to the previous week (30 April-06 May), said: "At least 140 pro-government forces and 44 civilians were killed in Afghanistan the past week, the highest death toll in a single week since October."

Issues at large

First, the surge in violence amidst the US troops withdrawal. Whether the massacre on the children is perpetrated by the Taliban or the Islamic State, it highlights the state of peace in Afghanistan, especially in Kabul. The targeted assassination of the journalist this week also highlights the efforts by the militants to silence the media.

Second, the responses from Europe and the US. It clearly shows that post-withdrawal, the international support is likely to be limited to expect that both the parties – government and Taliban reach an agreement amongst themselves.

Third, the Taliban ceasefire. One should not read too much into it. Perhaps, it is an exercise to ward off any negative publicity out of the attack on the School. Even otherwise, the statement from the Taliban spokesman clearly says that the ceasefire is aimed at the Afghan people celebrating Eid, than a part of political negotiations vis-à-vis the government.

In perspective

Despite statements from the US and Europe, the future of the Afghan population is now left to themselves to defend. And it looks bleak, especially for the minorities – the Shias and the women. Second, despite the ceasefire announcement, the Taliban is unlikely to engage with the government. Its announcement should be seen as a public relations exercise, than a political roadmap.

Afghanistan: Taliban still closely aligned to al-Qaida, says UN report

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 9 June 2021

In the news

On 1 June, the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the UN, in its twelfth report, has observed: "the Taliban's messaging remains uncompromising, and it shows no sign of reducing the level of violence in Afghanistan to facilitate peace negotiations with the Government of Afghanistan and other Afghan stakeholders. The Taliban's intent appears to be to continue to strengthen its military position as leverage." The report maintained as earlier: "the Taliban and Al-Qaida remain closely aligned and show no indication of breaking ties. Member States report no material change to this relationship, which has grown deeper as a consequence of personal bonds of marriage and shared partnership in struggle, now cemented through second generational ties."

The report also highlights the issue of narcotics in Afghanistan which continues to remain the Taliban's largest single source of income, Taliban's leadership structure, the 2020 fighting season and expectations for 2021, the challenges posed by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) and other foreign fighters in Afghanistan.

Issues at large

First, the continuing Taliban- al-Qaida nexus despite the US-Taliban deal. The report finds that al-Qaida continues to operate under the Taliban umbrella, with a significant part of its leadership based in the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan. This nexus continues despite the US-Taliban deal signed in 2020, which called for severing ties with the group. The report also contradicts President Biden's remarks that al-Qaida's presence in Afghanistan has been "greatly degraded."

Second, the status of the Taliban. The report claims that despite internal tensions, the group has remained outwardly unified as the Taliban Leadership Council (Quetta Shura) continues to pursue a diplomatic policy and military strategy to gain leverage for negotiations and raise their international profile. Meanwhile, the primary sources of Taliban financing remain criminal activities.

Third, the continuing trend of violence. The report assesses that the "security situation in Afghanistan remains as tense and challenging as at any time in recent history," adding, "many interlocutors believe that the Taliban have used the 2020 fighting season to further strengthen strangleholds around several provincial capitals, seeking to shape future military operations when levels of departing foreign troops are no longer able to effectively respond." However, the Taliban in most instances has denied responsibility for this surge in violence.

Fourth, the threat of ISIL-K and other foreign fighters in Afghanistan. The report highlights the lingering presence of the ISIL-K in parts of Afghanistan and the threat it has posed in the last year. Similarly, although the Taliban has denied the presence of foreign terrorist fighters in Afghanistan, several groups continue to operate in the country under the protection of

the Taliban.

In perspective

First, the Taliban's unkept promise and the US's claims. The Taliban has continued to maintain ties with al-Qaida and other militant groups, despite the pressure to sever ties. Conversely, the Biden administration has claimed that the threat of al-Qaida is diminished. However, reports such as these and UN Security Council (UNSC) Watchdog Group on al-Qaida, ISIL prove otherwise.

Second, the Taliban's links with militant groups. With the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country, the Taliban would want to consolidate itself; therefore, they would need all the allies, including al-Qaida, other militant groups, the drug mafia and others with a vested interest in Afghanistan.

Third, the threat of militant groups. Afghanistan is moving towards becoming a safe haven for militant groups. Although the Taliban has some control over the spread, the instability caused by the stalled negotiations and violence makes the environment suitable for such groups, which automatically pose a threat.

Afghanistan: Trilateral meeting highlights China's push for regional peace

Sarthak Jain, 9 June 2021

In the news

On 3 June, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Afghan Foreign Minister Mohammad Haneef Atmar and Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi held the fourth China-sponsored trilateral meeting virtually.

A joint statement issued after the trilateral talks stated: "The three sides underlined the importance of a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Afghanistan and called on all parties for an early declaration of a comprehensive ceasefire and an end to the senseless violence, to create the conditions needed for negotiation between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban."

Issues at large

First, a brief on the trilateral meeting. It started in December 2017 with Beijing making a clear statement that it wants to include Islamabad and Kabul on the Belt and Road Initiative. In 2018, the three sides introduced the term "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned." Three parties signed the Memorandum of Understanding on Counter-Terrorism. In 2019, a joint press release said: "The three sides committed to promote measures to counter terrorists' logistical capabilities including terror-financing, recruitment and training." In July 2020, the three sides agreed to prevent discrimination and stigma pertaining to allegations on China and support the World Health Organization's leading role in coordinating global COVID-19 response. The idea of induction of Kabul in BRI has changed the importance of peace in the region.

Second, stability in Afghanistan and the BRI concerns. To expand the BRI, regional stability and peace in Afghanistan are important. Therefore, China had to intervene to maintain peace to ensure Kabul joins the BRI. Apart from holding peace talks, China has assisted with humanitarian aid, food aid and exporting vaccines to war-torn countries.

Third, Afghanistan and China. Kabul has welcomed Chinese involvement. The Afghan government realizes the importance of investment in the region and thus appreciate any foreign support. The project offers much-needed infrastructure development to the nation.

In perspective

China believes in non-interference in internal conflicts of other nations. However, in this case, Beijing is breaking this pattern. It sees Afghanistan as an opportunity. To extend the BRI project, China needs a peaceful Afghanistan. Therefore, China has initiated its operations through dialogue. For Pakistan, China's involvement is a welcome step, as it would bring Islamabad and Beijing closer on the regional issue. For Afghanistan, external investments in the post-withdrawal period is even more important.

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Afghanistan: As the US leave Bagram, violence increases

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 7 July 2021

In the news

On 2 July, the US military left the Bagram Airfield, the biggest and last base in Afghanistan. The airfield was handed over to Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), effectively ending major US military operations after nearly two decades.

On 2 July, President Joe Biden said that the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan is "on track," adding, "it's a rational drawdown with our allies." He added: "We have worked out an over-the-horizon capacity. But the Afghans are going to have to be able to do it themselves." On the Afghan government's ability post the withdrawal he said: "I think they have the capacity to be able to sustain the government. But I am concerned that they deal with the internal issues that they have to be able to generate the kind of support they need nationwide to maintain the government."

On 4 July, the New York Times reported that General Austin S. Miller, the top US commander in Afghanistan, will remain in the country for "at least a couple more weeks," in an effort to "soften the blow" of the

withdrawal from Afghanistan and to reassure Afghans as the Taliban step up their offensive.

On 6 July, National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib assured the Afghan people that the ANDSF will retake all districts that have fallen to the Taliban, saying that government forces had not expected the Taliban offensive but would "absolutely, definitely" counterattack. According to Al Jazeera, the Taliban now controls roughly a third of all 421 districts and district centres as its march through northern Afghanistan gains momentum, causing the Afghan forces to flee across the border into Tajikistan.

Issues at large

First, end of America's 'longest war.' With the withdrawal of troops, what is called the 'longest war' for the US comes to an end after nearly two decades that spanned four presidencies of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden, respectively. Over the last 20 years, nearly 175,000 people in Afghanistan, including 51,000 terrorists/opposition fighters and over 2,300 US soldiers, had been killed. In addition, the war had cost the US nearly USD two trillion.

Second, the decision to withdraw. The withdrawal plan was consolidated with the signing of the US-Taliban agreement in 2020 under the Trump administration and carried forward by the Biden administration. According to the agreement, the conditions for the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan was laid out in return for a reduction of violence by the Taliban along with severing all ties with terrorist groups and joining the intra-Afghan talks. The deal has not made any lasting impact and has merely been used by the Taliban to ensure the US's exit from Afghanistan.

Third, the growing instability. Concerns over the withdrawal leading to more instability have been raised by the Afghans, Americans and other regional players. The pace of withdrawal and America's long-term strategy in Afghanistan has been questioned amid the deteriorating security situation. Additionally, several other important resources such as aid and foreign contractors that would also be stopped will cause the instability to intensify.

Meanwhile, the Taliban has been on an offensive and has made substantial territorial gains since the pull-out process began on 1 May.

Fourth, the unfinished issues. The withdrawal of troops is taking place despite the reports of several terrorist groups still operating in the country, the main reason for their stay. The US's plan on 'over the horizon' counterterrorism measures to monitor and curb terrorism has not been implemented given the hurdles they have already faced. Additionally, the US's institutional building and development plans will also remain unfinished.

In perspective

First, Afghanistan is likely to witness intense violence. In the coming months, the scale and intensity of violence are likely to increase due to the changes taking place in Afghanistan. Thus, this withdrawal will in turn result in displacement of people, disintegrations and push Afghanistan on the path to terror. However, a sole victory of either the Afghanistan government or the Taliban is highly unlikely, as the capabilities and situation in Afghanistan have changed. Rather, the ongoing deadlock is likely to continue.

Second, the futility of baseless interventions. The US's war in Afghanistan is another example of the futility of foreign interventions. While not undermining the effectiveness of interventions, Afghanistan would have problems of its own, however, the nature of the intervention, in this case, has fanned the flames of this conflict.

Afghanistan: Taliban's offensive reaches Afghanistan's major cities

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 4 August 2021

In the news

On 1 August, the Taliban escalated its countrywide offensive by continuing assaults in three provincial capitals: Herat, Lashkar Gah and Kandahar. Several commandos were deployed to the western city of Herat, while authorities in the southern city of Lashkar Gah called for more troops to counter the fierce

fighting. On the same day, the Taliban also struck the Kandahar airport in southern Afghanistan with at least three rockets. A Taliban spokesperson said: "Kandahar airport was targeted by us because the enemy were using it as a centre to conduct airstrikes against us." On 3 August, the residence of acting Defence Minister came under a car bomb attack, followed by sporadic gunfire and hand grenade blasts.

On 2 August, President Ashraf Ghani blamed the US "hasty" troop withdrawal for the worsening violence in Afghanistan. Further, he said that his administration would now focus on protecting provincial capitals and major urban areas in the face of the rapidly advancing Taliban, who he previously said has become "more cruel and more oppressive."

On 3 August, US special envoy for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, said: "At this point, they (Taliban) are demanding that they take the lion's share of power in the next government, given the military situation as they see it," adding, "the Taliban say they do not want to be a pariah state," He said: "the Talibs have been emboldened by the developments in recent weeks in terms of the gains that they have made and are in a maximalist frame of mind."

Issues at large

First, the Taliban's offensive. Since May 2021, the Taliban has launched a large-scale offensive across the country and has made substantial territorial gains by captured around half of Afghanistan's 400-odd districts, seizing land, closing in on the central government compound and taking control of key border crossings with neighbouring countries amid the US and NATO troop withdrawal. The recent attacks in Herat, Lashkar Gah and Kandahar mark a shift in the Afghan conflict, before these, clashes were largely confined to the country's rural areas or smaller cities contested by the militants. However, large-scale conventional attacks in Afghanistan's largest cities shows that the Taliban is marching towards the centre of these cities. Second, the return of former prisoners to the battlefield. According to Afghan officials, the Taliban commander supervising the offensive in Lashkar Gah is one of 5,000 former prisoners released by the Afghan government in 2020 under pressure from the US. Similarly,

several former prisoners that were released to further peace talks have returned to the battlefield to join the Taliban offensive, highlighting a miscalculation on the part of the US.

Third, Kabul's defensive. In efforts to counter the Taliban's offensive, the Afghan forces have lead operations and counterattacks against the Taliban in several provinces. The Afghan forces have responded with substantial air support, retaking some districts. However, both the Afghan air force and its commando forces are exhausted and overwhelmed. Although, the government has repeatedly dismissed the Taliban's territorial gains, it has largely failed to reverse their pace on the ground.

In perspective

First, the Taliban's end game. This is the first time that the Taliban has advanced into urban areas since they were overthrown nearly two decades ago. The current focus of the Taliban's efforts seems to be several key provincial capitals. Additionally, the Taliban's offensive depicts that they are not looking for power-sharing but something more. If the Taliban if succeeds in capturing any major urban centre, the current offensive would move to another level, impacting the already deteriorating situation in the country.

Second, Kabul's unsystematic response. The Taliban advance has once again left the Afghan government rattled. Although the Afghan forces have been holding ground in several key areas, Kabul still lacks clear direction in countering the Taliban, which in the long run would be futile.

India: Long-standing tensions escalate in Assam-Mizoram border

Wonchibeni Tsopoe, 4 August 2021

In the news

On 26 July, six officers of the Assam police and one civilian were killed at the Assam-Mizoram border as a long withstanding boundary issue over the two states aggravated violent clashes.

On 30 July, both states agreed to the

deployment of CRPF at the four-kilometre stretch from Assam's Lailapur to Mizoram's Vairangtei under the command of a senior CRPF official.

The North East Students' Organisation (NESO) the umbrella body of several unions in the region condemned the violence along the Assam-Mizoram border on Monday, the leaders of the students' bodies further said, "The fragile situation is a reminder of how vulnerable security of border residents can be when such conflicts arise."

Issues at large

First, the Assam and Mizoram border demarcation problem. Assam became a constituent state of India in 1950 and lost much of its territory to new states that emerged from within its borders between the early 1960s and 1970s. In 1972, Mizoram became a Union Territory, separating itself from Assam before attaining full statehood in 1987. Three southern Assam districts of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj share a 164 km long border with Mizoram's Kolasib, Mamit and Aizwal districts. Both the states oppose the demarcation as they claim land on the border between Assam's Cachar and Mizoram's Kolasib district. Due to this disagreement, alleged transgressions have taken place over the decades, and skirmishes increased in recent months; the dispute took an ugly turn on 26 July and escalated into a violent clash.

Second, the colonial roots to the conflict. The British government used Assam as ingress to capture the surrounding tribal areas. On 20 August, 1875, the British government stipulated a clear demarcation between the Cachar plains and Lushai hills, which was also a corollary of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation (BERF) Act of 1873. Mizoram, then called Lushai hills, was turned to a district of Assam. During this time, in 1875, the British released a notification differentiating Lushai hills from the plains of Cachar (present Assam). The second demarcation came in 1933, the map of Mizoram was redrawn and the Cachar-Mizoram border was dissolved. The new demarcation marked the separation between the Lushai hills and Manipur, which indicated the Manipur border began from the tripping of Lushair Hills, Assam's Cachar district and

Manipur.

Third, the difference between the two states. According to the Mizos, the first demarcation was done in consultation with Mizos chiefs and two years later, this also became the basis for the Inner Line Reserve Forest demarcation in the Gazette. Mizoram follows the first demarcation saying it is the only prescription that took into consideration of the Mizo community. On the other side, Assam follows the notification of the second demarcation because of which the dispute has been simmering for decades now. Despite multiple peace agreements to maintain the status quo, differences have prevailed over the years.

In perspective

The clashes between the two states date back to nearly a century and a half and both sides accuse each other of encroachment. There is no consensus boundary between the two; therefore, maintaining peace is difficult in the region. The two states should deter from violence as it overshadows the actual cause and rather negotiate for a diplomatic solution. While demarcating, a lot of history, ethnicity and tribal claims were overlooked, because of which the role of the central government is important to settle the problem amicably.

Afghanistan: Eight provincial capitals fall as the Taliban's offensive continues

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 11 August 2021

In the news

On 10 August, the Taliban captured Pul-e-Khumri, the provincial capital of Baghlan province, 200 kilometres north of Kabul. This is the eighth provincial capital to fall during the last two weeks. On the same day, Farah city, the provincial capital of Farah in southwest Afghanistan, was also captured. The Taliban has claimed they were closing in on Mazar-i-Sharif, the region's biggest city in the north and a key area for the government's control. Since 6 August, the Taliban have overrun several provinces including, Aybak, the capital of the northern province of Samangan, Kunduz city, a strategic location close to the border with Tajikistan, Taloqan, the provincial capital of northeast Takhar, Sheberghan, the capital of northern Jawzjan

province and Zaranj, on the border with Iran in Afghanistan's southern Nimroz province.

On 6 August, the UN Security Council meeting on Afghanistan was held during which the members strongly condemned the increase in violence in Afghanistan, asserting that the "Taliban must hear from the international community that we will not accept a military takeover of Afghanistan or a return of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate." This meeting comes days before the extended Troika meeting was held in Qatar on 11 August.

Issues at large

First, the Taliban's calculated offensive. Since May 2021, the Taliban has launched a large-scale offensive across the country and have seized control of much of rural Afghanistan since international forces began the last stage of their withdrawal. Over the recent weeks, the Taliban's offensive has focused on targeting Afghanistan's provincial capitals, urban city centres and border crossings. Additionally, the fighting has taken place in regions that are not traditionally Taliban's strongholds.

Second, the Afghan government's response. In efforts to counter the Taliban's offensive, the Afghan forces have lead operations and counterattacks against the Taliban in several provinces. The Afghan government has the advantage of a functional air force as well as its special forces, even though are stretched quite thin have been able to counter the Taliban's offensive. Amid the Taliban's offensive, the Afghan refused to acknowledge the falling capitals and has continued to emphasize on the Taliban deaths and the strength of the Afghan security forces.

Third, the muted international concerns. Although several countries have raised concerns over the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, there has been no action from these countries. Similarly, in its previous meeting, the "extended Troika" which included Russia, the US, China and Pakistan, made it clear it would not support the restoration of an 'Islamic emirate' or the old conservative order. However, the Taliban's relentless military offensive over the last few months has increased concerns about the Taliban ignoring the warning and the effectiveness of such regional groupings.

In perspective

First, the Taliban offensive has taken a new and bloodier turn. The Taliban's firm focus is now on Afghanistan's cities. The successful takeover marks a significant milestone in the groups relentless March to increase their control on the Afghan government and retake power in the country. Additionally, the Taliban's strategy of taking over the border regions shows that they plan on sealing the country, thus fighting from the outside in.

Second, the Afghan government's strategy. The Taliban's offensive has left the Afghan government in disarray. However, the government seems to be following strategically retreating in certain areas to help consolidate power in other key regions of the country Third, the questions of multinational efforts. The convergency of regional countries because of their common security concerns over Afghanistan's deteriorating situation makes the meeting such as the extended Troika extremely important. Platforms such as these could help in mitigating the problems in Afghanistan if the member countries bring the warring sides to the negotiating table.

Afghanistan: After two decades, the Taliban returns with ease, as the political, military and militia

D. Suba Chandran, 18 August 2021

In the news

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban captured Kabul, entered the Presidential Palace. Ashraf Ghani, who was then the President of Afghanistan, fled the country earlier. He was quoted to have said in a social media posting: "The Taliban have won with the judgement of their swords and guns, and are now responsible for the honour, property and self-preservation of their countrymen...They are now facing a new historical test. Either they will preserve the name and honour of Afghanistan, or they will give priority to other places and networks."

On 17 August, in a news conference in Kabul, Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban's spokesperson, said: "We don't want Afghanistan to be a battlefield anymore - from

today onward, war is over...I would like to assure the international community, including the United States, that nobody will be harmed...We don't want any internal or external enemies." He was also quoted to have committed to the rights of women. Enamullah Samangani, another leader of the Taliban's cultural commission, was quoted to have stated: "The Islamic Emirate doesn't want women to be victims...They should be in government structure according to Shariah law."

On 16 August, US President Biden made a lengthy statement on the current situation in Afghanistan. He said: "Our mission in Afghanistan was never supposed to have been nation building. It was never supposed to be creating a unified, centralized democracy. Our only vital national interest in Afghanistan remains today what it has always been: preventing a terrorist attack on American homeland...When I came into office, I inherited a deal that President Trump negotiated with the Taliban. Under his agreement, US forces would be out of Afghanistan by 1 May, 2021 — just a little over three months after I took office." He also stated: "I stand squarely behind my decision...I am President of the United States of America, and the buck stops with me." He also seems to be placing the responsibility on the Afghan leadership, when he said: "After 20 years, I've learned the hard way that there was never a good time to withdraw US forces...Afghanistan political leaders gave up and fled the country. The Afghan military collapsed, sometimes without trying to fight. If anything, the developments of the past week reinforced that ending US military involvement in Afghanistan now was the right decision."

On 16 August, Dmitry Zhirnov, Russia's Ambassador to Afghanistan, was quoted to have stated: "I judge by the first day of their control over Kabul. The impressions are good. The situation in Kabul is better now (under Taliban) than it was under Ashraf Ghani." Also on the same day, a spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said: "China respects Afghan people's right to decide their own destiny and future, and is willing to continue to develop friendship and cooperation with Afghanistan."

Issues at large

First, Taliban's rapid takeover of Afghanistan. It all started on 6 August in Zaranj, the capital of Nimroz province in southwest Afghanistan. In the next one week, all the major provincial capitals fell one by one – Herat, Kunduz, Mazar-e-Sharif and Kandahar. On 15 August, they captured Jalalabad and Kabul. The surprising element of the rapid takeover was not just the speed but the lack of opposition; the provinces and their capitals fell to the Taliban without any fight. For the Taliban, it was a walkover, contrary to what happened in the 1990s. Between November 1994 and September 1996, it had to fight hard for almost two years to capture Afghanistan. In 2021, it could do it in a week.

Second, the leadership crisis and the fleeing of the President. Ashraf Ghani made a bold statement on 14 August about not surrendering to the Taliban and not allowing the achievements of the previous decades to fall down. However, his fleeing the following day underlines the resolute of his leadership. On 11 August, following the fall of other major cities, Ghani flew to Mazar-e-Sharif to meet with Abdul Rashid Dostum. In retrospect, it appears, Ghani could not build a political consensus amongst the Afghan leaders. Nor he could lead the Afghan security forces effectively. During the middle of the Taliban's rapid advance, he fired the Afghan army chief. While talking about the Taliban's advances, one has to analyze why the Afghan political leadership failed to rise when the country demanded them the most.

Third, the melting of Afghan security forces. The US and its allies, over the last two decades, have spent billions of dollars on building a modern Afghan security force, which is believed to be more than 300,000. They were trained, equipped and provided with modern weapons and vehicles. Unfortunately, the Afghan security forces disappeared without putting up a fight when the Taliban entered the provincial capitals. Early reports indicate that there were multiple deals between the local commanders of the Afghan security forces and the Taliban. Others report the morale was down ever since US President Biden announced the withdrawal. A comparison with how Ahmad Shah Massoud fought the Taliban during 1994-96, with less external support should be useful. Massoud also finally gave up Kabul, but after putting up

a fight.

Fourth, the melting of the militias. Besides the Afghan security forces, there were numerous militias led by warlords in the north, west and east of Afghanistan. Ismail Khan in Herat, and Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Muhammad Noor in Mazar-e-Sharif are a few to name, who were known for their military acumen, militia support, and the anti-Taliban sentiment. Ismail Khan was captured by the Taliban in Herat; Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Muhammad Noor were reported to have fled Mazar-e-Sharif into Uzbekistan. According to early reports, the Taliban have agreed to Ismail Khan to continue to govern Herat. It appears that the militias that were pro-government until a week earlier, also have entered into tactical deals with the Taliban.

Fifth, the chaos and calm in Afghanistan, following the Taliban takeover. The international media focussed on what happened in the Kabul airport following the takeover, with multiple videos showing people wanting to get out of Afghanistan by clinging into aircrafts that are leaving Kabul. In few cities, there were reports about protests against the Taliban. For example, the protests in Jalalabad. The Taliban came down ruthlessly on these protestors. On the other hand, there are also reports on how the cities including Kabul, are getting ready for the Taliban rule. Sixth, the Taliban promises. While it has promised women's rights and even asked them to get back to work, there are suspicions. According to initial reports and statements, there is a difference between how the senior Taliban leaders have made statements on women rights and how reports and interviews of the Taliban commanders on the ground reflect a different position. The majority responses to the Taliban's promises so far has been cynical, keeping the old record, and the differences between the Taliban leaders and its commanders.

Seventh, local opposition to the Taliban. When the Taliban was capturing city after city without any resistance, the citizens mobilized in Kabul to vent out their anger against it. As could be seen from what happened in Jalalabad, there was a protest against the Taliban's return. However, as of now, they seem to be isolated events, than a common sentiment against the Taliban amongst the population. Will they come to the streets to protest against the Taliban remains to be seen.

Eighth, Biden's resolve to complete the withdrawal. His statement on 16 August underlines the following: taking responsibility for the decision to withdraw; its finality; his decision as a follow up to the previous administration's deal with the Taliban in 2020; the objectives of the US in Afghanistan having met, following the disruption of al Qaeda; and the inability of the Afghan leadership to come together and build a new Afghanistan.

Ninth, the Chinese and Russian resolve to stay in Afghanistan. While all other embassies in Kabul are either leaving the city or reducing their footprints, China and Russia are doing the opposite. During the recent months/years, Moscow and Beijing, along with Islamabad, have engaged with the Taliban. In recent months, perhaps, both China and Russia were also getting ready for the Taliban's return in Afghanistan.

In perspective

First, the facts. Taliban has returned to Kabul after two decades. The Afghan government has failed to respond. The Afghan security forces have melted without a fight. The much-famed militias have decided to strike deals. Clearly, the Taliban has recaptured Afghanistan without any resistance. Second, the US and the other countries that have invested billions of dollars and sacrificed hundreds of their soldiers have decided to cut their losses and get out of Afghanistan. Third, both the above mean that the Afghans have been left to fend for themselves after so many promises. Two generations of Afghans would be facing the wrath of the Taliban now. Fourth, the nation-building process, and the idea of a liberal, moderate, democratic and inclusive Afghanistan are in tatters, as the Islamic Emirate returns.

The Taliban should pick up from where it left two decades ago; the rest of the world should hang its heads in shame of what it had failed to build in Afghanistan during the last two decades. Still, there are lessons to learn, if there is a willingness. Else, one could go along with the narrative of the Taliban's old and new international friends, that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan would be different this time. It would be wishful thinking. Taliban would not change its colours.

Afghanistan: Chaos continues in Kabul airport over evacuation, with threats of terror attacks

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 25 August 2021

In the news

On 23 August, the US Defence officials stated that the US military evacuated about 11,000 people from the Kabul airport in 24 hours, bringing the total to 37,000 since 14 August.

On 24 August, a spokesperson for the European Commission stated: "All the staff who needed to be evacuated have been evacuated." Similarly, other countries, including the UK, Canada, Japan, India, Turkey, Australia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Poland, and Switzerland have evacuated their nationals and Afghans who worked with them.

On 22 August, Biden stated that his administration might extend the 31 August deadline for removing all American troops from Afghanistan, promising that all evacuated Afghan allies will be given a home in the United States after they are screened and vetted at bases in other countries. On 24 August, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas stated: "Even if [the evacuation] goes on until 31 August or even a few days longer, it will not be enough to allow those who we, or the United States, want to fly out." Similarly, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said: "We are concerned about the deadline set by the United States on 31 August. Additional time is needed to complete ongoing operations."

On 23 August, Taliban spokespersons warned that the US troops staying beyond the agreed deadline of 31 August would be "extending occupation" and this would "provoke a reaction." They said: "It's a red line. President Biden announced that on 31 August, they would withdraw all their military forces. So, if they extend it, that means they are extending occupation while there is no need for that," adding, "If the US or UK were to seek additional time to continue evacuations - the answer is no. Or there would be consequences."

Issues at large

First, the chaotic evacuation scenes at the

Kabul Airport. Since the Taliban's takeover, foreign governments have tried to get their citizens and affiliated Afghan nationals out of Afghanistan while thousands of Afghans have gathered at Kabul airport in hopes of an evacuation. . The chaotic scenes outside the Kabul Airport have produced images of panic and desperation showing massive crowds of Afghans pressed up against a barbed-wire fence with children and women at the front crying for help. Additionally, there have been horrific scenes of people hanging onto departing planes. According to media reports, several people have been killed while others have been injured at the Kabul airport in stampedes.

Second, not all foreign governments are evacuating. While the US and most European countries have begun evacuating from Afghanistan, several other countries, including Pakistan, China and Russia, have not done the same. Additionally, the people being evacuated include foreign government staff and aid agency workers along with Afghan residents who have worked with these governments or their agencies.

Third, the withdrawal deadline. With the evacuation process far from being completed, the question of whether the withdrawal deadline of 31 August will be extended has been raised. In this light, several countries have called for the extension of the deadline, particularly the G7 countries that were scheduled to deliberate on the matter. However, the extension is a dilemma given that the Taliban has already issued a warning on the same.

In perspective

First, the evacuation process was bound to be disorderly. With the deadline for withdrawal soon emerging and the Taliban's offensive and subsequent takeover, the evacuation process is likely to get complicated. With the evacuations still far from completion, countries are bound to facing more challenges.

Second, the focus has shifted from the Taliban's takeover to the situation at Kabul Airport. Over the last week, the horrid scenes at the Kabul Airport have preceded the issue over the Taliban's takeover. Additionally, the situation at the Kabul Airport has reinforced fears that the withdrawal would aggravate the already deteriorated security situation.

Third, rehabilitation of affiliated Afghan nationals post evacuation. Several countries have pledged to provide sanctuary for Afghans. However, with no logistics, it remains uncertain where they will be rehabilitated initially and their lives post-evacuation.

Afghanistan: The US completes its evacuation amid drone and terrorist attacks

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 1 September 2021

In the news

On 30 August, Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of the military's Central Command announced that the US has completed its military withdrawal and evacuation from Afghanistan. He said: "Tonight's withdrawal signifies both the end of the military component of the evacuation, but also the end of the nearly 20-year mission that began in Afghanistan shortly after 11 September 2001." On 26 August, the Islamic State in Khorasan Province, ISKP (ISIS-K) carried out a deadly attack outside Kabul airport which killed at least 175 civilians and 13 US soldiers and several injured. The ISKP said that its suicide bombers singled out "translators and collaborators with the American army" in the attacks.

On 29 August, the US forces launched a drone strike in Kabul which killed a suicide car bomber suspected of preparing to attack the airport. The strike was the second carried out by US forces since the Islamic State suicide bomber struck the airport. In response to the attack, President Joe Biden said: "This strike was not the last," adding, "Those who carried out this attack, as well as anyone who wishes America harm, know this: we will not forgive. We will not forget. We will hunt you down and make you pay."

On 30 August, the United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution on the situation in Afghanistan. The resolution demanded that Afghanistan not be used to threaten or attack any nation or shelter terrorists. The resolution was adopted after 13 Council members voted in favour, while permanent members Russia and China abstained from the voting.

Issues at large

First, end of the US's 20-year occupation. The US, along with the allied forces, have waged war for 20 years with the sole purpose of defeat terrorists in Afghanistan. The war has cost over USD two trillion and claimed more than 170,000 lives. Now, post the withdrawal, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken has stated: "A new chapter of America's engagement with Afghanistan has begun," adding, "It's one in which we will lead with our diplomacy. The military mission is over." Second, the reaction from the international community. The reactions and responses to the Afghan issue have been divided. While the western powers are critical of the situation, countries like China and Russia have stood behind the Taliban. Meanwhile, as most countries are moving out of Kabul, the evacuations have taken a disorderly path, unlike what was promised.

Third, the threat of ISKP. The group has been responsible for some of the worst attacks in Afghanistan in the recent past, carrying out attacks in mosques, public squares, educational centres and hospitals. In the first quarter of 2021, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan recorded 77 attacks that were claimed by or attributed to ISKP. The recent attack highlights the fact that the group continues to be a threat to Afghanistan and the region. Additionally, the bitter rivalry between the Taliban and ISKP and ISIS will be a major challenge to the stability and security the Taliban promise to provide for Afghans.

In perspective

First, the threat of terrorism with the reactivation of sleeper cells. The attack carried out by the ISKP shows that the group's sleeper cells in the region have been reactivated and that the group has strengthened its positions in and around Kabul. Thus, contrary to the statements made by the Biden administration previously on the success of the 'War on Terror' and the main objective of ensuring that Afghanistan would not be a launching pad for terrorism had been achieved, the threats of terrorism continue.

Second, justifying the 20-year occupation by the US and allied forces. Twenty years later, Afghanistan is being handed over to who the US and allies saw as a threat. Although the

occupation can be justified by giving Afghans a shot at democracy and freeing many women to pursue education and careers, however, has failed in the sole purpose of combating terrorism.

Third, the future of Afghanistan. This new era for Afghanistan will be different politically, economically and socially. Taliban has gained international legitimacy; however, the group does not enjoy absolute power in Afghanistan. Economically, Afghanistan will now need to fend for itself with international aid and assistance largely being cut. Socially, Afghanistan is going to witness challenges, no doubt; however, one hopes it would not be a repeat of the past.

Afghanistan: Taliban announces interim government, claims control of Panjshir but resistance forces

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 8 September 2021

In the news

On 6 September, the Taliban claimed to have captured the Panjshir Valley, raising their flag over the last Afghan provincial capital which was not under their control. The Taliban's spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said: "Panjshir Province completely fell to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," adding, "with this victory and latest efforts our country has come out of the whirlpool of the war and our people will have a happy life in peace, liberty and freedom."

The opposition group, the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRFA), disputed that claim, stating that its forces were still positioned strategically across the Panjshir Valley and maintained that they would fight. NRFA commander Ahmad Massoud said: "We are in Panjshir and our Resistance will continue," he added, "the national resistance forces are ready to immediately stop the war to achieve a lasting peace if the Taliban cease their attacks and military operations in Panjshir and Andarab, and hope to hold a large meeting with scholars and reformers, and continue discussions and talks."

On 7 September, the Taliban announced an interim government declaring Afghanistan as

an "Islamic Emirate." Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund was named to lead the council of ministers and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar was named as the acting deputy leader of the council of ministers. Sirajuddin Haqqani was named as acting minister of the interior, while Mawlawi Muhammad Yaqoob was named acting defence minister. Announcing the interim government, Mujahid said: "We're not a tribal force," adding, "We hope all countries in the world will recognize the legitimacy of our government and our Islamic regime."

Issues at large

First, the fall of Panjshir. Unlike in the 1990s, the Taliban had captured the provinces to the north of Panjshir, thus restricting the Northern Alliance to control of its supply line of arms, ammunition, fighters, food, and fuel to the resistance. Additionally, with the lack of support from the US and its allies, the resistance lost key assistance in its battle against the Taliban.

Second, resistance to continue. Although Panjshir remained the only holdout for the resistance forces, both Massoud and former Vice-President Amrullah Saleh have vowed to continue the resistance. Massoud previously stated: "The Taliban is not a problem for the Afghan people alone. Under Taliban control, Afghanistan will without doubt become ground zero of radical Islamist terrorism; plots against democracies will be hatched here once again." This comes after the failed talks were held between the Taliban and the resistance forces, seeking devolution of power to the provinces and inclusion of all ethnic groups in the new government. Meanwhile, peaceful protests by women, unconnected to the armed resistance in Panjshir, have taken place across the province.

Third, the Taliban's caretaker government. The formation of the new government comes after it was postponed twice because the group struggled to shape an inclusive administration acceptable both internally and externally. The initial names of the interim government did not include any non-Taliban, non-Haqqani Network stakeholders. Thus, though appearing to be a monolith while fighting the war, in the end, the most serious challenge for the Afghan Taliban will be to maintain unity within their ranks.

In perspective

First, the last pocket of the resistance. The Panjshir fighting has been the most prominent resistance to the Taliban, with the fall of Panjshir there remains no organized resistance in Afghanistan. If the Taliban manages to keep Panjshir under control, it would be a representation of the group's offensive and return to power. However, although the odds are against the resistance fighters, the battle has not been lost yet. Massoud along with the resistance forces will continue to fight back against the Taliban.

Second, the Taliban retreats to its old system. The Taliban's interim government highlights the fact that the group believes in a 'Taliban-led- Taliban-owned government.' Thus, proving that the group is still undecided on the idea of 'inclusion.' Additionally, the Taliban's path ahead is a challenging one as it grapples with a growing humanitarian and economic crisis following the takeover of Kabul.

Afghanistan: UN warns of a mass humanitarian crisis, while donors pledge USD one billion in aid

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 15 September 2021

In the news

On 13 September, the United Nations warned that millions of Afghans could run out of food before the arrival of winter, and one million children are at risk of starvation and death if their immediate needs are not met. While speaking at a high-level UN conference convened to address the crisis, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said: "The people of Afghanistan need a lifeline." He added: "Let us be clear: This conference is not simply about what we will give to the people of Afghanistan. It is about what we owe." At the end of the meeting, UN humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths announced that donor countries pledged a total of USD 1.2 billion in aid for Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis. Meanwhile, the World Food Programme (WFP) said: "A humanitarian crisis of incredible proportions is unfolding before our eyes. Conflict combined with drought and

covid-19 is pushing the people of Afghanistan into a humanitarian catastrophe."

On 14 September, Taliban's acting foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi welcomed the international community's humanitarian aid pledge for Afghanistan, stating: "We ensure that the aid will be distributed transparently to the people," and called on other countries and institutions to support Afghanistan in the development sector, in education and other areas.

On 8 September, China announced that it was offering USD 31 million worth of food and health supplies, including coronavirus vaccines, to Afghanistan. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that Afghanistan is "standing at the crossroads," as it faces a humanitarian crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic. On 12 September, Pakistan delivered another consignment of relief goods, including food and medical supplies, the fourth consignment of the relief goods to Afghanistan since the Taliban took over. Additionally, on 13 September, the United States announced nearly USD 64 million in additional humanitarian assistance for the people of Afghanistan, funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the US Department of State.

Issues at large

First, the impending humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Even before the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan has been impacted by multiple calamities, including severe drought and famine affecting a third of the country. The World Food Programme has warned that food supplies could start running out, pushing the 14 million food-insecure Afghans to the brink of starvation. Additionally, since 2021, more than 550,000 people have been displaced from their homes as the country's economy and health, education, and other services remain in shambles.

Second, the reluctance to provide humanitarian assistance. Afghanistan is one of the world's most aid-dependent countries, where donor countries have invested USD 65 billion in grants since 2002. The Taliban's return to power has triggering diplomatic isolation and cut off the international aid that drove a large portion of the Afghan economy. Although the

Taliban has tried to portray a reasonable outlook to the international community, the political uncertainty and suspicions over how the Taliban's rule have only complicated the matters, with the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other countries cut off Afghanistan's access to international funds.

Third, the logistic of aid distribution. The amount raised will go directly to or routed through the United Nations and non-governmental partner organizations still operating in the country and not to the Taliban. It is unclear how aid agencies and their workers will operate in the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, given that the Taliban could monitor and exert influence over aid agencies and humanitarian workers.

Fourth, aid as a political tool. Apart from maintaining diplomatic ties with the Taliban, countries like China and Pakistan are using financial aid to legitimize and strengthen the regime and using it as a means of legitimizing the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan.

In perspective

First, the expected humanitarian crisis. The impending humanitarian crisis is an inevitable situation, given that Afghanistan has been ravaged by decades-long wars. Thus, despite the politics around aid, Afghanistan was bound to face a massive humanitarian crisis. The international community cannot turn a blind eye to another war-induced humanitarian catastrophe.

Second, the Taliban's capacity to address the crisis. Despite the Taliban being more self-financed and is fed with assistance from countries like China and Pakistan, the group will not be able to manage the situation without foreign assistance. Additionally, those who will be affected continue to be the Afghans who are already in a dire state.

Pakistan: Imran Khan announces talks with the TTP factions

D. Suba Chandran, 7 October 2021

In the news

On 1 October, in an interview with a Turkish TV - TRT World, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan announced that his government is in talks with some of the TTP groups. He said: "Some of the Pakistani Taliban groups actually want to talk to our government...for some peace and reconciliation. And we are in talks with some of the groups...There are different groups which form the TTP and some of them want to talk to our government for peace. So, we are in talks with them. It's a reconciliation process."

To a question, whether the Afghan Taliban is helping on the above process, Imran Khan said: "Since the talks were taking place in Afghanistan, so in that sense, yes." To the question that the Pakistani Taliban would lay down the arms, Imran Khan said: "Yes. And then, we forgive them. They become normal citizens." He also said: "I do not believe in military solution. I'm anti-military solution. I always believe, as a politician, political dialogue is the way ahead." To the question why is the TTP targeting security forces, if they are negotiating for a political settlement, Imran said: "I think, that is just a spate of attacks. We are talking. We might not reach a conclusion or settlement at the end. But, we are talking."

Issues at large

First, the TTP terror in Pakistan. The Tehrik-i-Taliban-Pakistan (TTP), was founded post-American invasion of Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks in the US. Initially, formed as different tribal groups in the erstwhile Federally Administrated Tribal Agencies (FATA) of Pakistan, they came to unite under the TTP banner in 2007. Baitullah Mehsud became the first major leader of the TTP, though different tribal groups had their own leaders fighting the US forces and Pakistan (then under Gen Musharraf's regime). The TTP ran/runs a terror campaign within Pakistan; numerous political leaders from political parties were assassinated by it; a series of massive suicide attacks were launched across the country – from Khyber to Karachi.

Second, the divide within the TTP. The Pakistani Taliban was not a monolithic group. During the initial years, the TTP was led by

the Mehsud and Wazir tribes in North and South Waziristan agencies. Qari Hussain Mehsud, Hakimullah Mehsud, Wali ur Rehman, Hafiz Gul Bahadur, and Maulvi Nazir were some of the leaders of these two tribes. Though they fought under the TTP banner, there were differences within, and at times also fought against each other. Later it expanded to include other tribal agencies of the FATA. For example, the TNSM (Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi) from the Swat valley became a part of the TTP.

Third, the dialogue with the TTP. Though Imran Khan has been consistent on the idea of negotiating with the TTP, there is no consensus on the subject within Pakistan – either within or outside the Parliament. The Establishment considers the TTP as a major threat; the TTP had carried out major attacks against the security forces. And even during the recent weeks, when it is believed to be in talks with the government, there has been a series of attacks.

In perspective

The decision to talk with the TTP seems to be based on a personal conviction of Imran Khan, than a part of a well-planned process. He is also not clear about the endgame, as reflected by his statement that he "might not reach some sort of conclusion or settlement in the end." Second, the expectation that the TTP would lay down arms and "become normal citizens" is more of a hope, than based on an assessment at the ground level. Is the TTP, or sections of it, talking to the Imran government, without asking for anything in return? And where does the Establishment stand on this? These are two crucial questions that would decide the outcome of Imran's talks with the TTP.

Pakistan: A month-long ceasefire with the TTP

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 11 November 2021

In the news

On 8 November, Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry announced that a "complete ceasefire" had been reached between the government and the Tehreek-i-Taliban

Pakistan (TTP). The minister stated that talks between the government and the TTP were underway, stating: "the state's sovereignty, national security, peace in relevant areas and social and economic stability will be considered during the talks." Additionally, he added that the interim Afghan government had facilitated the negotiations.

Later, on 9 November, he reiterated: "There are various groups within TTP; there are [some] ideologues, while there are others who joined the organisation under compulsion. The state of Pakistan wants to give its citizens a chance if all of them, some of them or a fraction of them want to come back and show their allegiance to the Constitution of Pakistan." Meanwhile, TTP spokesperson Mohammad Khurasani confirmed that the ceasefire which will begin on 9 November would remain in place until 9 December, during which both sides will form a committee to continue talks.

Issues at large

First, Imran Khan's efforts to reach out to proscribed groups. Prime Minister Imran Khan in an interview with TRT World stated: "There are different groups which form the TTP and some of them want to talk to our government for peace. So, we are in talks with them. It's a reconciliation process," arguing that dialogue was the only solution and is willing to "forgive" the TTP if an agreement is reached. PM Khan has always maintained that he favours negotiations over military action because of which he has been criticised for being a sympathizer of the militants. Second, challenges in addressing the TTP issue. Dealing with the TTP comes with several challenges. The lack of national consensus because of the government's unilateral approach along with the divide over how the negotiations should take place are the main challenges currently. This in turn has caused an intense backlash from the opposition parties, civil society and media who believe that the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) is going soft of the TTP.

Third, TTP's track record. The group's network was initially dismantled to a large extent after military operations that were carried out in the country in recent years. However, isolated attacks claimed by the TTP in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan the targeting of

a high-security location has raised concerns of the TTP's resurgence. Additionally, the regroup within the group has also been concerning as the United Nations in a report addressed the activities of the TTP and noted the "reunification of splinter groups [of TTP]." Meanwhile, this is not the first time that the Pakistan government and the TTP have agreed to a ceasefire. Previously, in March 2014, a similar agreement was reached but it was short-lived as the Pakistan army launched a counterterrorist operation driving the group out.

In perspective

First, PM Khan's alternative strategy. PM Khan seems to believe in a softer approach while dealing in proscribed groups such as the TTP. Although this may not be the ideal approach to many, he may be trying to use an alternative approach to address the issue given that the multiple strategies of the past have mostly failed. Additionally, with the Afghan Taliban on board with the negotiation, there is probably a more viable for talks. Second, the ambiguity around the terms of negotiations has made the talks extremely controversial. Although this is not the first time Pakistan is trying to reach an agreement with the TTP, the group has once again only agreed to a short-term ceasefire, showing no indication that they are willing to lay down its arms and accept the Constitution. Besides this, TTP considers its beliefs and actions as the absolute truth and being righteous thus reaching common ground with groups will be extremely difficult. Additionally, given that the TTP has the blood of thousands of innocent Pakistanis on its hands, it will not be an easy task to gather public support for peace talks.

India: Electoral calculations prevail over farmers' concerns

Alok K Gupta, 25 November 2021

In the news

On 19 November, on the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that the three farm laws would be repealed. The decision came after one year of

massive protests by different farmers' organizations (especially from Punjab and Haryana) in and around Delhi, under the umbrella of Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM), since 26 November 2020, calling for the repeal of those laws. Modi claimed that though the farm laws were meant to strengthen the small farmers, all efforts of the government to convince them about the benefits had failed.

On the same day, the SKM welcomed the repeal but indicated that it would raise the other pending demands like legalization of Minimum Support Price (MSP). Meanwhile, those who supported laws called it an 'unfortunate decision' influenced by political considerations.

Issues at large

First, repeal as a tactical retreat. The announcement was a complete surprise as the government did not take any initiative over the recent past months. Eleven rounds of negotiations were held between the 29 representatives of farmer's unions and government ministers, in the initial stages of the protests; however, a stalemate continued after the last round in January 2021. Therefore, the government's announcement of annulment after nearly ten months, smacks of political compulsions and a strategic move rather than concerns for farmers' interests.

Second, confusing signals from and within the government. Especially when all the satraps of government were steadfastly insisting that the laws were good for farmers and would never be rolled back. How could government intentions melt from a tough stand? It means the government also knew that the laws were tuned more to protect interest of agri-businesses rather than farmers. Hence, they stand to lose before the farmers.

Third, protests and the political cost. The roll-back has been announced amidst impending elections in five States over next year. Elections in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh are already heating up which may have forced the government to take a U-turn. Punjab and UP are states with huge base of farmers, with the former being the core driving force of the agitation. Farmers from Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, also participated in the protests, and those from other states lent their support. Guru

Nanak Jayanti was chosen to underline concessions to Sikh communities. Hence, roll-back is motivated by escalating political costs.

Fourth, the government's efforts to decimate the protest. The government roped in police to remove the protestors unsuccessfully from Delhi-UP borders. Farmers, too, went on the back foot when internal dissensions erupted owing to the storming of Red Fort on 26 January 2020. All divisive political efforts were made to liquidate the protests. However, the farmers galvanized themselves with fresh energy to sustain the protest further. Roll-back of laws thus is more on account of electoral imperatives than concerns for farmers.

Fifth, the suspension of the laws. The Supreme Court had placed a stay on the implementation of the three laws on 12 January, which were promulgated as an ordinance on 5 June 2020. Hence these were in force for only 221 days. The government then imposed a stock limit under the Essential Commodities Act 1955. Hence, the announcement is immaterial as the laws were under suspension; yet a U-turn will help the government towards smooth conduct of the winter session of Parliament; and ensure mitigation of calculated electoral loss in the immediate future.

In perspective

Repeals seem to be a huge jolt to the government and cudgels into the hands of the opposition. First, agricultural marketing reforms have been pending for a long to facilitate farmers their due. The central government legislated on a state subject. Erstwhile attempts at reforming Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) Acts of the state had failed, which prompted the Centre to enact. Once again, the laws have been rolled back. Second, this is the second roll-back of this government, the first being the Land Acquisition Reforms of 2015. Both were related to farmers. It may motivate CAA and Asset monetization. Third, these laws were the third tranche under Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan to support ailing economy during COVID 19, according to the government. Hence, a big jolt to Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan too. Congress-I, Trinamool, AAP, and others who lent their support were

being castigated as against national interest will now use their narratives of the ruling party being anti-farmer to capitalize on popular sentiments.

Peace and Conflict in 2021

Central Asia, Middle East and Africa

Armenia: Demonstrations increase as Armenia PM slams ‘coup attempt’

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 4 March 2021

In the news

On 1 March, protesters stormed a government building in the Armenian capital, Yerevan, demanding PM Nikol Pashinyan’s resignation, escalating a months-long political crisis over his handling of the recent war with Azerbaijan. On the same day, Pashinyan said he would be ready to hold snap parliamentary elections if the opposition agreed to certain conditions.

On 25 February, the General Staff of Armenia’s armed forces joined the opposition called for Pashinyan’s resignation with the Defence Ministry spokesman Samvel Asatryan stating, “Due to the current situation, the armed forces of the Republic of Armenia demand the resignation of the prime minister and government of the Republic of Armenia, at the same time warning against the use of force against the people who died defending the homeland and Artsakh.” Pashinyan responded calling the statement a “coup attempt.”

On 27 February, President Armen Sarkisian refused to sign off on the dismissal of the head of the country’s general staff whose firing by Pashinyan prompted the political crisis. Sarkisian said the move was unconstitutional and that the army should be kept out of politics.

Issues at large

First, Pashinyan’s struggle to maintain his position since the war in 2020. Protests broke out in Armenia in November 2020 after Pashinyan signed a Russian-brokered cease-fire that brought an end to the six-week war with Azerbaijan over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. The forces aligning against Pashinyan are growing by the day, and those publicly demanding his resignation now

include the country’s president, the two opposition parties in parliament, all three former post-Soviet leaders of Armenia, the leaders of the two major Armenian churches, the academic council of Yerevan State University, and several provincial governors and mayors. Despite the pressure, Pashinyan has refused to step down and defended the peace deal as a painful but necessary move that prevented Azerbaijan from overrunning the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Second, the looming constitutional/institutional crisis. The current political crisis has pitted the Prime Minister and President against each other, this is the first such decree Sarkisian has refused to sign in during his tenure with Pashinyan. Similarly, there has been a deepening rift between the Prime Minister and the military who have criticised Pashinyan for allegedly being too soft on certain issues.

Third, the rising opposition in Armenia. Although the opposition parties failed to gather a quorum of lawmakers to vote Pashinyan out, a coalition of opposition groups, including the former ruling Republican Party, have staged opposition protests in the capital with tents lining the streets causing tensions to surge.

In perspective

With winter receding, the protests are likely to move from being dormant to active. However, an attempt to take power away from Pashinyan and his elected government would be unprecedented for the republic of Armenia.

While a wide swath of Armenian society now believes Pashinyan should resign, the more difficult question is that who should replace him? Although the opposition has risen to prominence in recent months, its weak position has continued to enable Pashinyan to stay in power. Conversely, snap elections could provide a path out of the deadlock, yet Pashinyan’s chances of winning are slim. His approval ratings have fallen from over 80 per cent after the country’s peaceful revolution in 2018, to just about 30 per cent.

Israel: Benny Gantz approves a new settlement in West Bank

Lakshmi V Menon, 21 January 2021

In the news

On 17 January 2021, Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz approved the construction of approximately 800 new settlement housing units in the West Bank. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had previously promised the same. To offset a potential blowback, Gantz also approved some preliminary steps for Palestinian construction projects. Settler leaders, such as Samaria Regional Council head Yossi Dagan, hailed the move as a "historic achievement" and called for the recognition of homes in the illegal outposts.

On the same day, the Palestinian Authority called the move "a pre-emptive attempt" to undermine the Biden administration's efforts to "relaunch the stalled peace process". Meanwhile, Israeli anti-settlement campaign/monitoring group Peace Now, Jordan, Egypt and UK condemned the hurried move. European Union hinted it may jeopardize the 'Abraham Accords'.

Issues at large

First, Netanyahu's expansionist policies. On 28 May 2020, Netanyahu publicized his commitment to annex the occupied West Bank. On 14 October, Israel approved 2,166 new settler homes across West Bank. It signals Israel's dismissal of Palestinian statehood. Settlements are considered illegal under international law and are considered a hurdle for a two-state solution. Palestinians identify the swelling settler population (over 500,000 people) as an obstacle for achieving independence.

Second, the last-minute push. The Israel-friendly Trump administration will be leaving the office on 20 January. With a Congress that has been deeply divided between Democrats and Republicans, Biden is expected to restore the US stance against settlement construction. The recent approvals seem to be Netanyahu's way of utilizing the pro-settlement Trump administration's final days.

Third, the normalizations. After decades of conflict, Arab states such as the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman and Morocco normalized relations with Israel by concluding the US-sponsored Abraham accords in the latter end of 2020. Sudan also signed an agreement with Israel. The settlement approval makes it difficult for the Arab signatories to justify their normalization decisions.

In perspective

First, annexation policies, of which settlement construction is a part of, will redraw the eastern frontiers of Israel and push the asymmetric conflict into novel territory. As per reports, the earmarked areas would encompass 30 per cent of the West Bank. Although over 4.5 per cent of Palestinians living in West Bank, would come under the annexed territory, Israeli sovereignty will not apply to Palestinians. The latter would only be subject to Palestinian laws and Israeli military orders.

Second, for decades, US administrations and the global community opposed settlement construction. But the Trump administration derailed. Instead of criticizing Israeli settlement announcements, Washington in 2018 announced that it no longer recognized the illegality of Israeli settlements under international law. Thus, during Trump's tenure, Israel approved over 27,000 settler homes' construction. Besides, on 14 January, the Palestinian Authority's head Mahmoud Abbas announced Palestine's first national vote since 2006. If Biden restores Washington's traditional stand, the elections may worsen the impending friction between Biden and Netanyahu.

Third, the settlement construction may make normalizing ties with Israel harder for other interested Arab states. Particularly in the absence of the Trump administration that on 16 January termed UAE and Bahrain as "major security partners"; an incentive for Israeli normalization. However, as Palestinian statehood has lost its charm in the Arab world, the new approvals may prove inconsequential for further Arab-Israeli normalizations.

Yemen: Joe Biden's new strategy should aim at ending the disastrous war

Rashmi B R, 11 February 2021

In the news

On 8 February, the Houthi rebels launched an offensive on Ma'rib, a city in the northern part of Yemen, and one of the few strongholds of the government. The attacks were launched from three fronts and continued despite strong resistance from the government forces, allied tribesmen, and the air cover provided by the Arab coalition. The clash resulted in the death of at least 20 soldiers and few Houthi fighters.

On 4 February, President Biden announced that the US is "ending all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arm sales." On 5 February, the US State Department informed the Congress that it will reverse the Trump administration's decision to declare Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization.

On 7 February, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths began his two-day visit to Iran to meet Iranian foreign minister and officials, to discuss the conflict in Yemen.

Issues at large

First, the shift in the US policy under Biden. The Trump administration, though not directly involved in the war, explicitly extended its support to the Saudi Arabia-led Arab coalition, primarily through increased arms sales, circumventing the opposition the US Congress. It also did not condemn Saudi Arabia for committing human rights violations and war offences in Yemen and in other parts of the region. Continuing the policy against Iran and its proxies, the Trump administration had listed the Houthis as a terrorist organization. Under Joe Biden, there is a shift in the US policy towards Yemen. In his address at the State Department, he remarked that the war in Yemen must end. In this regard, he appointed Timothy Lenderking, a veteran diplomat, to cooperate with the UN and "all the parties to the conflict to push for a diplomatic resolution." Nevertheless, the State Department condemned and called upon the

rebels to halt the offensive and violence that is impacting civilians in Yemen.

Second, the long-drawn war in Yemen and the domestic political crisis. The rebels and the government forces are in a long-drawn conflict and violent clashes continue, as the Houthis remain strong despite stiff resistance from the Arab coalition. The government, despite the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement, lacks decisive power enough to control the rebellion.

Third, the humanitarian crisis. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project, the relentless fighting in Yemen has inflicted severe damage, killing more than 110,000 people of which more than 12,500 are civilians. According to the UN, 80 per cent of the population in the country depend on assistance for survival. It also issued strong warnings of an impending famine that will push Yemen into a crisis, from where revival would be nearly impossible.

In perspective

First, the renewed efforts in Yemen to end the war. The government representatives and the Houthis participated in the UN-sponsored peace talks in December 2018. The talks failed and any further negotiations were not held despite repeated efforts from the UN. Biden's announcement to end support to Saudi Arabia and Martin Griffiths' visit to Iran, is now seen as the first step towards reviving the efforts to end the conflict. Griffiths stated that his priorities include an agreement between the parties on a "nationwide ceasefire, urgent humanitarian measures and the resumption of the political process."

Second, the measures Biden ought to take. The assurance on the reversal of Trump's policy on Yemen has revived hopes on beginning the peace process. By appointing an envoy and announcing a review of assistance to Saudi Arabia, Biden has provided space for diplomacy. However, though his address to the State Department calls for ending the war, it does not provide a solution. The questions of how and what kind of assistance to Saudi Arabia, the US plans to end, must be answered through definitive policies.

Third, the question of responsibility. The war will not end unless the Houthis and the government; the Arab coalition and Iran arrive

at a consensus on the issue. The regional countries and other western powers that indirectly support the primary parties to the conflict must consider the humanitarian crisis that is unfolding.

Yemen: Saudi Arabia announces ceasefire

Poornima B, 25 March 2021

In the news

On 23 March, the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia announced a ceasefire proposal to end the war in Yemen. The terms of the ceasefire include the following: reopening of the airport in Sanaa, allowing regional and international flights to operate; permitting the import of food and fuel through the Hodeidah port; and, restarting negotiations between the Yemeni government and the Houthis.

The Houthis have dismissed the proposal citing there is "nothing new." In April 2020, Saudi Arabia had called for a ceasefire amid the coronavirus outbreak, which the warring parties eventually violated. Following the recent proposal, some Iranian news agency - Mehr News reported that Saudi Arabia was "forced" to suggest a ceasefire, underlining that the Houthis have the upper hand in Yemen's conflict.

Issues at large

First, the unending war with a serious humanitarian crisis. The war in Yemen has been ongoing since 2014; it has intensified with the involvement of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with material backing from the US. Over the years, Yemen's situation has become the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. Yemen has witnessed millions of people displaced, a cholera outbreak, a devastating flood, widespread poverty and food shortage leading to massive malnutrition among children.

Second, a devastating war with no clear objectives. Neither the Saudi-backed coalition forces nor the Houthis seem to be having a clear political objective. There seems to be no clear winner after seven years of war. Previous peace efforts have had only limited scope and

have not been inclusive. The war is seen as a proxy war between Tehran and Riyadh.

Third, the different perspectives. The Houthis see the war as an act of aggression by Riyadh. Contrarily, the Saudi Kingdom sees it as a civil conflict, nonetheless acknowledging the invisible hand of Iran. This clash of narratives will question the credibility of the ceasefire. The southern separatists also do not seem to be trusting the Houthis in adhering to the ceasefire regulations. This discord could interfere with the initiative.

Fourth, the Houthis on a different leaf. While Riyadh has allowed for partial removal of the blockade on the Hodeidah port, the Houthis have demanded unconditional and complete removal. They also want the release of 14 ships that are under the control of the Saudi-led coalition. The discrepancies in the demands and compromises could render the ceasefire ineffective.

In perspective

As the Biden administration has clarified its position concerning the Yemen conflict, withdrawing its support to Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom seeks to refine its image in front of its most important western ally. Mohammed bin Salman's Yemen policy has been severely criticized; he seems to have realized the need for course correction and not further affect Riyadh's ties with Washington.

Unlike the previous time, this ceasefire proposal could gain more traction as there is active US intervention in the Yemeni crisis, something that was underplayed by President Trump. Lack of confidence between the parties, whose involvement is necessary for the ceasefire, is a potential hurdle. Saudi Arabia will be expected to step up its incentives to the Houthis to execute the ceasefire. The ceasefire, in turn, can be an efficient confidence-building mechanism that can cater to further peace efforts to resolve the conflict and tend to the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

The Gulf Reconciliation: Blockade against Qatar lifted but the GCC crisis far from over

Poornima B, 7 January 2021

In the news

On 5 January, the Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani headed to Al-Ula in Saudi Arabia, accepting an invitation from the Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz to attend the 41st Gulf Summit. On 4 January, the Abu Samra border between Qatar and Saudi Arabia was opened after more than three years of blockade.

The summit witnessed the 'solidarity and stability' deal (also referred to as the Al-Ula statement) that calls for the end of the diplomatic blockade with Qatar and paves the way to wider negotiation space to extinguish the tensions with Doha. The deal was welcomed by several members of the Arab World as well as Iran. Egypt also signed a reconciliation agreement with Qatar during the summit.

The Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, under whose oversee the blockade was put in place in 2017, stated that he hopes to see a unified effort towards confronting challenges in the region, most prominently, the threat posed by Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programme.

Issues at large

First, the failure of the Qatar blockade. In 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt imposed a diplomatic and trade blockade on Qatar. The quartet accused Doha of its alleged support for terrorist outfits, its close ties with Iran and Al Jazeera's role in exacerbating the Arab Spring crisis. However, Qatar denied the allegations. Since the blockade's imposition, none of the objectives for which it was imposed, could be achieved against Qatar.

Second, the emergence of a strong Qatar. With the assertive policies steered by Emir al-Thani, Qatar has emerged as a more resilient state since the blockade. It had gradually adapted to the regional conditions and has devised ways to sustain its economy despite the blockade.

Qatar has been continuing to have a working relationship with Iran.

Third, a divided GCC. Diverging interests and geopolitical imperatives of the concerned parties had delayed an opportune moment for the dispute to be resolved. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was rendered inefficient and weak as the members stood divided. Kuwait and the US have consistently used their diplomatic resources to bring the rift to an end.

Fourth, the US policies towards the Middle East. It has been consistent with bringing all its allies - including Israel, Saudi Arabia and Qatar on the same page. The lifting of blockade should be seen as a part of the American pressure.

In perspective

Despite the signing of the reconciliation deal and the quartet's willingness to mend their relations with Qatar, much has to be dealt with to comprehensively cement the GCC's fissure. MBS has come to realize Iran a bigger threat that needs to be resisted, and Gulf Arab solidarity an instrumental for this purpose. The Middle East's recent geopolitics has been dynamic, with Arab states like the UAE and Bahrain normalizing relations with Israel.

Tensions between the UAE and Qatar have been much deeper. In November 2020, the Foreign Minister of the UAE said that the Gulf reconciliation with Qatar was not even a priority. The two Gulf states were at loggerheads since 2018 over a racial discrimination case at the International Court of Justice. Moreover, Doha had suspected UAE's hands in using Israeli spyware to hack information about Al Jazeera journalists.

Qatar stands firmly determined about the Palestinian cause by not agreeing to establish formal relations with Israel until a two-state solution is arrived at. While the reconciliation is set to improve the economic and diplomatic integration in the GCC, strong divergences of interest between Qatar and the other Persian Gulf Arab states over significant regional issues and concerns set the target point for complete reconciliation very high.

Iran: On the first anniversary of Soleimani's assassination, Tehran decides to enrich uranium

Lakshmi V Menon, 7 January 2021

In the news

On 1 January, Iran organized an event that kick-started ten days of commemoration to mark the first anniversary of the US drone strike in Baghdad that killed top Iranian general Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi militia leader and the deputy chief of the Iran-aligned Popular Mobilisation Forces, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. At the event, Soleimani's successor vowed that the "path of resistance won't change". Senior officials from Iran-aligned organizations from Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad also spoke at the event.

Later, on 4 January, Tehran announced its decision to resume enriching its uranium stock to 20 per cent at the Fordo facility. Meanwhile, Iraq marked the first anniversary of the US drone strike in Baghdad that killed Soleimani and Muhandis. Thousands of mourners marched in the mock funeral procession leading to the Baghdad airport where the strike had taken place. The head of Hashd al-Shaabi, Faleh al-Fayyad, vowed retaliation against the attackers and demanded that the US troops leave Iraq.

Issues at large

First, the rising US-Iran tensions. Ever since the attack that brought Tehran and Washington to the brink of war, bilateral tensions have been rising. In its letter to the United Nations Security Council on 31 December, Iran condemned the US "military adventurism" in the Sea of Oman and the Gulf, and Washington's dispensing of "fake information, baseless accusations and threatening rhetoric" against Tehran. While Khomeini renewed his revenge vow, the US flew two nuclear-capable B-52 bombers over the Gulf to send a deterrence message to Tehran.

Second, the attack ratcheted up regional tensions. Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's Revolutionary Guard's elite Quds Force, was responsible for Iran's foreign operations requiring him to shuttle between Lebanon, Iraq

and Syria frequently. The killing of the two men undoubtedly worsened the Saudi-Iran schism in the Middle East.

Third, Iran's uranium enrichment is its most significant breach of 2015 deal to end nuclear sanctions. Enriched uranium is used for making reactor fuel and nuclear bombs. Although Tehran has previously insisted that its nuclear programme is peaceful, it has rolled back on various commitments as a retaliation to the crumbling US economic sanctions reinstated by President Donald Trump in 2018 following his exit from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

In perspective

Three issues need to be looked into - Iran's actions/strategies, regional developments either triggering or following the first, the US response under the new President. Joe Biden has said he would consider reviving the JCPOA provided Iran returns to complete compliance and adheres to further negotiations. Any extreme or erratic US move could significantly dent Middle Eastern politics. Meanwhile, domestic concerns regarding potential escalation or security deterioration are rife in Iran and Iraq.

Mali: Tensions simmer as militants target French soldiers once again

Apoorva Sudhakar, 7 January 2021

In the news

On 4 January, a North Africa branch of Al Qaeda, known as the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM), claimed the IED attacks on an armoured vehicle in Mali's eastern region. In the attack, two French soldiers were killed, and one was injured. The two soldiers were on an intelligence operation when the attack occurred.

The attack comes barely a week after three French soldiers were hit in a similar IED blast on 29 December 2020. Like the latest incident, the three deceased soldiers were involved in an operation to curb the threat of armed rebels in western Africa.

In the latter half of 2020, several attacks were targeted at French military bases in the country. With the latest attack, the death toll of French soldiers deployed in Mali has gone up to 50 since France intervened to fight against armed rebels in 2013.

Issues at large

First, a brief background on the instability in Mali. Since June 2020, Mali has witnessed anti-government protests, a military coup, and a transitional government, largely led by former military officials. However, Mali has been mired in political instability since 2012. Simultaneously, the Islamic State started cementing itself in the West African region. At the same time, Mali has been the recent epicentre of Islamist extremism, Burkina Faso and Niger are also feeling its impact.

Second, the rising anti-French sentiment. In its latest statement, the GSIM listed reasons behind its attacks on the French personnel: France's military presence in the region, recent publications of the Charlie Hebdo cartoon of Prophet Muhammad. The group also resented Macron's defence of the same under the banner of freedom of expression. This resentment has been resonated with by other Islamic countries across the world.

Third, the external presence in Mali. In 2013, France led its first intervention in Mali against Islamist insurgency and currently, there are more than 5000 French troops in the country. In December 2020, the UK announced its decision to deploy 300 British troops as a part of the UN peacekeeping force in Mali. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, Mali has nearly 14,000 foreign troops from 56 countries.

Fourth, the rivalry between Islamist groups in the region. While threats from one extremist group are imminent, the rivalry between different groups adds to the region's instability. For example, the GSIM and the Islamic State in Greater Sahara have had frequent violent clashes. The IS, critical of other terrorist organizations in the region, including GSIM, Boko Haram, said these groups are not deadly enough to destabilize the region. On the other hand, the GSIM criticizes the IS for targeting civilians and has equated the IS with "French occupiers and criminal militias."

In perspective

Despite the French presence in the region, militant attacks against civilians and security forces in the western Africa region have increased in recent times. Further, the IS made a gradual but strong emergence in the region while security operations weakened its presence in the Middle East, thereby signalling a shift in terrorist organizations' operational base.

Central African Republic: France intervenes as thousands flee election-related violence in the count

Apoorva Sudhakar, 14 January 2021

In the news

On 9 January, French fighter jets flew over the Central African Republic (CAR). According to the office of the French President, the flights were flown in at the request of the CAR President and with the permission of the UN as tensions escalated amid the elections in 2020.

On 8 January, the UNHCR spokesperson said more than 30,000 people from CAR had fled to its neighbouring countries amid the election-related violence. The Democratic Republic of the Congo accounted for the highest number of people fleeing as 24,196 people had crossed over into the country, followed by Cameroon, Chad and the Republic of Congo.

Further, the spokesperson said that within CAR, 1,85,000 people retreated to the forests since 15 December 2020 to escape the violence; of this, 62,000 remain "newly displaced" while the rest returned home.

Issues at large

First, a brief background on the conflict in CAR. The current instability in CAR has its roots in 2013 when Seleka forces, formed majorly by Muslim groups, staged a coup and removed the then-President François Bozizé from power in 2013. Following this, Christian forces under the banner of "anti-balaka" forces, retaliated leading to a protracted conflict. Though a peace agreement was

signed between the government and rebel groups, violence has persisted, and armed groups control two-thirds of CAR.

Second, the disputed elections of 2020. In December 2020, CAR held its presidential elections; Faustin-Archange Touadera, who was elected president in 2016, won his second term. Before the elections, Bozizé formed a rebel coalition with other presidential candidates after the Constitutional Court rejected his candidacy. After Touadera was re-elected, the opposition coalition has been citing irregularities in the elections and demanded the annulment of the results.

Third, the deteriorating security conditions. According to the Election Commission, 800 of the 5,408 polling stations did not operate on the election day due to security threats. Prior to the elections, and after the polling, rebels captured several towns fuelling the CAR's already tense atmosphere. According to the UN, one-fifth of the CAR population is displaced due to the protracted conflict and half of the population is dependent on humanitarian assistance.

Fourth, the external intervention in CAR. Russia and Rwanda had deployed their troops to support the UN mission in monitoring the election process in CAR. Similarly, the Touadera's latest request for French intervention adds to increased external powers in the region.

In perspective

First, mere intervention by external powers will not stem the conflict in CAR. The scale of humanitarian loss over the years reflects the failure of the state in addressing the conflict. Further, troops' deployment by different countries did not keep the rebels from seizing towns and reigniting civilian displacement and its spillover to neighbouring countries, which have their own conflicts to address.

Second, France's latest intervention in CAR comes amid its security operations in other African countries like Mali and Libya. Further, France has had a series of interventions in CAR since the 2013 coup. However, French operations have not yielded the results necessary to root out the violence - neither in CAR, nor in Mali or other countries.

Sudan: Another intertribal massacre in another African country

Apoorva Sudhakar, 21 January 2021

In the news

On 18 January, 55 people were massacred and 37 injured as clashes between the Arab Rizeigat tribe and the non-Arab Fallata tribe ensued in Sudan's South Darfur state. A week before this, members of the Fallata tribe had allegedly killed a person from the Rizeigat tribe.

On the same day, the UN Secretary-General condemned a similar attack in West Darfur. It urged the Sudanese government to ensure that the National Plan for Civilian Protection was in place and bring an end to the violence.

On 16 January, a scuffle between two men belonging to different ethnic groups spiralled into deadly violence which left at least 129 dead (as of 19 January), including armed forces personnel, and 198 injured in the West Darfur state. One of the men, belonging to an Arab tribe, was stabbed to death resulting in retaliatory attacks on the non-Arab Masalit tribe.

On the same day, Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok said he had directed a high-profile delegation to visit West Darfur to review the situation.

Issues at large

First, the nature of inter-tribal conflicts in Africa. The current instances of conflict in Darfur between Arab tribes and non-Arab tribes are often traced to a lack of access to resources. For example, in recent months, the Arab herders and non-Arab farmers have often clashed over water and land. However, this is not peculiar to Darfur or Sudan. Other examples of intertribal conflicts in Africa include the following: Hutu-Tutsi conflict in Rwanda; Fulani-Tuareg conflict in western African countries like Nigeria and Mali; and the latest - Tigray conflict in Ethiopia. Second, the failure of the State. Sudan is currently being governed by a transitional government led by Hamdok after former ruler,

Omar al Bashir, who helped arm the Arab tribes and was ousted in 2019. Under al-Bashir, the non-Arab tribes were targeted, and Hamdok came to power with the promise of improving the security conditions. However, Hamdok has been unable to do so, and in 2020, protests demanding the resignation of the entire government broke out. Further, the transitional government provides power-sharing between military and civilian leaders; however, tensions between the two have been simmering for a while.

Third, the fragile peace deal. In October 2020, the Sudanese government signed a peace deal with a coalition of rebel groups to end the violence that had been continuing for years. However, two groups - one being the Darfur-based Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) - refused to sign the peace agreement.

Fourth, the withdrawal of the UNAMID. The recent spate of violence comes merely days after the African Union-UN mission, known as the UNAMID, officially withdrew from Darfur on 31 December 2020 after it was established in 2007. Though the mission was not perceived as a success by the local population, its withdrawal has sparked fears that it would cause a vacuum. The National Plan for Civilian Protection has been framed to succeed in the UNAMID.

In perspective

First, the persistent conflict in Sudan is a reflection of the failure of successive governments. Further, unless the government strikes a balance between the military and civilian officials in the power-sharing agreement, it would be difficult to collectively address the problems - ethnic, economic or otherwise.

Second, peacebuilding will be difficult without the SLM as it had been a key force against the government since 2003. Further, the exit of the UNAMID, is likely to retain the violent status-quo, if not worsen it until the government begins to implement the National Plan for Civilian Protection soon.

Ethiopia: Instability persists with continuing violence, jailed opposition leaders

Apoorva Sudhakar, 18 February 2021

In the news

On 14 February, Nation reported that at least 28 people were killed and dozens injured in the conflict-hit Tigray region during the anti-government protests which started on 8 February; Ethiopian forces allegedly used live bullets against the protesters.

On 13 February, Aljazeera reported that the condition of jailed Oromo opposition leaders who have been on a hunger strike since 27 January deteriorated; four leaders were taken to the hospital after they collapsed.

On 11 February, the Director-General of Ethiopia's Agency for Refugees and Returnees Affairs announced the closure of two Eritrean refugee camps citing the impact of the Tigray conflict on the two. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) said the two camps had been destroyed and the refugees displaced.

Issues at large

First, the uncertainties surrounding the Tigray conflict. Hundred days after the Ethiopian government launched an offensive into Tigray on 4 November 2020, the uncertainties regarding the political developments in the region persist. After Ethiopia declared an end to the conflict on 28 November, many leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) have gone into hiding but have also vowed to continue resistance. Further, since Ethiopia had also imposed an emergency on Tigray prior to the conflict, information from the region has been difficult to verify.

Second, the multiple crises in Ethiopia. Even before the Tigray crisis began in November 2020, Ethiopia started to witness political and ethnic unrest. For example, the above-mentioned opposition leaders were jailed on grounds of inciting riots following the assassination of popular singer-activist Hachalu Hundessa in June 2020. Similarly, other instances ethnic conflicts - like the massacre of over 200 in the Benishangul-Gumuz region in western Ethiopia - have

taken place over the last few months.

Third, the creeping authoritarianism. Ahmed came to power in 2018 on the promise of reformist and inclusive politics, after the Oromo ethnic group protested against the TPLF-led federal government for sidelining other ethnic groups. However, over time, Ahmed has reflected an authoritarian approach by jailing opposition leaders, journalists critical of the government, and imposing frequent internet shutdowns.

Fourth, the worsening humanitarian conditions. Since the conflict in Tigray escalated, humanitarian agencies including the UN, have been calling on the government to provide unhindered access to the region, especially to the two Eritrean camps, as relief supplies were scarce.

In perspective

First, the multiple political and ethnic crises do little to help Ahmed gain the support of Ethiopians. Ahmed's reluctance to hold any dialogue with opposition figures leads to increased resentment among the population. In the current atmosphere, it is unlikely that Ahmed will succeed in establishing the inclusive governance he once promised. However, the previous regime too has shaped the current state of affairs as it did not leave much space for Ahmed to reverse the authoritarian past of Ethiopia.

Second, a humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding in the Tigray region, the scale of which remains unknown as the government is controlling information from the region and also dismissing independent reports or claims made by journalists or aid organisations.

Saudi Arabia: Crown Prince MBS named in the US intelligence report on the killing of Jamal Khashoggi

Harini Madhusudan, 4 March 2021

In the news

On 26 February, an intelligence report by the office of the US Director of National Intelligence revealed that the Crown Prince of Saudi, Mohammed bin Salman played a role in directing the Saudi hit squad to either "capture

or kill" Khashoggi. The report says, "We assess that Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman approved an operation in Istanbul to capture or kill Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi." The direct involvement of one of his advisers as well as members of his protective detail in the operation is some of the reasons for the conclusion. The four-page report names 21 individuals who participated in the killing.

On, 2 March, the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) have filed a criminal complaint with a German prosecutor alleging that Saudi Arabian officials are responsible for "widespread and systematic" persecution of journalists in the kingdom, citing what it characterizes as the arbitrary detention of more than 30.

Issues at large

First, the return of the Khashoggi case. The Khashoggi killing had been dying-out from popular memory. The renewed interest in the case came with the Biden election campaign and the subsequent release of the report. The RSF case filed in Germany also draws attention to the case of Jamal Khashoggi again.

Second, the change in US strategy to the Middle East under Biden. Throughout his election campaign, Biden vowed to take a harder stance with a pretext of having Saudi Arabia act responsibly or pay a price. Taking from it, the release of the report comes in the early months of Biden taking office. In an attempt to indicate that nothing would change in the relations, Biden made a call to Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud the day before the release. There are also changes in the US strategy towards Yemen and statements hinting the same on Iran.

Third, international investigations, reports and the pressure on MBS. An investigation by the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Agnes Callamard, concluded that "Since 2017, the Crown Prince has had absolute control of the Kingdom's security and intelligence organizations, making it highly unlikely that Saudi officials would have carried out an operation of this nature without the Crown Prince's authorization." The current US intelligence report prepared in 2019, takes a

similar path and correlates the actions of the people accused to link the role of MBS in the decision to kill Khashoggi. It appears the international pressure on MBS is back with developments in the US and Germany.

In perspective

First, though the US officials have portrayed it as an attempt to re-calibrate the relations and not rupture them, actions taken by Biden have drawn a lot of attention. However, there has been no MBS specific sanctions in the US yet.

Second, the recent measures would have an impact on US-Saudi Arabia relations. Especially with MBS. Hours after the release of the report, the Saudi foreign ministry has called it unacceptable, and false. Though the decision to release the report can be seen in good light, it seems like President Biden got the timing wrong and angered many parties including the human rights defenders.

Syria: UN report calls for a complete ceasefire

Jeshil Samuel J, 4 March 2021

In the news

On 1 March, the United Nations released a report by the Commission of Enquiry for Syria. The report explicitly holds the Government of Syria and armed groups in the region responsible for the detainment and mistreatment of tens of thousands of innocent civilians. The report highlights the government's role in suppressing dissent by arresting and detaining civilians in detainment camps for more than a decade. It also gives insights into the war crimes committed by ISIL, HTS, the FSA, the SNA and the SDF.

On 2 March, three human rights groups filed a complaint in France against the war crimes committed in Syria. The groups have urged the French government to investigate the use of chemical weapons in the conflict, based on first-hand testimonies collected from numerous witnesses and victims. The three groups had previously filed a complaint regarding the same issue in Germany last year.

On 25 February, the United States conducted an airstrike on Iran-backed militias operating in Syria. The airstrike was conducted on the Syrian-side of the Syrian-Iraq border and killed around 22 militants. The strike also destroyed multiple militant facilities in Al Bukamal along with three trucks carrying munitions from Iraq.

Issues at large

First, the ongoing civil war in Syria. The war began during the Arab Spring uprising in 2011 when the Syrian populace began protesting for the removal of their despotic leader, President Bashar al-Assad. Unable to control the uprising, President Assad invoked a complete military crackdown on protestors, resulting in a bloodbath. In retaliation, rebel groups began opposing the government in armed conflict. Not long after, the civil war in Syria turned into a proxy war in which Iran and Russia backed Assad's government, and The Gulf States, Turkey, Jordan and the US supported the rebels. The war also gave rise to religious extremist groups like Hezbollah and ISIS, creating further unrest in the region.

Second, the civilian population caught in the crossfire. The UN report mentions that none of the warring factions respects civilian rights in line with international legal obligations. From the use of chemical weapons to numerous detention camps around the country, the civilian population has been repeatedly targeted and abused. The pandemic has also made certain that the crowded detention camps are deathtraps for innocent civilians.

Third, the international community and their response. The involvement of various armed groups in the conflict has made the decisions of the international community divided and unproductive thus far. With the US and Russia taking opposing sides, the international community has had a restricted approach toward the conflict. When countries like the US try to promote a peaceful resolution, militias in the region disrupt it blatantly.

In perspective

The war in Syria is nowhere close to a finish. From the UN report, it is evident that innocent civilians have had to endure the brunt of the war. The parties involved are not ready for a

compromise or cooperative initiative despite the plight of the civilians. Similar to the conflict in Yemen, the role of external powers has increased the intensity of the war and divided the country significantly. All this unnecessary carnage can only end if all parties involved respond to the UN's call for a complete ceasefire.

Yemen: The donor conference raises only USD 1.7 billion, as humanitarian aid

Dincy Adlakha, 4 March 2021

In the news

On 1 March, a “Virtual High-Level Pledging Event for the Humanitarian Situation in Yemen” was held by the UN. It was co-hosted by Sweden and Switzerland. More than 100 governments and donors participated in the conference but the amount pledged was highly short of requirements and even less than that raised in 2020. In the three sessions of the conference, discussions took place around the major objectives of the conference. These included raising awareness and mobilising resources for severe and deteriorating humanitarian crisis in Yemen and the imminent risk of large-scale famine, and the past success and present challenges of humanitarian partners.

Issues at large

First, the looming famine in the country. The danger of the longest famine in many decades has been materializing in Yemen. The president of UNSC had stated in August 2017, warning the world of the emerging food crisis in Yemen. In March 2018, the Council, yet again recognized that the coming famine would not be very deadly. The numbers indicated that 3.4 million people were pushed to dependency on humanitarian aid within a year. On 12th February 2021, four agencies of the UN (FAO, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO) indicated that nearly 2.3 million children under the age of five in Yemen are projected to suffer from acute malnutrition in 2021. 4,00,000 of these could die if they do not receive urgent treatment. According to the latest UN data, more than 16 million Yemenis

(about half the population of the country) will face hunger this year, and nearly 50,000 are already starving to death in famine-like conditions.

Second, the failure of internal actors in resolving the humanitarian aid issue. The Houthi rebels have been posing obstructions in aid. Approval delays, violence against the staff, interference with an assessment of need, and usage of aid access to extort concessions and money are common practices utilized by the Houthis. Since May-June 2020, the Houthis have blocked 262 containers at Hodeida Port hindering the delivery of PPE kits and transport of commercial vessels carrying fuel for revenue. All this makes food, hospital operations, and water supply obscure for the Yemenis, and leaving them highly vulnerable to COVID-19. Even the Coalition-backed Yemeni government has recently issued numerous bureaucratic restrictions on aid agencies creating unnecessary obstacles and delaying aid deliverance.

Third, the lack of international attention to Yemen. The UN has called the situation in Yemen the world's worst humanitarian crisis and yet the international community has failed to provide Yemen with the deserved attention and help. The focus on Yemen comes only in the context of a proxy war between Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia and Shia-majority Iran. The few Yemeni journalists identify two major reasons for the ignorance by global media. These are that Yemen does not pose a direct threat to the western countries and there are no “waves” of Yemeni refugees crossing the Mediterranean. International media and members of the community have pushed Yemen on the side-lines.

In perspective

External solutions to the issue will fail unless the Houthis and the Yemeni government lift unnecessary restrictions on humanitarian aid. Yet, efforts from the UNSC to identify senior Houthi and government officials involved in obstruction of aid, and taking appropriate actions on them might help the situation. However, no permanent solution can be expected until the conflict itself is resolved. The international community needs to act tactfully and move towards a political solution.

Lebanon: The revival of protests amid worsening economic conditions

Apoorva Sudhakar, 11 March 2021

In the news

On 9 March, National News Agency, a state-run organisation, reported that demonstrators protesting against the country's deteriorating economic conditions had blocked main highways including that leading to the capital city, Beirut. The developments came despite the President's calls to clear the roadblocks.

On 8 March, President Michel Aoun called on the army and security forces "to clear roadblocks after a week of protests over a collapsing economy and paralysed government." However, the Army Chief, General Joseph Aoun, said, "The officer also is suffering and is hungry, to the officials I say, where are you going? What are you waiting for? What are you planning to do?" Therefore, he pushed the political leadership to find a long-lasting solution to the economic and political crisis.

On 6 March, the caretaker Prime Minister, Hasan Diab threatened to abstain from his duties thereby attempting to pressurise the political leaders to form a new government.

Issues at large

First, the crash of the Lebanese pound. On 2 March, the Lebanese pound hit a record low against the US dollar on the black market thereby being valued at 10,000 Lebanese pounds against the dollar. Further, the official exchange rate stood at 1,520 Lebanese pounds to the dollar. This acted as a trigger to the latest protests.

Second, the return of protests. The current unrest is the third occurrence of mass protests since 2019. The first mass protests of recent times started in October 2019 when the government proposed a tax on WhatsApp calls, threatening the people's options to communicate freely without incurring heavy expenses on telephone calls. This triggered anti-government protests which later translated into a demand to overhaul the sectarian-based political system. Next, people took to the streets in August 2020 after the Beirut Port

blast which left at least 200 people dead and thousands injured. However, in all cases, the protests remained leaderless.

Third, worsening economic conditions. Amid economic deterioration and rising prices, the Lebanese have been struggling to secure essential commodities. The UN says, at least 50 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line. In March 2020, Lebanon defaulted on a loan of USD 1.2 billion. In December 2020, Diab said subsidies on flour, fuel and medication, would have to be lifted in early 2021 as foreign reserves are falling short.

Fourth, the political deadlock. The current Prime Minister-designate, Saad Hariri had resigned as PM in 2019 following the protests; Diab was appointed in January 2020.

However, following the Beirut blast, Diab resigned and his successor Mustapha Adib resigned within a month. Following this, in October 2020, Hariri was re-elected as PM but has been unable to form a government due to differences with President Aoun.

In perspective

First, since protests in Lebanon have remained largely leaderless, it has been difficult to sustain them as support for the protests wane away with time, thereby pushing Lebanon into a status quo, be it political or economic. Therefore, the current protests too may take a backseat after some months. However, the Army Chief's words come as a surprise being the first of its kind from a person of authority.

Second, unless the political deadlock ends, it will be difficult to arrive at a solution to the country's economic woes. The economic situation is bound to worsen in the coming months and its effects could last for years.

Niger: 137 massacred in the latest attack by gunmen

Apoorva Sudhakar, 25 March 2021

In the news

On 23 March, a three-day mourning began in Niger in memory of the 137 who were killed in a raid by unidentified gunmen. On the same day, the African Union chairman said the fight

against terrorism in the Sahel has to be strengthened urgently.

On 22 March, the Nigerien government confirmed the incident, which took place across three villages in the southwestern part of Niger on 21 March. The government statement read, "In treating civilian populations systematically as targets now, these armed bandits have gone a step further into horror and brutality." Further, the statement said the government had launched an investigation "to find the perpetrators of these cowardly and criminal acts, and bring them before the courts."

On 21 March, the Constitutional Court confirmed the victory of Mohamed Bazoum as the new President of Niger after elections were conducted in February.

Issues at large

First, the continuing attacks in Niger. The latest attack comes less than a week after at least 58 people were killed in a similar raid by gunmen on 15 March in a neighbouring village. Prior to this incident, on 2 January, as many as 100 civilians were killed in two separate attacks in the same region. As of 23 March, BBC reported that close to 300 people were killed in "jihadist violence."

Second, the lack of clarity on the perpetrators. As of 24 March, no group has claimed responsibility for the attack. The BBC quotes a Sahel researcher who said the perpetrators in the latest attack are believed to belong to the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Apart from the ISGS, groups like al Qaeda also operate in countries across the Sahel region, especially in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. However, some instances of violence have been linked to ethnic Fulani tribes and their conflict with other communities for access and control over resources.

Third, the victims. Apart from civilians, security forces have also been targeted by the perpetrators. In January 2020, 89 Nigerien soldiers were killed in an attack on a military base. Further, the tactics of violence are similar in neighbouring countries like Mali; a similar attack was targeted at a military base in Mali. Here, 33 soldiers were killed and 14 were injured during the attack for which the IS had claimed responsibility. Among the civilians, children too have been killed during the raids by gunmen.

Fourth, failure of government and regional security forces. The government, in cooperation with neighbouring countries, has deployed several forces to address the threat. Further, Bazoum ordered army reinforcement in the region following the attacks on 15 March. However, these operations have not yielded the necessary results.

In perspective

First, the increased frequency and scale of attacks and failure of the government to address the issue have caused insecurities among the populations living in the border areas. It is questionable that armed forces are unaware of or unwilling to monitor the movement of hundreds of gunmen towards civilian areas.

Second, the onus of introducing measures to curb the violence now lies on Bazoum, who will be sworn in on 2 April. He was elected on his promises to address the insecurity in the region; whether he will be able to walk the talk remains to be seen in the coming few months.

Nigeria: Abductions highlight the worsening security situation

Apoorva Sudhakar, 25 February 2021

In the news

On 22 February, the Governor of Niger state in northwest Nigeria announced that 53 people, including 20 women and nine children, had been released by bandits. The 53 people had been abducted nearly a week ago by bandits when they were traveling in a state-owned bus in a village in Niger.

On 18 February, the Defence Minister said people should not be cowards. He said, "At times, bandits will come with about three rounds of ammunition. When they fire a shot, everybody runs. I don't know why people are running away from minor, minor, minor things like that. They should stand. Let these people know that even the villagers have the competence and capability to defend themselves."

On 17 February, one pupil was killed and 42 people, including 27 students, were abducted from a school in Niger. Apart from the students, three staff and their family members

were abducted by gunmen who stormed the school around midnight. As of 23 February, the 42 are still missing. On 19 February, Aljazeera reported that government officials had contacted the kidnapers for peaceful negotiations as “any military action could result in unnecessary deaths.”

Issues at large

First, the increased instances of abductions. The latest abductions come after nearly 300 schoolboys were allegedly abducted by Boko Haram in December 2020 from another state in northwest Nigeria; they were later released after negotiations. Further, Africanews reported that in early February 2021, in Niger again, gunmen had killed at least 10 and kidnapped another 23.

Second, the insecurity in northwest Nigeria. Apart from the Niger state, other states in the northwestern region of Nigeria are witnessing similar instances of violence. Until recently, Nigeria faced issues of extremism in the northeastern region where Boko Haram and other terrorist organisations have their strongholds. The insecurity is now spreading to the northwest and attacks carry a similarity with the tactics of Boko Haram.

Third, the role of bandits and kidnapping for ransom. Though there are similarities with the terrorist organisations, the attacks in northwestern states are carried out by local groups, generally known as bandits. Bandits are infamous for kidnapping for ransoms. In such cases, the bandit groups are open to the idea of negotiating and releasing the victims, instead of killing them.

Fourth, the failure of the government. The government has been unresponsive to the demands of the people to improve the security conditions. After years of witnessing massacres and abductions and pushing for change by the people, President Buhari finally replaced the heads of the army, navy and air force on 26 January. Further, there has also been a lack of transparency from the government’s side about the negotiations with the bandits or terrorist groups.

In perspective

First, unless the government steps up its efforts to increase security in the country, it will not be able to gain the trust and support of

Nigerians. For the government to resolve problems like banditry, it is imperative to identify the root of the problem. Though, appointing new heads of defence may be a stepping stone to this, the government cannot afford to lose more time under increasing threats of violence.

Second, the government has not been accountable for the numerous instances of abductions and violence. Statements like that of the Defence Minister attempt to shift responsibility of security on to the people instead of owning up to the shortcomings in the security system.

Nigeria: The fear and uncertainties of child abduction, despite the latest release of 279 schoolgirl

Apoorva Sudhakar, 4 March 2021

In the news

On 26 February, as many as 317 girls were reported to have been abducted from the school by 100-odd gunmen who stormed the school in the wee hours of the day. However, the Governor clarified that some of the girls escaped and hid in the bushes. Therefore, the total number of girls abducted was 279, all of whom the government managed to release after negotiations with the “repentant bandits.” He denied paying any ransom to the bandits but termed the whole incident politically motivated. He said, “While the state was in negotiation with (the) abductors for the release of the schoolgirls, other persons offered money to the armed bandits to keep the girls in captivity.”

On 27 February, 42 people, including 27 students, who had been previously abducted on 17 February, were released.

On 2 March, the Governor of Zamfara State announced the release of all 279 girls. President Muhammadu Buhari tweeted that he was happy “that their ordeal has come to a happy end without any incident.”

On 3 March, three people were shot by security forces. The security forces opened fire when parents started attacking government

officials with stones during the handover ceremony of the abducted children.

Issues at large

First, the recurring mass abductions. In 2014, Boko Haram abducted 276 girls from a school in Chibok and this generated international outrage. However, numerous other instances of the abduction of school children have taken place. For example, in 2018, as many as 110 girls were abducted by the group. Similarly, in December 2020, more than 300 schoolboys were abducted allegedly by Boko Haram, who were later released after negotiations. From December 2020 to February 2021, three mass abductions took place in schools.

Second, expansion in kidnapping groups. Mass abductions from school were a strategy adopted by Boko Haram which opposed any form of western education. However, over time, local armed groups, generally known as bandits, have also adopted a similar strategy. In the case of bandits, the abducted people were released after what the government calls "peaceful negotiations." Further, casualties in many cases involving bandits have been minimal as kidnapers also aim for money in the form of ransoms.

Third, failure of the state and lack of transparency from the government. The recurrence of mass abductions reflects a state failure as it has not been able to deploy the necessary forces and technology to trace the kidnapers. However, it could also be the state's lack of willingness to act on the issue. Further, the government reaches out to the kidnapers for negotiations citing that military actions might result in casualties. However, the said negotiations have never been made public. Though the government has in all cases denied paying ransoms to the kidnapers, doubts have arisen over the same.

In perspective

The curious case of kidnappings raises more questions than answers. First, if one goes by the government's words that it does not pay ransoms to the kidnapers, then the larger question at play is: What is the endgame of the kidnapers? If the kidnappings are politically motivated, as the Governor says, then who is trying to send a message to the government and what is the message they are aiming to convey?

Second, repeated instances of abductions from schools create a sense of insecurity not just among students, but also parents. This could result in parents preventing their children, especially girls, from going to schools thereby impacting the social-economic conditions of different sections of Nigerian society.

West Africa: Over 100 killed in series of attacks by bandits across countries

Apoorva Sudhakar, 25 August 2021

In the news

On 20 August, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres condemned an armed assault in Burkina Faso's Arbinda region, which left at least 80 people dead on 18 August. The casualties from the attack, suspected to be carried out by jihadists, included 59 civilians, 15 military police personnel and six pro-government militiamen. Guterres's statement conveyed that the UN would stand in solidarity with the Burkinabe government and other Sahel countries "in their efforts to counter and prevent terrorism and violent extremism, promote social cohesion and achieve sustainable development."

On 20 August, unidentified gunmen killed 16 people in the Tillaberi region within Niger, four days after 37 people were massacred in a different village in the same region on 16 August. On the same day, several parliamentarians reportedly called for enhanced security measures in the region.

On 21 August, 12 people were killed and six injured by gunmen in Nigeria's Katsina State. In two separate attacks, two people were killed each on 19 and 20 August. On the same day, Chad announced that it would withdraw 600 troops from G5 Sahel forces from the border between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, and termed it a "strategic redeployment to better adapt to the organization of the terrorists" in the country.

Issues at large

First, the continuation of violence and large-scale massacres. The attack in Burkina Faso took place two months after gunmen, including child soldiers aged between 12 to 14,

massacred over 130 people. Similarly, in Niger, in the Tillaberi region, 137 and 66 people were massacred in two different instances in March. Meanwhile, in Nigeria, apart from massacres like that of 88 people in a coordinated attack across seven villages in June, bandits also frequently abduct students and villagers in regular raids.

Second, different regions, different actors, same issues. Insecurity and instability are common among these countries, despite the perpetrators being different. Regional governments refer to perpetrators with no particular allegiance to any group as bandits, who are involved in cattle-rustling, resource conflicts, inter-communal conflicts. Lately, several attacks have also been linked to an "Islamist insurgency" on grounds that groups like the Islamic State and the al Qaeda, have shifted base to Africa from the Middle East. Following the latest massacre in Burkina Faso, the Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Office said that the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara had spread across the African continent, particularly in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Meanwhile, Nigeria has already been facing the brunt of terrorism since 2009 when Boko Haram marked its presence and later paved the way for the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).

Third, collective regional failure and external intervention. France intervened in the fight against this insurgency in 2013 in Mali; since then, it has deployed 5,000 troops. However, observing that there was no indication of violence abating, in July 2021, it announced that it would withdraw over 2,000 troops. Similarly, Chad's decision to withdraw 600 of its 1,200-strong troops from the G5 forces will also affect the fight against the above threats as the country had been one of the strongest contributors to the task force.

In perspective

Some regions in West Africa have been witnessing a slow burn for over a decade since Boko Haram established its base in Nigeria. The latest series of attacks indicate that despite regular and similar tactics used by the perpetrators, the regional governments have not served their promises of security and stability of neither their respective countries,

nor the affected region. Therefore, it is likely that the gaps in governance are being exploited by terrorist groups in the region, therefore, leading to the expansion of the IS and al Qaeda bases in the continent. Some media reports also suggest that these terrorist groups are gradually bringing bandits into their fold. In light of this, the protection of civilians is at stake.

Mozambique: Violence escalates after ISIS rebels seize town

Apoorva Sudhakar, 31 March 2021

In the news

On 29 March, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the week-long siege over Palma, a town in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province. On 30 March, the International Organisation for Migration said it had tracked "3,361 internally displaced persons (IDPs), 672 families, arriving by foot, bus, plane and boat from Palma" to other districts in the province. According to the IOM, more than three-quarters of those who escaped the violence were women and children. Though initial media reports suggest that dozens have died over the week, the exact number of casualties is unknown.

On 24 March, armed men took over Palma in a coordinated raid attacking from several points. Many civilians escaped by boats, and others took refuge in a hotel; however, many, including foreign nationals, remain unaccounted. The government spokesperson said, "A group of terrorists sneaked into...Palma and launched actions that resulted in the cowardly murder of dozens of defenceless people."

Issues at large

First, the continuing instability and displacement in the province. The instability in the Cabo Delgado began in 2017. Initial attacks targeted government officials and security forces. However, over time, civilians were targeted; some were beheaded. As of March 2021, the UN estimates that at least 670,000 people have been displaced and more than 2,000, including security officials, killed since 2017. On 22 March, some UN officials

said if the problem is left unaddressed, then the number of IDPs would reach one million by June.

Second, the local group - al Shabaab and its links with Islamist extremists. Al Shabaab, though is a local group, it identifies itself as the Al-Sunna wa Jama'a (ASWJ) and submits allegiance to the IS. Though the IS has also claimed several attacks, it is challenging to verify the claims.

Third, the government's ineffective response. So far, the government has responded with military operations and has also signed contracts with private military companies to quell the instability. Amnesty International suggests that along with the armed group, the government and the private company have committed war crimes claiming that innocent civilians were being detained and killed by security forces.

Fourth, the socio-economic grievances in Cabo Delgado. The province has attracted foreign companies, including ExxonMobil and Total, because of its gas reserves. However, the local population, especially the youth, opine that the foreign presence has not yielded any benefits to the province compared to other provinces. Further, Cabo Delgado is underdeveloped and is characterized by high illiteracy, subsequent unemployment, lack of access to healthcare, and the like. This has fuelled the anti-government sentiment amongst the local population.

In perspective

First, the latest attack is a reflection of the government's failure in intelligence as well as its response. It also shows that the government ignoring the increasing frequency and gravity of attacks against the civilians has emboldened the extremist group.

Second, the instability also is rooted in the government's failure in ensuring basic social necessities. While religion could be an element, it is not the only feature shaping the unrest. Therefore, the government and international community covering the issue should look beyond the Islamist extremism and instead focus on addressing the grievances of the people.

Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam: Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan fail to reach a consensus, again

Apoorva Sudhakar, 7 April 2021

In the news

On 6 April, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan failed to reach an agreement over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), after three days of talks in Kinshasa. The Egyptian Foreign Ministry said: "This position reveals once again Ethiopia's lack of political will to negotiate in good faith." Similarly, the Sudanese Foreign Minister said, "Without a new approach to negotiations, there becomes space for Ethiopia to impose a fait accompli and put all the peoples of the region in grave danger."

On 4 April, the President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and African Union Chairman commenced the latest round of talks between the three countries with their respective foreign ministers and irrigation ministers and African Union officials. On the same day, the President said, "I ask you all to make a fresh start, to open one or several windows of hope, to seize every opportunity." The Egyptian Foreign Minister said, "These negotiations represent the last chance that the three countries must seize to reach an accord."

Issues at large

First, a brief history of the Nile dam. Ethiopia began the construction of the dam over the Blue Nile tributary in 2011 and has a capacity of 74 billion cubic metres and a capacity of 6,500 megawatts. Ethiopia believes the dam will help in power generation for its entire 110-million strong population, when the construction is completed and starts operating by 2023. The power generation is also expected to address the problems of Ethiopia's neighbouring countries, including Sudan. In 2020, Ethiopia filled the reservoir for the first time and is planning to do the same in the monsoon of 2021.

Second, the contentions of the lower riparian countries. The two lower riparian countries, Egypt and Sudan, raised apprehensions that the dam will affect their water supply. They prefer that Ethiopia takes longer to fill the dam

to prevent a dramatic drop in the river's water level. Further, Egypt, which depends on the Nile for 90 per cent of its water requirements, holds a sentimental and historical value to the river. Egypt and Sudan cite their rights to the river that were guaranteed to them in 1929 and 1959.

Third, new demands on mediation. The latest talks failed after the three countries disagreed on the process of mediation. Egypt and Sudan suggested that the US, EU, UN, and the AU to mediate the talks. On 15 March, the Sudanese Prime Minister also formally requested the four parties to mediate. However, during the latest talks, Ethiopia emphasized that the mediation should be African-led. Further, Ethiopia prefers the solution to be a set of guidelines, while Egypt and Sudan push for a legally binding agreement.

In perspective

First, talks between the two countries have failed to produce a consensus for almost a decade. However, since 2020, Ethiopia has unilaterally operated the filling of the reservoir and is likely to continue the same in the coming years. Unless the three countries reach an agreement, Egypt and Sudan will be at the losing end.

Second, the involvement of external actors may complicate Ethiopia's position on the dam because the leadership is already facing pressure from the US, EU and the UN due to the ongoing internal conflict in the country.

Mozambique: Palma attack paints a grave picture of Africa's security concerns

Apoorva Sudhakar, 7 April 2021

In the news

On 6 April, the UNHCR spokesperson said at least 11,000 people had fled Palma, a town in Cabo Delgado province, which had been under ISIS attack from 24 March. The people fled to other districts in the province, namely, Pemba, Nangade, Mueda and Montepuez. He said that close to 80 per cent of those who had been separated were women and children.

On 5 April, the army spokesperson announced that the army had regained control over the town and that several militants had been killed in operation. The secretary of State for Cabo Delgado said, "There was significant loss of human life, infrastructure destroyed. However, people are safe now."

On the same day, Aljazeera reported that since thousands had fled to Pemba, the district's food, water resources, and healthcare facilities had been overburdened. Aljazeera quoted the OCHA, which mentioned that Pemba had witnessed a population swell in February, which posed a problem.

Issues at large

First, the increasing role of non-state actors in Africa. Attacks by non-state actors like ISIS are not restricted to Mozambique. Over the years, factions of the Islamic State, like IS West Africa Province (ISWAP), and other terrorist groups like the Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Shabaab in Somalia, have established themselves in different countries. Other non-state actors include rebel groups like those operating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, and Sudan. Such groups often use violence as a strategy to convey a message to the State or challenge it.

Second, the shrinking space for the State. The attack on Palma, though one of the first large-scale instances of violence, is not the first time militants struck. Previously, Cabo Delgado province has witnessed villagers' massacres, and the State has responded with military operations. However, the state response to violence, not just in Mozambique but across countries in Africa, has resorted chiefly to deploying security forces and has not effectively been preventive; it has mainly been retaliatory.

Third, Palma as a reflection of the problems in Africa. The instability in Palma and Cabo Delgado at large has its roots in the lack of access to the people's socio-economic needs, thereby fuelling resentment against the government. This is a common problem in African countries though the reasons behind the same may differ. For example, in some countries, certain groups feel excluded when a person from another ethnicity is in power or vice versa. In other countries, the sentiment

could be a result of belonging to the geographic or political periphery.

In perspective

First, in Mozambique, it is a relief that the army has regained control over Palma.

However, it took ten days or more reflects the militants' preparedness for such operations and projects the government's and security forces' lack of the same. Further, the humanitarian situation in Pemba will worsen unless there is immediate attention to the needs of the people.

Second, in Africa, the space for the State to operate seems to be shrinking. Every day, new and increased security concerns bring little to no respite to the people. Instead, the insecurity among populations who are frequently targeted has been on the rise.

Iran: Another act of "sabotage" at Natanz uranium enrichment facility

Lokendra Sharma, 14 April 2021

In the news

On 11 April, the Natanz nuclear facility in Iran suffered a power blackout, causing damage to the centrifuges used for uranium enrichment. Iranian media blamed it on Israel's intelligence agency, Mossad.

On 12 April, Iran's Foreign Minister Javed Zarif wrote a letter to the UN Secretary-General in which he called the act of targeting a "highly sensitive safeguarded nuclear facility" with "high risk" of radioactive material release as "reckless criminal nuclear terrorism" and a "grave war crime". Israeli news outlets claimed that Israel was behind the attack, though Israel officially neither confirmed nor denied its role in the attack.

On 12 April, Israel's PM Netanyahu, while not directly confirming a role, said: "I will never allow Iran to obtain the nuclear capability to carry out its genocidal goal of eliminating Israel." On the same day, the US denied any involvement. The White House Press Secretary said: "The US was not involved in any manner".

On 13 April, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister said that the country would raise uranium enrichment levels to 60 per cent and has conveyed this to the International Atomic Energy Organisation.

Issues at large

First, the nature of the attack and the extent of the damage. Multiple accounts have been reported, ranging from a kinetic cyber-attack to a large explosion at the power supply system of the plant. The official Iranian version claims that there was a small explosion at the electricity distribution centre affecting the older generation centrifuges and that it did not stop the enrichment process. The New York Times however, based on Israeli and the US intelligence sources, claimed that "it could take at least nine months to restore Natanz's production."

Second, the attacks on Natanz in the past. The Natanz plant is the primary uranium enrichment facility of the country and has been central to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) deal. It has been the recipient of attacks in the past that have been attributed to Israel. This includes the cyber-attack using Stuxnet in 2007 and the fire incident in 2020.

Third, Israel's position on the Iranian nuclear programme. Israel has been a staunch opponent of the Iranian nuclear programme, and considers Iran's development of nuclear weapons as an existential threat to the country. Israel has not just been believed to target Iranian nuclear facilities, but also assassinating top Iranian nuclear scientists, including Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in 2020.

Fourth, the timing of the sabotage. The attack happened just a day after Iran celebrated its National Nuclear Technology Day, and President Hassan Rouhani inaugurated advanced centrifuges (capable of enriching uranium faster) at the Natanz site. The attack also coincided with the US Secretary of State Gen Llyod Austin's visit to Israel, and closely follows the conclusion of the first week of nuclear talks at Vienna between the US, Iran and the European partners of the JCPOA.

In perspective

Even as Israel did not confirm its role, multiple reports, including some by Israeli Hebrew media, attribute the attack to the country. If Israel was behind the attack, then it could have had two potential motivations for the attack: first, delaying the Iranian uranium enrichment, especially after Iran unveiled new-generation centrifuges; second, to torpedo the nuclear talks happening at Vienna.

However, it is questionable whether any of these objectives will be fulfilled. Iran has shown high resilience in the last two decades despite a series of attacks. The attack has rather prompted Iran to up the ante by announcing an enrichment target of 60 per cent, inching closer to the 90 per cent weapons-grade level. Further, the attack, rather than torpedoing, may strengthen the Iranian position, which may play the victim card and use the new enrichment announcement as a bargaining chip.

Lastly, even though Iran has vowed revenge, it is unlikely to do anything significant, given its record of making calls for revenge and not following it through. The call for revenge then, like before, is to address domestic public opinion.

Ethiopia: Massacre in Afar-Somali border reflects larger instability in the country

Apoorva Sudhakar, 14 April 2021

In the news

On 8 April, the Ministry of Peace announced that the presidents of the Afar and Somali regional states had reached an agreement to resolve issues between the two regions. The decision called for a withdrawal of "security forces of their regions and allow [the] federal government to investigate and hold to account parties responsible for the conflict."

On 7 April, Reuters quoted Afar's deputy police commissioner who confirmed that at least 100 civilians were killed in clashes with the Somali forces. Blaming the Somali Regional State Special Forces, he said the violence began on 2 April and lasted till 6 April. Similarly, the head of Afar regional state communication bureau said the Somali

forces, using heavy weaponry, had killed children and women while they were sleeping. However, the Somali region's spokesperson blamed the Afar forces, saying 25 people had been killed on 2 April and an "unknown number of civilians" were killed on 6 April.

Issues at large

First, the Afar-Somali problem. The recent differences between the two regions stem from claims over three towns which were transferred to Afar from the Somali region in 2014. The 2014 agreement was finalised under the then ruling coalition. However, in 2019, despite Afar considering the three towns as integral to the region, the Somali administration withdrew from the 2014 agreement.

Second, the possible immediate trigger for the clashes. Addis Standard quotes a humanitarian worker who explained the recent unrest. They said the clashes were triggered after people, belonging to three disputed towns, protested the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia's decision to call off polling in eight kebeles (the smallest administrative units), mostly inhabited by Somali groups. Following this, Afar security personnel retaliated with force. Third, the latest violence is not isolated.

Reliefweb explains that the tensions between the two regions have resulted in displacement of 29,000 households in July to October 2020 alone. It also quotes Afar authorities who say that nearly 30,000 people have been displaced from areas under the Somali and Afar region, but live with a host community in Afar.

Fourth, the problem of governance across the country. The chief ombudsman said that in March alone, at least 300 people were killed during clashes in the Amhara region in western Ethiopia. The violence erupted between the Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups after an Oromo imam was allegedly shot down. Apart from the Amhara-Oromo clashes, the conflict in Tigray which began in November 2020 has also resulted in casualties and human rights abuses.

In perspective

First, the Afar-Somali problem reflects a larger problem of the federal government's equation with the periphery. Just like Tigray being a peripheral region, Afar is on the north western periphery of Ethiopia bordering Eritrea and

Djibouti. Therefore, like the Tigray conflict-affected Eritrea, escalation in Afar is likely to follow the same path.

Second, the internal stability of Ethiopia has worsened over the three years under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's governance. As the elections are scheduled for June, instances of violence of this scale, in a different part of the country, are unlikely to favour him.

Rwanda: France did nothing to stop the 1994 genocide, says report

Apoorva Sudhakar, 21 April 2021

In the news

On 19 April, a report commissioned by Rwanda said the French government "bears significant responsibility for having enabled a foreseeable genocide" in 1994. The report said: "From its knowledge of massacres of civilians conducted by the government and its allies to the daily dehumanization of the Tutsi...the French government could see that genocide was coming. The French government was neither blind nor unconscious about the foreseeable genocide." The report covers the period between 1990 to 1994 and outlines that the French government supported the Habyarimana government throughout the years, regardless of the above warning signs.

Further, it also analyses France's role after the genocide and accuses the French government of covering up, obstructing and promulgating false narratives on its role in the genocide. It also maintains that France made little effort to bring those who committed the genocide to justice. It includes witness accounts citing that "For those who have not lived it, to simply say the word 'genocide' is almost anodyne and cannot convey even the small piece of the horror contained in the testimonies."

Issues at large

First, an earlier report by France. Commissioned by Emmanuel Macron, on the role of France in the genocide, the report was published on 26 March. Known as the Duclert report, it was prepared by 15 historians who were given access to the government's archives. Similar to the Rwandan narrative, the

Duclert report says that France "bears serious and overwhelming responsibility" for the 1994 genocide as the government, under former President François Mitterrand, had a "strong, personal and direct relationship" with Habyarimana. It, however, clarifies that France did not actively want to be part of the genocide.

Second, the relations between France and Rwanda. Historian Vincent Duclert says that France was interested in expanding its influence in post-colonial Africa, and by establishing control over Rwanda, an erstwhile Belgian colony, Mitterrand expected to enter a new region. However, post-1994, the relations between the two countries have been strained, especially since Rwandan President Paul Kagame was a former leader of the Rwandan Patriotic Front; the RPF rebelled against the Habyarimana government. The Rwandan government accused France of harbouring criminals who murdered Tutsis during its rescue mission, Operation Turquoise.

Third, the role of the international community. While much of the focus has been on France, the Rwandan report does mention the role of other actors like Belgium, Uganda, and the US. During the genocide, the international community largely looked away to the extent that the US was hesitant to term it a genocide. However, Rwanda has not applied the same scale of scrutiny to other actors.

In perspective

First, the two reports could be a turning point in the relations between the two countries. Rwanda has welcomed Macron's acknowledgement of the French role in the genocide. Kagame also appreciated Macron's decision to have commissioned the Duclert report in 2019. He outlined it as France's efforts to "move forward with a good understanding of what happened."

Second, the report brings back the focus on France which has been on a spree of revisiting its colonial past. Prior to the Duclert report, Macron had admitted to France's role in the murder of a freedom fighter in Algeria, which was a French colony. Therefore, such steps reflect the maturity and resolve with which France is handling its past.

Israel-Syria: Continuing Missile Strikes

Jeshil Samuel J, 29 April 2021

On 22 April, a Syrian anti-aircraft missile landed near Israel's top-secret Dimona nuclear facility in the Negev desert. Although the missile did not cause any damage or injuries, the Israeli military immediately launched a counterattack the same day. It destroyed multiple defence batteries in Syria, including the one that fired the missile. Three soldiers were seriously wounded, and a Syrian officer was killed in the strike.

On 8 April, the Israeli military attacked an arms depot and military facility in the Al-Demas area near Damascus. Though Syrian air defences intercepted most of the missiles, a few managed to hit targets, killing three and damaging military infrastructures as well. The depot is said to have been used by the Hezbollah militias operating from Syria.

Issues at large

First, Israel's Syria problem. Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria a decade ago, Iranian troops have been a constant support to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The increasing number of Iranian troops in Syria was not welcomed by Israel, which shares its northern border with Syria. Iran also began supplying precision-guided rocket missiles to the militias operating under them in Syria. This became a huge security concern for Israel, which then began conducting regular air and missile strikes in Syria to disrupt the supply chain from Iran and keep the rising number of militants in check.

Second, Syria's Israel problem. Syria has not recognized Israel and does not have any bilateral ties. Despite their hatred towards Israel, Syria does not usually initiate or provoke any form of attack on the border they share with Israel. Most of the attacks that they conduct are retaliatory strikes against Israeli attacks. The recent missile attack near the Dimona nuclear facility was also reported by Syrian media outlets to be a defensive measure to prevent Israeli airstrikes near Damascus. However, the militias operating from Syria are said to have a keen interest in targetting Israel

and have conducted numerous attacks on the Israel-Syria border.

Third, the use of proxies in the conflict. Syria has been home to numerous religious and regional extremist groups even before the Arab Spring movement engulfed in 2011. Groups such as the Shabiha who primarily consist of the Alawite Muslims, have been used as proxies by the Syrian government since the 1980s. After 2011, extremist groups such as the Hezbollah, backed by Iran due to their Shiite roots, began gaining a foothold in Syria. To suppress the violent uprising quickly, President Assad sought help from Hezbollah and the Iranian government, giving Tehran more control in Syria and opportunities to attack Israel. On the other hand, Israel has conducted most of their attacks in Syria, targeting Iranian troops and Iran-backed groups.

In perspective

The constant missile strikes between Israel and Syria are nowhere close to an end. A report from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights mentioned that Israel had conducted 29 strikes in Syria since the beginning of 2021. The tit-for-tat game between Iran and Israel is causing massive losses to Syria, which has been used as a battleground for proxy wars. For now, Iran could limit its use of proxies to orchestrate attacks due to its crumbling economy, and Israel might want to rethink its security measures after getting attacked deep within its territory.

Somalia: Farmaajo reverses term extension following clashes in the capital

Apoorva Sudhakar, 29 April 2021

In the news

On 28 April, President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, also known as Farmaajo, reversed the decision to extend his presidential term by two years after clashes within security forces gripped the capital, Mogadishu, for three days. Farmaajo said he would appear before the parliament on 1 May "to gain their endorsement for the electoral process that

[was] agreed upon." He also asked the opposition not to initiate activities that could jeopardize the country's stability. However, the opposition maintained that they would not change their stand.

On 25 April, Mogadishu witnessed clashes between pro-government and pro-opposition units within the security forces. The New York Times reported that pro-opposition soldiers "took positions at several strategic locations in Mogadishu, drawing fire from pro-government forces." A former Somali president claimed that soldiers had attacked his residence and Farmaajo of the same. However, the Minister of Internal Security denied these claims and blamed foreign countries instead.

On 23 April, the UN Security Council called on all actors in Somalia to reach a consensus on the electoral process and "reject violence and resume dialogue as a matter of urgency and without precondition."

Issues at large

First, the political deadlock. The latest clashes took place after Farmaajo extended his presidential term by two years on 12 April. This measure was taken after the regional governments of Puntland and Jubbaland, and the federal government disagreed on the procedure for parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for February 2021. This was the second time elections were postponed; the parliamentary elections were postponed from December 2020.

Second, the clan-based electoral system. The presidential elections in Somalia are characterized by a clan system wherein clan elders choose lawmakers who elect the president. Further, clans do not have an equal share, and hence the system is called the 4.5 formula, where four major clans have an equal share, and the minority groups have half a share. Though the system has been under criticism from within and outside the country, the political leaders have not given it up. The clan divisions are also evident in the armed forces.

Third, external pressure on Somalia. Since 2012, external countries and organizations, including the US, EU and the UN, have backed the federal government in Somalia to prevent the country from slipping into a civil

war. Therefore, following Farmaajo's bid to extend the presidential terms, the US threatened to impose sanctions, and the EU also said it would consider "concrete measures."

In perspective

First, the recent clashes reflect the worsening internal political stability of the country. It also exposes the fragile nature of Somalia's clan-based system, whether in the political front or in the armed forces.

Second, the long-drawn political and electoral impasse shows that the political leaders, both federal and regional, lack a will to reach a consensus or a compromise. While the clashes have pushed Farmaajo to act in urgency, it is uncertain whether the immediacy will be reflected in other leaders.

Yemen: The Battle for Marib rages on

Jeshil Samuel J, 5 May 2021

In the news

On 25 April, Agency France Press (AFP) reported: "the (Houthi) rebels have taken full control of the North-West Kassara battlefield and made progress on western frontlines towards Marib". The AFP's report also stated that the battle for Marib had moved to the Al-Min area which is just 6 kilometres away from the city. However, the very next day, Yemen's Information Minister Muammar Al-Eryani denied the credibility of the news and declared it as misinformation.

On 2 May, Yemen's Major General, Abdu Abdullah Majili, announced that Yemini troops had successfully expelled militias from numerous locations in the Al-Kasara and Al-Mashjah region through a series of attacks. He also mentioned that three rebels were captured, and twenty rebel vehicles were destroyed during the attack. The Arab coalition forces provided air support during the attacks and managed to disrupt the flow of weaponry between rebel forces.

Issues at large

First, the long battle for Marib. It started in February' despite efforts calling for a ceasefire by the Saudi coalition in March, the rebels have been persistent in gaining control over the city. Since then, numerous airstrikes have been conducted by the Arab coalition targeting the Houthis, and the Houthis have retaliated with missile strikes of their own. The recent escalations, however, have been the bloodiest so far. The rebels have been attacking Marib relentlessly in successive waves, with the initial waves consisting of novice fighters (including children). Despite losing hundreds of fighters, the Houthis have continued to reinforce their ranks with members from nearby regions, thereby prolonging the fight.

Second, the significance of Marib. Not only is Marib the last major stronghold of the Yemeni government in the North, it also houses a large number of oil fields, refineries and natural gas pipelines. The city also has a dam that acts as the primary source of freshwater for the nearby regions. All these factors contribute to why Marib is sought after by both parties. The Houthis desperately want to hamstring the functioning of the government before entering into any negotiation. Victory over Marib would unquestionably cement their dominance in the northern region and cripple the government's functioning. The Yemeni government is therefore forced to protect Marib at all costs.

Third, the humanitarian crises surrounding Marib. Since the beginning of the conflict in Yemen in 2014, Marib has been a safe haven for hundreds of thousands of displaced citizens. The 140 temporary camps surrounding the city had been pivotal in sustaining the displaced Yemenis, but recently, these camps have faced Houthi hostility and an acute water and food shortage. Sadly, the escalation of violence around Marib has been so intense that it has displaced 13,600 of the city's own citizens, making them vulnerable to the ongoing violence, pandemic, and water shortages.

In perspective

A quick victory in Marib is not possible for either side. Houthi forces will have a hard time advancing to the city now due to the pushback from Yemeni forces and the mountainous

terrain surrounding them. The Yemeni government, on the other hand, unable to handle the rebels and the ongoing humanitarian crises at the same time would have to try and initiate a ceasefire immediately. In the end, no matter which side wins or loses, Yemeni citizens have been bearing the brunt of this war, with more than 80% of them in need of immediate aid.

Israel: Surge in violence, as the Hamas and security forces engage in rocket attacks, escalating the

Jeshil Samuel J, 12 May 2021

In the news

On 07 May, a series of skirmishes started between the worshippers and the Israeli police in the Al Aqsa mosque compound, with an exchange of stones, stun grenades and rubber bullets. The Palestinians had been protesting against any possible eviction in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood in East Jerusalem that would follow a Court verdict and the Israeli government's settlement policies.

On 10 May, riots broke out in the Old City of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount as Israelis celebrated Jerusalem Day. On the same day, rockets were launched from the Gaza Strip by Hamas, targeting Israeli settlements in Jerusalem. A spokesperson for the Hamas said that they had launched "a rocket strike against the enemy in the occupied Jerusalem in response to their crimes and aggression against the holy city and its aggression against our people in Sheikh Jarrah and Al-Aqsa mosque." In an immediate response to the attack, the Israeli military attacked the Gaza Strip with airstrikes, killing nearly twenty. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also made a stern statement after the attacks saying: "Israel will respond very forcefully. We will not tolerate attacks on our territory, our capital, our citizens and our soldiers. Whoever strikes us will pay a heavy price."

During 11-12 May, the rocket attacks by Hamas and Israel continued, targeting each other, with casualties increasing. According to a BBC report, violence is being witnessed in many parts, with Benjamin Netanyahu, stating

his plan to send in "military forces to help police maintain order in cities ruptured by violence."

Issues at large

First, the immediate trigger behind the violent clash. Minor confrontations between Israeli security forces and Palestinians had started a month ago when the Israeli police erected barriers to stop people from sitting in the Damascus Gate Plaza and after the Israeli government imposed a 10,000-person limit for the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The attempt to evict Palestinians in East Jerusalem to expand Israeli settlements has also been a primary trigger. Palestinian residents of the Sheikh Jarrah area had been ordered by a district court earlier to vacate their homes which in turn fuelled protests. The simmering tension erupted into uncontrollable violence after Israeli forces entered the Al-Aqsa Mosque and began using stun grenades and rubber bullets to suppress protests. On 9 May, despite the Israeli Supreme Court's decision to delay the order for eviction, clashes between protestors and Israeli forces have only intensified.

Second, the long-term issues plaguing East Jerusalem. Since the 1990s, the Israeli settlement plans have allowed the government to build settlement blocs within Palestinian majority areas of Jerusalem pushing nearly 1,40,000 Palestinians out of the city. In 2020, 170 Palestinian structures were demolished, and 385 people were displaced by the Israeli government to accommodate Israeli settlements. This increase in Israeli settlements have left Palestinians vulnerable and threatened despite international law stating that an occupying power cannot confiscate private property in the occupied territory. Israeli citizens, on the other hand, are pushed into confrontations with Palestinians despite being legally entitled by Israeli law to own land in the East Jerusalem region.

Third, the Israeli and Palestinian position and politics on the matter. Prime Minister Netanyahu clearly stated that Israel would firmly resist the pressure put on it not to build or expand in Jerusalem. He went on to say that "just as every nation builds in its capital and builds up its capital, we also have the right to build in Jerusalem". Conversely, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has vehemently

opposed the Israeli government's crackdown on the Palestinian population and has urged the UN Security Council to have a session on the ongoing issue. Due to the recent attacks carried out by Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip, President Abbas had to cancel celebrations for Eid al-Fitr.

Fourth, the sudden escalation with the Hamas intervening with the rocket attacks and Israel responding with a larger force. What was a local issue, related to a neighbourhood in East Jerusalem has now expanded into a full-scale conflict between Hamas and Israel.

In perspective

The recent escalation in violence has increased international support for the Palestinians living in Jerusalem. Countries such as Turkey, Jordan, Germany and France have shown concerns over Israel's policies towards Palestinians.

On a national level, the recent events could garner more support for PM Netanyahu, who needs public and political support to retain his position. PM Netanyahu could use the attacks by Hamas as an opportunity to increase Israeli presence in the Gaza Strip. On the local level, the confrontation between Jewish settlers and Palestinian residents in East Jerusalem would continue even after the large-scale clashes in the city subside.

Israel-Palestine: Who wants what?

Udbhav Krishna P, 19 May 2021

In the news

On 18 May, a White House statement stated that President Joe Biden had extended his support for a ceasefire in the Israel- Palestine conflict during the phone call with Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. As of 18 May, Gaza health officials reported that at least 212 Palestinians had been killed, including 61 children and 36 women, in more than a week of fighting. Meanwhile, ten people have been killed in Israel, including two children. Around 3,350 rockets have been fired by militants from Gaza, and retaliatory

air and artillery strikes by Israel have killed 130 Palestinian combatants.

On 16 May, Israel destroyed a 12-storey tower block in Gaza, that housed the US-based Associated Press and other news media, saying the building was also used by the Islamist militant group Hamas.

On 13 May, Israel carried out airstrikes on the Gaza strip, increased their deployment of troops and tanks along the Gaza border despite international calls for calm. Later in a statement, the Israeli army denied that any such ground offensive had started.

Issues at large

First, what does Israel want? In the immediate future, Israel would want the militants in Gaza to stop their rocket attacks and also disarm. Israel would also prefer the Palestinian families in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood to vacate their homes after the court ruling that Jewish families held historical claims to the land. In the long run, Israel would want the whole of Jerusalem as their capital. Israel would not let Palestinians claim more land for themselves as this could threaten the overall demography of the region, threatening the survival of the Jewish state.

Second, what does Palestine want?

Immediately, Palestine would want an end to the police violence in East Jerusalem and West Bank and the air and artillery strikes on Gaza. They demand the non-eviction of Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood. In the long run, Palestinians would want East Jerusalem to be the capital of the State of Palestine. However, the Palestinians are highly divided. The Palestinian Authority believes in a two-state solution and diplomatic negotiations with Israel; it does not want more Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In contrast, Hamas, which governs Gaza, believes in an armed struggle against Israel for Palestinian statehood. Hamas wants to gain more support in the West Bank as they feel Fatah is weak and they are the only strong resistance of Palestinians against Israel.

Third, what does the Arab world want? The Arab world has uniformly condemned the Israeli airstrikes in Gaza and Israeli police invasion into Jerusalem's Al Aqsa Mosque.

The UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, which had recently recognized Israel, also openly criticized Israel's policies and called for the support of Palestinians and defence of Jerusalem. Egypt, Qatar and Jordan are trying to negotiate a solution to the crisis. In the long term, they too agree with a two-state solution.

Fourth, what does the US want? The US wants a ceasefire and violence to end in the region. They have sent an envoy Hady Amr to diffuse tension between Israel and Palestine. In the long run, the US would want Israel to find an acceptable solution and accommodate the interests of the Palestinians.

In perspective

First, the international failure. The UN and other big and regional powers have failed to reach an understanding. They could not end the violence, pressurize the actors and broker a ceasefire. The United States, an ally of Israel, has blocked any statement from the UN. Second, countries like Egypt could not force Hamas to stop firing rockets and reach a ceasefire. Countries like Turkey are trying to garner support for the Palestinians and establish themselves as their messiah and improve their regional standing in the Middle East.

Israel-Hamas ceasefire: The long road to peace

Lakshmi V Menon, 26 May 2021

In the news

On 21 May, Israel's Cabinet voted to approve Egypt-mediated ceasefire with the Hamas in the Gaza strip, following 11 days of airstrikes and rocket attacks. Palestinians conducted celebratory gatherings in the occupied territories, and Israel removed emergency restrictions in rocket-hit areas. While both parties have claimed victory, they also maintained that the holding of the ceasefire would depend on ground circumstances.

During 25-27 May, Antony Blinken, as a part of his first visit as the US Secretary of State to the Middle East, met the leaders of Israel, Palestine, Egypt and Jordan. On 25 May, in a statement in Jerusalem, he said: "I traveled

here at the request of President Biden, who asked me to come to pursue four basic objectives. First, to demonstrate the commitment of the United States to Israel's security. Second, to start to work toward greater stability and reduce tensions in the West Bank and Jerusalem. Third, to support urgent humanitarian and reconstruction assistance for Gaza to benefit the Palestinian people. And fourth, to continue to rebuild our relationship with the Palestinian people and the Palestinian Authority."

In Jordan, he said: "We see the cease-fire not as an end, but as a beginning - something to build on." In a meeting with Mahmoud Abbas announced that the US plans to reopen the Jerusalem consulate "to engage with and provide support to the Palestinian people."

Issues at large

First, the international pressure on Israel and Hamas to declare a ceasefire. Israel and Hamas engaged in a series of airstrikes and rocket attacks against each other. The strikes that continued for 11 days resulted in asymmetric casualties, with Gaza suffering the most. Initial statements and requests from the rest of the world went unheeded. Finally, Egypt used its influence on Hamas to agree to a ceasefire, which was accepted by Israel.

Second, the differing stances by Israel and Hamas on ceasefire. According to Hamas, the maintenance of the truce is conditional on Israel "lift(ing) their hands-off Sheikh Jarrah (where Palestinians face eviction from their houses) and Al-Aqsa Mosque." However, Israel denies making such a promise and calls the ceasefire unconditional.

Third, the role of Egypt. The truce was mediated by Egypt, the only state having open communication lines with Hamas and Israel and sharing borders with both Israel and the Gaza strip. Despite an Egyptian blockade devastating the Gazan economy, Hamas being the Muslim Brotherhood's (a political movement banned in Egypt) militant Palestinian branch and the pro-government media of Egypt portraying Hamas as a threat, Egypt, was able to broker the cease-fire successfully.

Fourth, the call for a two-state solution. On 19 May, US President Biden called for de-

escalation and reiterated the two-state solution as the only way ahead to end the conflict. The idea of a two-state solution is decades old and has been there since the 1940s. Multiple discussions have been held on the idea, and there has been a considerable change in the position of multiple actors that include the Israelis, Palestinians, Arabs and rest of the world.

In perspective

The recent Israeli-Palestinian violence was the worst since 2014. Regardless of Israel's narrative, the reality is that Israel is the only sovereign authority in the conflict. Both sides have claimed victory over the eleven days of violence. The ceasefire's longevity also heavily depends on the ruling of Israel's Supreme Court on Palestinian eviction. A verdict in the eviction's favour could spur further protests and violence. Moreover, tensions post the ceasefire's announcement shows that the truce is not reflected at the popular level. Although Israel has "temporarily" lifted certain restrictions on the Al Aqsa, Sheikh Jarra persists as a complication.

Blinken's announcement reflects a commitment to the two-state solution and status-quo on the Haram al-sharif. He also promised aid to the Gazans but maintained that it would be kept out of Hamas' hands. The latter has been accused of siphoning international aid for procuring weapons, thus complicating international aid distribution among Gazans. The US is trying to bolster the internationally backed Palestinian Authority under Abbas and ensure the ceasefire holds. However, the ceasefire could crumble, as it did in 2014 when Israel attempted to execute Hamas's military commander Mohammed Deif.

Nigeria: Another mass abduction grips Niger state

Apoorva Sudhakar, 2 June 2021

In the news

On 30 May, gunmen kidnapped hundreds of students from the above-mentioned school. The exact number of children kidnapped has

not been confirmed. Aljazeera cites the Niger government's tweet, which said around 200 had been kidnapped; similarly, BBC quotes a school teacher who said 150 to 200 were kidnapped.

On 31 May, Premium Times reported that 11 of the total children abducted from an Islamic school in Niger state were released. The news report quoted Niger Governor's Chief Press Secretary said that the 11 were released because they "were too small and couldn't walk." Further, according to reports, "about 70 motorcycles, attacked 17 communities in Wushishi local Government Area where they shot several people while some women and children drowned as they tried to escape across River Kaduna."

On 29 May, the Kaduna Commissioner for Home Affairs and Internal Security confirmed that 14 students who had been abducted from the Greenfield University in April, were released; two others who had been kidnapped along with the students were also released.

Issues at large

First, the increasing frequency of kidnappings. According to an Aljazeera news report, more than 700 students have been abducted since December 2020. Further, in several of the recent mass abductions, the kidnappers have kept the victims captive for more than a month, a change from the earlier abductions of recent times, which would last no more than two weeks.

Second, lack of clarity on ransoms. The state governments, on several occasions, have reiterated their policy to not pay ransoms. However, parents of some students pay ransoms by themselves. For example, Premium Times reported that for the release of the Greenfield University students in Kaduna, parents paid more than 40 million Naira.

Third, kidnapping as an industry. The Council on Foreign Relations explains that in the past, kidnappers targeted wealthy personalities in order to extract maximum money. However, the CFR cites data from an intelligence firm that shows that the targets now include those from the poorer sections of the society. In such cases, the victim's families may not be able to pay the ransom, "and victims are much more likely to be killed."

Fourth, failure of the government's response. Apart from claiming to not pay ransoms, various governments have also said they would not negotiate with the kidnappers. However, this strategy has backfired. In the Greenfield University abductions, the kidnappers had killed five students and had threatened to kill more if ransoms were not paid. This had led to protests across cities but with no avail.

In perspective

First, the uptick in the number of mass abductions indicates that the government failed to see the trend and prepare itself to prevent such incidents. Further, while the government has denied paying ransoms or negotiating, it does not seem to have any other strategy to address the issue. It also reflects the lack of urgency and willingness on the part of the government.

Second, parents resort to paying ransoms as they have no other choice to bring their children back to safety. However, this has emboldened the kidnappers to detain students for longer periods as well as demand more.

Syria: No surprises in the election, as Bashar al-Assad returns

Jeshil Samuel J, 2 June 2021

In the news

On 26 May, Syria conducted its Presidential election despite heavy criticism and condemnation from the international community. Syrian ex-pats and refugees were allowed to vote a week earlier in Syrian embassies.

On 27 May, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was re-elected as President for the fourth time. He has been in power since 2000 and will hold office for the next seven years. Russia's President, Iran's President, Oman's Sultan and Hezbollah leaders congratulated President Assad on his victory.

Earlier on 3 May, Syria's constitutional court had selected two opponents to stand against President Assad in the elections. From 51 candidates, the court approved President Assad, deputy Cabinet Minister Abdallah Saloum Abdallah, and the head of the National

Democratic Front (NDF), Mahmoud Ahmed Marei, to contest in the presidential elections.

Issues at large

First, the election process. This is the second election to be conducted since the Arab Springs movement swept the country in 2011. With 18 million Syrians eligible to vote in the presidential elections, there was a turnout of 78.6 per cent (nearly 14 million voters). The elections lasted for 17 hours in 12,000 polling stations around the country with no independent monitors. However, delegates from Iran, Russia and Belarus were reported to be present during the elections to monitor it. The head of the Syrian parliament, Hammouda Sabbagh, announced the results of the elections on 27 May. According to the results, President Assad had garnered 95.1 per cent of the total votes, establishing his presidency for the fourth time. The UN has not recognized the elections since the government did not adhere to the UN mandates set for elections.

Second, the major issues with the elections. The legitimacy of the elections was questioned by many as it did not follow the UN Security Council resolution 2254, which was unanimously passed in 2015. The recent election was dubbed as a sham by the US, UK, Germany, France and Italy when it was announced in April. Voters within Syria and outside faced condemnation for participating in the elections. Syrian ex-pats and refugees in Lebanon were pelted with stones and beaten with sticks on the way to vote in Beirut. Students in Syria were forced to cast their votes by their universities with the threat of either being expelled or failed if they did not vote. Nearly eight million displaced citizens living in the rebel-controlled North-Western and North-Eastern parts of Syria did not cast their votes. The Syrian Democratic Council in its statement said: "We will not be part of the presidential election process and we will not participate in it."

Third, the weak opposition. Both the candidates selected by the government were not well known and did not have the same media coverage and presence as Assad. Abdallah Saloum won 1.5 per cent of the votes and Ahmed Marei of the NDF won 3.3 per cent. The NDF headed by Ahmed Marei is a small state-endorsed opposition party that has

long been criticized for being an extension of the government.

In perspective

Despite the international backlash, the elections have confirmed Assad's reign for the next seven years. The legal and constitutional framework of Syria also favours Assad and his regime. The country is in desperate need of a strong and stable government that would fix the economic depression and social unrest (all of which Assad promised to do). Though it might not be the best option, a strongman like President Assad could bring much-needed stability.

Burkina Faso: Another massacre in Africa

Apoorva Sudhakar, 9 June 2021

In the news

On 7 June, BBC cited AFP and reported that at least 160 people had been killed in a spate of attacks in northern Burkina Faso on 5 June; armed men had burned the local market and homes. According to AFP, 160 bodies had been recovered from three mass graves by local communities on 6 June. Meanwhile, Aljazeera reported that the death toll included seven children.

On 7 June, a statement from the African Union Commission Chairperson read that he "expresses his indignation and condemnation at this barbarity and calls once again for a prompt and vigorous regional and international response against terrorists in Burkina Faso and throughout the Sahel region."

On 5 June, the UN Secretary-General spokesperson released a statement: "The Secretary-General is outraged by the killing, early today, of over a hundred civilians, including seven children, in an attack by unidentified assailants on a village...He strongly condemns the heinous attack and underscores the urgent need for the international community to redouble support to the member states in the fight against violent extremism and its unacceptable human toll."

Issues at large

First, the threat of violence in Burkina Faso. According to the BBC report, the latest attack comes less than a month after 30 people were killed in eastern Burkina Faso. The UNOCHA's situation report on Burkina Faso says that more than a million people have been displaced due to violence since 2019. Further, the report links violence to the presence of non-state armed groups in the northern and eastern parts of the country.

Second, the perpetrators. As of 8 June, no group has claimed responsibility for the attack. Several media reports, however, link terrorist organizations such as the al Qaeda and Islamic State to the attacks. Apart from terrorist groups, armed bandits operate in the region for multiple reasons including the need to control access to resources. In 2020, the UN outlined a growing link between the terrorists, organized crime and intercommunal forces owing to "the absence of the State in peripheral areas."

Third, the larger instability in the Sahel region. The region has been vulnerable to political instability, armed groups and Islamist militants; three neighbouring countries - Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger - are hotspots of the same. For example, the attack in Burkina Faso shares similarities with the massacre of 137 people in Niger in March when gunmen had raided three villages. On the other hand, in May, Mali witnessed its second military coup in less than 10 months. A letter written to the AU Commission chairperson by activists, writers, and regional institutions, mentions that 2440 civilians had lost their lives in 2020 alone due to the instability and violence. Fourth, failure of regional and international response. The African Union has condemned all instances of violence and called for a stronger fight against militancy and extremism. However, no concrete plan has been followed up to address the situation. Meanwhile, France had intervened in the Sahel region in 2013 in order to address the militancy. However, in light of the latest coup in Mali, France announced the suspension of a joint military operation with the country.

In perspective

First, the scale of the attack signifies that the regional security situation in the Sahel is

undergoing an unprecedented deterioration. France's suspension of the joint military operation could also become a contributing factor to further instability in the region. Second, if the attacks have indeed been carried out by Islamist militants, then it signifies an expansion of extremism in the region. Therefore, the responsibility to address the root causes of the same lies with the governments of countries most affected.

Ethiopia: The Tigray region is inching towards a major 'famine', states an IPC report

Mohamad Aseel Ummer, 16 June 2021

In the news

On 10 June, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) published a report on Ethiopia for the period May-September 2021. It reveals that nearly 5.5 million people in the conflict-ridden regions of Tigray, Afar and Amhara are facing exacerbated food insecurity. It says that approximately 350,000 people are in 'catastrophe' (Phase 5) or the last level, the highest number after the 2011 Somalian famine. Further, 3.1 million people are in the 'Crisis' category (IPC phase 3) and 2.1 million in the 'Emergency' category (IPC phase 4). Over 50 per cent of all the household in the northern regions of Tigray have inadequate food consumption, and nearly one-third of all houses have only one meal per day.

On 11 June, UN humanitarian aid Chief Mark Lowcock commented: "there is a famine in the Northern region of Ethiopia". On 13 June, the G7 leaders have called for an uninterrupted access of humanitarian aid to the northern region to mitigate the impacts of the crisis.

On 15 June, the Ethiopian envoy to the UN "vehemently denied" the assessment and stated that the data are collected in a "very botched" manner.

Issues at large

First, the protracted war in Ethiopia and the conflict-induced displacement. The friction continues between the federal forces of the country and the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) militants. Contrary to the

government's claim that the war started in November 2020, ending by December, the fight continues. Thousands have crossed over to Sudan; many are internally displaced. According to the International Organization of Migration (IOM), most IDP camps are poorly facilitated and facing severe food shortages.

Second, hindrance in mobility and access to aid. The report observes that the roadblocks and other blockades placed by the Ethiopian and Eritrean troops have created significant difficulty for the humanitarian aid-workers and envoys to reach the conflict-hit region. The blockades also hinder the mobility of the common Tigrayans from reaching camps to receive aid and humanitarian assistance. The blockades have also resulted in difficulties in accessing medical care.

Third, continued disruption of agriculture and related activities. Approximately 80 per cent of the Tigrayan population is engaged in agricultural and pastoral activities for livelihood and for means of food. However, in 2020 the harvest was disrupted due to the conflict. The absence of agricultural and pastoral activities in the region has also added to the worsening famine. Further, the unavailability of food products has increased the market dysfunctionality, and food remains inaccessible for the rural population.

In perspective

It is unlikely that the report will make a significant impact in the region. The Ethiopian government has made it clear that the findings are not credible. An overall surge in the intensity of the famine is anticipated as the crisis is expected to worsen in the months ahead, causing further displacement, disruption of aid networks. Malnutrition and other health issues caused due to poor supply of nutrition are forecasted to rise and can escalate the death toll from the region.

Abiy Ahmed's administration will have to face fresh international condemnation and possibly sanctions if the situation deteriorates. This can also impact the outcomes of the general elections to be held on 21 June. Ethiopia being a key player in the Horn of Africa, the famine can have regional implications. A major migrant crisis is conceivable in the near future, causing further instability in the region.

Ethiopia: Federal government declares unilateral ceasefire after TPLF recaptures Mekelle

Apoorva Sudhakar, 30 June 2021

In the news

On 29 June, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) spokesperson vowed to clear the Tigray region off all "enemies." BBC quoted the spokesperson's remarks to CNN: "We will not stop until Tigray has been cleared of any and all enemy forces. We will do whatever it takes." On the same day, Tigray residents reportedly celebrated the recapture of Tigray by the TPLF. Meanwhile, the US State Department warned that if hostilities continue in Tigray, Ethiopia and Eritrea should be prepared for actions from the US.

On 28 June, TPLF troops seized the regional capital, Mekelle, forcing Tigray's interim authority appointed by the federal government to flee. Following this, the federal government declared a unilateral ceasefire. Al Jazeera quoted from the statement: "This unilateral ceasefire declaration starts from today 28 June 2021 and will stay until the farming season ends." The UN Secretary-General said he had spoken with the Prime Minister and said: "I am hopeful that an effective cessation of hostilities will take place."

Issues at large

First, a recap of the conflict in Tigray. The recapture of Mekelle comes eight months after the federal government declared the end of a military offensive on 28 November 2020. The offensive had been launched on 4 November in response to an alleged TPLF attack on federal military bases in Tigray. Though the offensive lasted only three weeks, the fallouts of the same led to a humanitarian crisis and rights violations including massacres, sexual abuse, and restrictions on aid supply. Differences between the TPLF and the federal government can be traced back to 2018 when PM Abiy Ahmed overthrew the TPLF-led government.

Second, the recent spate of violence. On 22 June, dozens of civilians were killed in a military airstrike on a village in Tigray; some witnesses claimed that around 40 people were

killed and some have pinned the figure at 80. In a separate incident, on 25 June, the Doctors without Borders (MSF) agency reported that three of its staff had been murdered in Tigray. Apart from the above incidents, several reports of violence throughout the eight months have been released.

Third, the uncertainty regarding the elections. On 21 June, Ethiopia held its parliamentary elections, which had previously been delayed twice since 2020. The postponement of elections in 2020 was a trigger for the worsening of relations between Tigray and the federal government. Meanwhile, the elections were boycotted by some opposition parties on the grounds of manipulation and harassment and polls were not held in Tigray.

Fourth, increased international attention on the crisis. Recently, the UN human rights chief said: "I am deeply disturbed by continued reports of serious violations of international humanitarian law and gross human rights violations and abuses against civilians by all parties to the conflict." Concerns regarding the conflict also include the role of Eritrea in targeting Tigrayans. After denying several times, the Ethiopian government admitted the presence of Eritrean troops along the Tigray borders and condemned their role in rights abuses. The EU and the US have repeatedly expressed concerns over the above; Eritrea and Ethiopia, under the TPLF-led government, had been at war for decades.

In perspective

First, the recapture of Mekelle is not surprising; after the federal government declared its victory in November, the TPLF retreated but had vowed to come back. The timing of the recapture - within a week of the elections - signifies that the move was well planned and that TPLF has a roadmap ahead. The TPLF had previously warned of action against Eritrea's presence in Tigray; therefore, any escalation between the two could have devastating impacts in the region.

Second, if Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed wins the elections and retains his position, he will have to deal with multiple crises, some of which were triggered by his policies; otherwise, another TPLF like uprising from another region of Ethiopia cannot be ruled out.

Libya: Berlin Conference stresses on Libyan-led and Libyan-owned political process

Apoorva Sudhakar, 30 June 2021

In the news

On 23 June, the Second Berlin Conference on Libya was hosted by the German Foreign Minister and the United Nations Secretary-General. A press release from the Federal Foreign Office of Germany acknowledged the improvement in Libya's situation and reiterated support to the interim Government of National Unity. However, the Conference also held that several measures were yet to be implemented and asked the interim government to ensure elections in December. Lastly, the Conference called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces without delay. The press release said: "We reaffirm our strong commitment to the UN-facilitated, Libyan-led and Libyan owned political process and the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national unity of Libya."

On 28 June, the UN Secretary-General Special Envoy for Libya addressed the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF). The Envoy reiterated from the Berlin Conference and said: "I encourage you to move beyond what divides you and to reach a consensus on a possible constitutional basis for the elections in December. By this, you will live up to your responsibilities."

Issues at large

First, the progress in Libya. In October 2020, the two warring sides in Libya – the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) and the parallel authority, Libyan National Army (LNA) - signed a ceasefire. Subsequently, an interim government was sworn in on 15 March with elected interim Prime Minister, President and Vice President who will ensure that parliamentary and presidential elections are held on 24 December 2021. As of 29 June, the ceasefire has been successful for the longest period in recent times. Previous Libyan-led and Libyan-owned ceasefires had failed as they focused on power-sharing between the GNA and LNA. However, the Berlin

Conference emphasizes an entirely new government.

Second, the external actors. The latest Conference included delegations from the UNSC's permanent five countries; Italy, Turkey, the UAE, the European Union, African Union, UN; and other African countries. The attendance of the European and Arab countries is particularly important as they were supporting different sides in the Libyan conflict. For example, Italy and France were supporting the GNA and LNA, respectively; similarly, Qatar and the UAE were also supporting the respective sides. All these countries have now unanimously called for a solution. However, Turkey differs from the rest of the countries on the troop withdrawal and insists on maintaining its forces in Libya as part of an agreement with the GNA. Currently, the UN estimates that over 20,000 foreign mercenaries are present in Libya.

Third, continued European interests in Africa. The Berlin Conference was first held in February 2020. Between the first and second Conferences, European countries, especially Germany and France have displayed an increased interest in Africa. For example, in March, France reopened its embassy in Tripoli after seven years. France has also been mending its relations with Rwanda, and the French President visited Rwanda in May. Similarly, Germany recognized the genocide between 1904 to 1908 in Namibia, which was a German colony.

In perspective

First, the solution to the conflict lies in the inclusivity of all conflicting parties in the new government. Therefore, the months leading up to December will be crucial as they will decide whether the emphasis on a "Libyan-led and Libyan owned" will reap the required results or not.

Second, the Conference is another step in European countries trying to correct their positions in Africa. The Conference also reflected a strong US interest in the finding a solution to the Libyan conflict.

South Africa: Arrest of Jacob Zuma triggers violence across the country

Anu Maria Joseph, 14 July 2021

In the news

On 11 July, President Cyril Ramaphosa called on the protesters to calm down, saying "there can never be any justification for such violent destruction and disruptive actions."

Meanwhile, military troops have been deployed in Gauteng province and in Zuma's home province of KwaZulu-Natal to tackle the violence.

On 13 July, the Washington Post reported widespread violence and looting. It reported more than 70 people getting killed and widespread looting across South Africa.

On 7 July, South Africa's former president Jacob Zuma handed himself to the police. He is due to serve his 15 months sentence for contempt of court as he failed to attend the enquiry on corruption charges during his presidency. Protests following the arrest are degenerating to larger violence in the country. At least 26 people have been killed and about 800 arrested.

Issues at large

First, arrest and the allegations. Jacob Zuma was forced out of his office by his own party, the African National Congress, in 2018 over corruption allegations. He has been accused of 18 charges of racketeering, corruption, fraud, tax evasion and money laundering. The charges also include the corruption over a multi-billion-dollar arms deal in 1999 and the state capture in 2017. On 26 May, he pleaded not guilty of all the charges saying he is a victim of conspiracies involving his enemies in the African National Congress.

Second, the divisions within the ANC. The party today is divided into two factions, one supporting Zuma and the other supporting Ramaphosa. The Zuma faction claims that Ramaphosa is using the court to maintain his leadership in the party. They argue that Zuma is a victim of political witch-hunting by Ramaphosa's allies.

Third, the spread of violence. The ongoing unrest in the country began as a protest against

Zuma's arrest but has now broadened to larger violence. Shops and malls have been ransacked, businesses set on fire and major highways blocked. The police say that the criminals and the opportunistic individuals are trying to enrich themselves under the situation. South Africa's consumer goods council warned that the unrest might lead to food shortages as deliveries have been disrupted, banking services and healthcare have also been impacted.

In perspective

First, the arrest of Zuma can be seen as a great achievement of the South African judiciary. It proved the accountability of the court in bringing equality before the law.

Second, but the split within ANC will be a great challenge for the party in regaining the public trust. The victims of the split will be the citizens as the governing party loses its balance. People are insecure with the government under the party in addressing their needs and issues.

Third, the pro-Zuma protests have crossed the line to larger violence. The multiple disturbances, triggered by poor economic conditions and the pandemic, may lead to larger unrest, poverty, unemployment and an increase in deaths.

Tunisia: New political crisis, as the President sacks the Prime Minister and dissolves the Parliament

Anu Maria Joseph, 28 July 2021

In the news

On 25 July, several cities in Tunisia witnessed multiple clashes between the protestors and police. The young crowds shouted "get out" demanding the government to step down. The protestors cited the government's negligence in handling the recent spike of Covid-19 cases and the economic and social turmoil. On the same day, President Kais Saied dismissed Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and suspended the Parliament with the help of the military. He said: "We have taken these decisions... until social peace returns to Tunisia and until we save the state."

On 26 June, Rached Ghannouchi, the Speaker of the Parliament and the leader of the Ennahda party described the President's decision as "a coup against the revolution and the constitution."

Issues at large

First, the protests before the "coup". Protesters called out the collapse of the health system under the flaring pandemic and socio-economic turmoil. Covid-19 deaths in the country crossed 300 fatalities per day by mid-July. Only seven per cent out of the 12 million total population is fully vaccinated. On 8 July, the health ministry described the situation as "catastrophic" as the health system has "collapsed" under the strain of the pandemic. According to government data, the Tunisian economy had a nine per cent downturn this year. The National Institute of Statistics recorded an unemployment rate of 18 per cent. However, youth unemployment is above 30 per cent. Lack of opportunities with poor economic reforms and development inflamed the public under hard Covid-19 restrictions. Second, the 'coup'. President Saied's decision to suspend the Parliament is termed a 'coup'. Being a semi-presidential system, Article 80 of the Constitution of Tunisia allows the President to assume executive power for 30 days in a situation of 'immense danger'. However, the Article says it is mandatory to consult with the Prime Minister and the Parliament Speaker. But, the constitutional court which was meant to settle the issue is still not established. Crucially, the 'coup' narrative is under debate.

Third, unstable government and power struggle. Even though President Saied and the Parliament were elected in 2019, it was only in August 2020, after multiple failed attempts, Mechichi took office and formed the government. Since then, the Ennahda party under Ghannouchi and President Saied continuously squabble over the cabinet reshuffling and the control of security forces. The fragile and short-lived governments stumbled to deal with the public grievances rather focused on internal struggles. Fourth, Tunisia and the Arab Spring. Tunisia, which ignited the Arab spring in 2011, was regarded as the only success among uprisings. However, the economic crisis, political dissatisfaction and hangover of transition still

haunt the country even after the ten years of revolution.

In perspective

First, Tunisians lost their faith in short-lived governments. As the focus goes back to the political struggles, there will be a further ignorance of the real issues that are essentially needed to be addressed. Second, but President Saied's efforts are the last hope for Tunisians. His power grab is an experiment on Tunisian democracy. Third, the 'coup' accusation by the opposition has now confused the public creating a fence between the supporters and the opponents. The confusion will potentially facilitate the ongoing protests.

Yemen: Houthi attack on the al-Anad base, an indication of the continuing confrontations

By Rashmi B R, 1 September 2021

In the news

On 29 August, the Houthis launched drones and ballistic missiles on the al-Anad military base in Lahij, a government-held southern province. Considered as one of the deadliest attacks in recent years, it killed at least 30 and wounded more than 60 soldiers belonging to the Southern Forces backed by the UAE and part of the Saudi-led Arab coalition.

On 31 August, the coalition stated that the Saudi air defence forces intercepted a drone launched targeting the Abha International Airport.

Issues at large

First, the stall of ceasefire talks. Saudi Arabia proposed a ceasefire plan in March 2021, aimed at lifting the blockades on Sana'a International Airport and the seaports of Yemen and ending six years of fighting that now includes multiple national and international actors. The plan and the talks were supported by the United Nations and backed by the United States. Following brisk diplomatic activities and high profile talks mainly held in Oman, the talks are now stalled after the parties failed to reach a deal. The drone attack comes against the backdrop of the failure of talks.

Second, continuing war and lingering stalemate. Yemen is marred by internal political differences and the fight between the Houthis and the internationally recognized government. The role of the external countries like the US, Arab countries and Iran fuelled the war further. The Marib offensive is one of the deadliest clashes in the six years, taking a heavy toll on the conflicting parties. While the Houthis seemed near victorious in capturing a resource-rich Marib, they are facing stiff resistance from the government forces and the coalition that have killed thousands of fighters in recent months.

Third, continuing confrontations. Even prior to the battle of Marib, the confrontations between the Arab coalition, especially Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, have occurred. While the Houthis have launched a series of attacks on the bordering cities, airports, and Aramco oil facilities, the Kingdom has responded by intercepting the drones and missiles.

Fourth, the sustenance of the Houthis. The Ansarallah started as a movement to overthrow the internationally recognized regime and gained substantial territorial control of Yemen. Over the years, they have been able to sustain, despite heavy military bombardments from the Arab coalition supported by the US. This speaks volumes about the support they receive from Iran and Hezbollah and also Tehran's expanse in the region.

Fifth, the Middle Eastern great game. Yemen is a battleground that is used by the regional states to establish their influence in the Middle East. 2015 marked the intensification of the war when the Arab coalition entered. As mentioned earlier, Iran and its proxies are supporting the Houthi rebels against the coalition. In other words, the war in Yemen has unfolded the larger geopolitical rivalries in the Middle East and the necessity of the key states to prove their sway over regional affairs.

In perspective

First, misplaced priorities. Yemen is experiencing the world's worst humanitarian crisis, claiming the lives of more than 233,000 people and the risk of one of the greatest famines. Yet, the fighting seems to occupy a central stage, and the misplaced priorities of the conflicting parties are evident. With the

war reaching a stalemate, the objectives of either side are far from achieved.

Second, the indifference of the international community. Yemen is not the first country to face such a crisis. Rwanda, Somalia, Syria, Afghanistan, and many others, have all been victims of long-lasting conflicts that have affected millions. Yet, the indifference and insensitivity of the international community have remained consistent.

Guinea: Another coup in Africa

Apoorva Sudhakar, 8 September 2021

In the news

On 5 September, an elite unit of soldiers ousted and arrested President Alpha Condé, followed by the suspension of the constitution, sealing of national borders, dissolution of the government and parliament, and replacement of regional governors with military commanders. Colonel Mamadi Doumbouya, who led the coup, justified the move citing "poverty and endemic corruption" under Condé's governance. Al Jazeera quoted Doumbouya: "The personalization of political life is over. We will no longer entrust politics to one man, we will entrust it to the people." Meanwhile BBC quoted the opposition coalition's founder: "I will say that I'm sadly happy with what happened. We don't want to be happy with a coup, but in certain circumstances like [the ones] in Guinea now, we will say we are really happy with what is happening because without that, the country will be stuck in [the] endless power of one person who wants to stay in power forever." On the same day, the UN Secretary-General tweeted: "I am personally following the situation in Guinea very closely. I strongly condemn any takeover of the government by force of the gun and call for the immediate release of President Alpha Conde." Similarly, the African Union, European Union, United States, Russia, France condemned the move. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) threatened sanctions in the absence of constitutional order.

On 6 September, the military leaders met with Condé's cabinet; according to news reports, government officials have been asked to surrender their passports and return their official vehicles. Hundreds of Guineans were

shown celebrating along with soldiers.

Issues at large

First, the political landscape in Guinea. Guinea gained independence from France in 1958. From 1958 to 1984, Ahmed Sekou Toure served as the president of the country. Following Toure's death, Lansana Conté took over the leadership through a military coup, and introduced a multiparty system in the 1990s but restrained from giving up his power. Following Conté's death in 2008, Captain Moussa Dadis Camara seized power through a coup. In 2010, the military government however agreed to a democratic transition. Second, Condé's controversial third term as President. Condé was the first leader in Guinea to be elected to power in a democratic transition in 2010 after serving as an opposition figure for decades. His election, on the promise of promoting and protecting human rights, was seen as a new beginning for the country, and he was re-elected in 2015. However, in 2020, Condé moved a referendum amending the two-term limit, thereby allowing him to run for a third term. The move sparked protests and violence in Guinea, and also resulted in nearly 30 casualties. Following this, several opposition leaders were arrested for their alleged role in the electoral violence that ensued.

Third, the military intervention. The coup was led by the Groupement des Forces Speciales (GPS). Condé had formed the GPS for his own protection. Doumbouya maintained that the coup was carried out in the interest of 12.7 million people. He said that in light of the lack of development, it was "time to wake up," adding, "The duty of a soldier is to save the country."

Fourth, the popular sentiments. People were seen celebrating the coup on 5 September draped in the national flag and enjoying themselves with soldiers. Dissatisfaction with Condé reached new heights with the referendum. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic unravelled inefficient governance and gaps within the healthcare system which has aggravated the general public's grievances. Other concerns include corruption, unemployment, and shrinking space for dissent.

In perspective

Given the history of coups and the history of the leadership in Guinea, it is unlikely that there will be a democratic transition in the near future. The coup was the aftermath of the slow burn within Guinea, fuelled by the above-mentioned reasons. Further, the opposition leader's happiness over the coup also indicates a flawed democratic system.

Guinea has now entered the list of countries undergoing political instability in Africa. Several African leaders have previously bypassed the two-term limit through measures like those adopted by Condé; for example, in 2020, Alassane Ouattara of Ivory Coast won his third term through similar amendments. Likewise, leaders from Burkina Faso, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, have also attempted to amend the constitution or have continued to hold on to power despite the two-term limits. Similarly, political instabilities have also become frequent in Africa, the Guinean coup being the third in just a year, after Mali witnessed two coups in August 2020 and May 2021.

Rwanda: 'Hotel Rwanda' hero Paul Rusesabagina sentenced for terrorism offences

Mohamad Aseel Ummer, 22 September 2021

In the news

On 20 September, Paul Rusesabagina was sentenced to 25 years of prison under charges of terrorism by a court in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. Rusesabagina had climbed to popularity after the release of the Hollywood movie 'Hotel Rwanda' in which he was portrayed as the humanitarian hotel manager that housed nearly 1200 Tutsis during the Rwandan Genocide of 1994. The prosecutors of the legal row had sought life imprisonment for Paul under several charges, including terrorism, kidnappings, arsons and forming a terrorist organization.

Ned Price, a US Department of State spokesperson, commented that the US is concerned by the verdict and questions the fairness of the trial. Belgium's Foreign Minister Sophie Wilmes resented the verdict and observed that Paul did not benefit from a

fair trial. Paul's supporters and human rights activists call the trial a political sham and accused the Kagame government of arbitrariness.

Issues at large

First, the political intolerance in Rwanda. President Paul Kagame has been criticized internationally for his totalitarian approach towards dissent and opposition at the domestic and international levels. Earlier in 2014, the Human Rights Watch had released a report titled 'Repression across Borders', which documents nearly 10 cases of mistreatment in the form of attacks and threats faced by critics in exile. Paul Rusesabagina is a prominent political figure and a critique of Paul Kagame and his administration. He has remained as a strong voice of the opposition coalition Rwandan Movement of Democratic Change (MRCD) overseas, especially in the west. He is also recognized to be among the leadership of the (MRCD). He is held responsible along with 20 other defendants for various acts of violence committed by the radical and armed wing of the Ihumure party called the National Liberation Front (FLN). Earlier in 2018, he openly expressed his support for FLN and called for armed resistance against the Kagame administration. However, he denies the allegation of being an active member of FLN. Many opposition figures and rights groups have condemned the trial as they view it as a strong expression of judicial unfairness.

Second, the questionable judicial trial. The Rwandan Intelligence Bureau detained Paul Rusesabagina from Dubai after being tricked to travel in a plane which he was given the impression would take him to Burundi, instead landed in Kigali. He was later kept in solitary confinement for nearly 250 days; according to Nelson Mandela rules for the treatment of prisoners (UN), this is a form of torture. Paul's legal team also accuses the Rwandan authorities of preventing proper audience with the defendant, and his international legal aids have been prevented from contacting him. In protest, Paul had boycotted the recent hearings while the other defendants attended.

Third, dwindling popular support to Paul Rusesabagina. The national hero has been facing increased criticism; many of his critics identify him as a 'manufactured hero' who had

unjustly benefited from the genocide. According to the state-run media, his popular image is largely a product of the western interpretation of the genocide and contradicts the facts. Authors like Alfred Ndahiro, in his work on the genocide, provides an alternative reality based on the accounts of the survivors of the genocide who were at the hotel Paul managed. Such campaigns have caused significant damage to Paul Rusesabagina's popularity in the country.

In perspective

The opposition has unequivocally condemned the verdict. "In a country where freedom is limited, all power is in the hands of the executive, how could a judge dare to take a decision incompatible with the wishes of the president" commented an opposition leader. Paul has been acquitted of creating and running an armed group, but with the remaining allegations, he is expected to serve his sentence.

Yemen: Houthis continue to capture territories

Jeshil Samuel J, 22 September 2021

In the news

On 16 September, nearly 50 pro-government troops and rebels were killed after clashes in the Al-Bayda province. According to military sources, a colonel and 19 other loyalists were killed in the clashes, and the Houthis had seized a few key areas from the government forces. The Sawma'ah district and the Mukayras District in Al-Bayda have come under Houthi control as per reports. The Houthis had launched the offensive at Al-Bayda weeks in advance to assert their dominance in Central Yemen.

On 18 September, nine people involved in the killing of Al-Sammad were publicly executed in broad daylight by the Houthis. Al-Sammad was the President of a Houthi-backed political party and was killed by a Saudi-led airstrike in 2018. After a rebel-controlled court found the 9 Yemenis guilty of spying for the Saudi-led coalition forces, the public executions were carried out with hundreds of onlookers in the capital city of Sanaa.

On 20 September, more than 30 rebels were killed in Marib after Saudi-led airstrikes hit Houthi reinforcements. The Marib region has been coveted by the Houthis for more than a year now. Despite the heavy casualties they suffer, the Houthis have continuously attacked Marib in successive waves. The rebels are also notorious for using young boys in their frontlines to soak up the enemy fire.

Issues at large

First, the incapable Yemeni government. Despite being backed by Saudi Arabia, the government under President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi has done very little to gain control over territories or mending ties with the Houthis. President Hadi's apathetic nature towards numerous issues since his time as Vice-President in 1994 has often raised concerns about his leadership. The lack of a transparent system had allowed corruption to fester within the government even before the conflict began in 2014. The unchecked corruption has impacted the management of essential resources and foreign aid within the country.

Second, the declining morale amongst government troops. Till 2020, the Yemeni military did a commendable job in deterring Houthi advances on multiple fronts. Even if they lost control over territory, the military (with the help of the local tribes) would immediately regain control over the territory. However, this will to fight has seen a decline in recent times, mainly due to the lack of funding and proper leadership in the military. The military has also adopted reactionary strategies over proactive strategies, thereby reducing the number of offensive operations.

Third, the US withdrawal of support to the Saudi-led coalition. From the time Tim Leaderking was appointed as the US Special Envoy for Yemen (in February), the US strategy towards the war in Yemen has changed significantly. To end the dire humanitarian condition plaguing Yemen, the US decided to stop supporting the Saudi-led coalition logistically and financially. In early September, the US started removing its Patriot missile defence batteries from Saudi Arabia, despite the kingdom facing numerous Houthi ariel (missile, mortar and drone) attacks in recent times. The US deciding to take a

diplomatic route to solve the conflict has emboldened the Houthis.

In perspective

The distressing humanitarian conditions of the Yemeni public and the grave human rights violations committed by the Houthis have made the conflict in Yemen one of the worst the world has seen in recent years. With no sense of accountability to the Yemeni public or the international community, the Houthis have imposed their reign of terror through local courts. The tribes who oppose the Houthi rule are suppressed with an iron fist, and the public who show dissent are tortured and killed. To make matters worse, the Yemeni government still plays second fiddle to external powers and has no true voice or power of its own.

Sudan: Tensions flare-up as the military dissolves the civilian government

Mohamad Aseel Ummer, 28 October 2021

In the news

On 25 October, General Abdel Fattah Burhan, head of Sudan's armed forces, in a televised broadcast announced that the civilian leadership of the transitional government has been dissolved due to political infighting which can lead to a civil war. Prior to the announcement, various news sources reported heavy deployment of security forces in the capital - Khartoum and key civilian leaders like Prime Minister Abdella Hamdook being detained from their residences.

Government supporters who had been demonstrating since last week as a response to a call for military coup took to the streets in Khartoum and other major cities demanding an immediate release of detained leaders and reinstating the civilian government back to power. The armed forces responded with live ammunition and military-grade weapons to disperse the protesters who gathered in front of important military and governmental establishments. By the second day, with a military enforced lockdown in the capital, seven individuals were recorded killed and

nearly 140 wounded, with some in critical conditions as the military struggles to re-establish order.

The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned the military take-over and called out for the immediate release of the civilian leaders, including the Prime Minister, in a statement. The EU Policy Chief Joseph Borell expressed strong contempt over the coup and said, "the actions of the Military represent betrayal of the revolution and the transition". Chairperson of African Union Moussa Mahamat demanded the immediate release of the detained leaders and reminded that "dialogue and consensus is the only relevant path to save the country and its democratic transition." Sudan's neighbors like Egypt and Ethiopia have expressed their concerns over the developments in Khartoum as any rise in tensions can ignite a spill-over causing regional instability.

On 26 October, White House Spokesperson Ned Price informed that Secretary of State Antony Blinken held a dialogue with Abdella Hamdook over telephone and re-stated his concern over the developments in Sudan.

Issues at large

First, the multiple attempts by the military to jeopardise the civilian leadership. With the civilian leadership being dissolved, the majority of the Sudanese population believe that the transition chalked out in 2019 has been entirely jeopardized. It is unlikely that the military would surrender its control and facilitate the elections expected to be held in 2023 as the military has previously made multiple attempts to monopolize governance in the past two years, which eventually strained the relations between the civilian and military leadership of the interim government.

Second, the rights violation amid the protests. The excessive and brutal force used by the military to control the protesters has raised international concerns as death tolls are expected to climb in the coming days. Human Rights Watch has already condemned the violence and stated, "the coup is a major blow to the Sudanese transition". Various News agencies have also reported that there are internet and communication blackouts in the

country, and some suggest that the military has taken complete control over State media.

Third, the deterioration of the economy. The plummeting economy is expected to take further blows in the coming days. The Eastern port of Sudan, a major shipping point that facilitates international trade is under a blockade enforced by local tribesmen. The restrictions are expected to be temporarily lifted, but analysts suggest that the instability lurking in the country can prevent foreign trade and with the chances of sanctions and the Biden Administration's decision to suspend a financial assistance package worth 700 million USD, Sudanese economic future seems bleak.

In perspective

First, the tensions can escalate as the larger Sudanese population seems convinced that military administration cannot be the most promising option, and with the civilian leaders, except for Hamdok and his wife who were returned to their residence according to the military, while others being detained the ongoing protest will reach intensified extends causing further loss of life and damage to Sudan's political landscape. On 27th, The Doctor's Union has officially declared their active solidarity along with various other civilian organizations and are expected to participate in the ongoing protests.

Second, the international community is evidently concerned about the recent developments in Sudan and any further hinderance to the transition can place the country in a critical position. For instances, in December 2020, after 27 years US removed Sudan from the list of States which sponsored terrorism. Without a clear de-escalation of the current tensions, Sudan could be blacklisted or become a pariah state.

Ethiopia: One after a year of the Tigray conflict, back to square one

Apoorva Sudhakar, 4 November 2021

In the news

On 4 November, Ethiopia marked one year of the beginning of the Tigray conflict after the federal government launched a military

offensive into the country's northern region in 2020.

On 1 November, the Ethiopian cabinet declared a state of emergency and called on the citizens to defend the capital city Addis Ababa from the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The justice minister termed the situation with the TPLF a threat to Ethiopia's "existence, sovereignty and unity" and said the danger cannot be averted "through the usual law enforcement systems and procedures." The development came after the TPLF claimed to have captured two towns in Tigray's neighboring region, Amhara. The TPLF spokesperson said: "We have to make sure that our children are not dying from hunger and starvation. We have to make sure that there is access to food, so we'll do what it takes to make sure that the siege is broken. If marching to Addis is what it takes to break the siege, we will."

On 2 November, the head of Addis Ababa's Peace and Security Administration Bureau directed residents to register their firearms within two days. The chief also said that the youth would be recruited and organized to coordinate with the security force.

Issues at large

First, a brief recap of the conflict. The ongoing conflict flared up on 4 November 2020, when the federal government ordered a military offensive into Tigray, alleging that the TPLF had attacked some federal military bases. The TPLF justified its attacks claiming that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had plans to send soldiers into the region as it defied federal orders not to conduct elections; despite the orders, the Tigray region held elections in September 2020. On 28 November, PM Abiy declared an end to the offensive and announced the capture of Tigray's capital, Mekelle. However, after a brief retreat, Tigrayan forces returned to fight, and in June 2021, Tigrayan forces recaptured Mekelle; since October 2021, Ethiopia has been carrying out a series of airstrikes on Tigray.

Second, the unraveling of ethnic fault lines. Following the outbreak of the conflict in Tigray, different ethnic groups have exploited the situation leading to massacres of rival communities in other regions like Afar,

Amhara, and Oromia. Some of the incidents include the Mai Kadra massacre and repeated clashes between the Oromos and Amharas. Ethnic violence is also cropping up across other regions in Ethiopia, like in the country's west, where the Gumuz has targeted both Amharas and Oromos.

Third, the role of regional actors. The tensions between Eritrea and the TPLF can be traced back to the 1990s when the TPLF led the ruling coalition in Ethiopia. Following the military offensive in November 2020, the TPLF accused Eritrea, Ethiopia's neighboring country, which borders Tigray, of siding with the Ethiopian troops. After dismissing these claims several times, PM Abiy confirmed the presence of Eritrean troops in March 2021. Despite these developments, regional organizations like the African Union have not come down on Ethiopia or Eritrea. In August, professionals including former chief justices, authors, academicians from across Africa wrote an open letter criticizing the AU for the "lack of effective engagement" in the conflict.

Fourth, mounting international pressure. The United Nations, United States, and European Union have repeatedly called for an end to hostilities, reiterating that there is no military solution to the conflict. The US had also placed sanctions on the Chief of Staff of the Eritrean Defence Forces for the alleged role in abuses against Tigrayans. Further, rights organizations like Amnesty International have released several reports on the rights abuses in the region and have called for international action. However, PM Abiy has brushed aside such developments and termed them conspiracies of the West.

Fifth, the worsening humanitarian conditions. The actual number of casualties over the last one year remains unknown; meanwhile thousands have fled to Sudan. Media outlets like The New York Times have reported on mass rapes at the hands of security forces in Tigray; Eritrean troops have also been accused of systematic rape in the region. In another development, the UN has issued several warnings of famine in Tigray, the risk of malnourishment among pregnant women, and acute malnutrition in children under five years. In short, the humanitarian conditions seem to deteriorate over the days.

In perspective

One year since the beginning of the conflict, the situation seems to be spiralling down for Ethiopia. Despite having declared a victory within three weeks of the conflict, with the airstrikes in October, Ethiopia and Tigray are back to square one. Though PM Abiy won the long-delayed elections held in July; however, the situation in Tigray seems to be going out of his control. Once the West's hero, Abiy Ahmed seems to have fallen out with the international community. Meanwhile, the TPLF finds it difficult to sustain its fight without support; reports suggest that the TPLF and the Oromo fighters had joined forces during the conflict. The situation is not suitable for either side.

On the humanitarian front, the international community is rightfully concerned; however, calling for an end to hostilities and imposing sanctions will not convince the two sides to give up their fight.

Turkey, Russia and regional issues in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

Apoorva Sudhakar, 8 October 2020

In the news

On 5 October, Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service warned that escalation of conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region posed a threat of Islamist radicals to Moscow. Meanwhile, despite Russia, France, and the United States calling for an unconditional ceasefire, Turkey has come out in support of Azerbaijan and said that without a sustainable solution, a ceasefire is meaningless.

On 27 September, clashes erupted between the two countries resulting in at least 300 deaths including civilians and declaration of martial law in both countries.

Issues at large

First, Turkey's increasing assertiveness in the region. Armenia claims that Turkey has been sending fighters to the region, including from Syria and Libya. Though Turkey has denied claims of sending mercenaries to Azerbaijan, Erdogan has maintained that support for

Azerbaijan is a part of Turkey's quest for its "deserved place in the world order." France and Syria have blamed Turkey for crossing the red line and stirring up the conflict.

Second, Russia's hesitations to get involved in the conflict. Russia, which has enjoyed relations with both the former Soviet blocs, has sold arms to the two countries but Russia's defence pact guarantees security to Armenia. Moscow may, however, not extend the support in the conflicted region because it is internationally recognized as a part of Azerbaijan. Moreover, this is an opportunity for Russia to counter the current Armenian leadership's anti-Kremlin politics.

Third, Iran as a balancing actor. Despite sharing a border with Azerbaijan and having a common Shia ethnicity, Iran has stayed away from getting involved in the conflict and has called for negotiations. However, in the past week, small demonstrations were held in support of Azerbaijan, including in Tehran and Tabriz.

Fourth, Azerbaijan's role in Europe and Turkey's energy security. The Nagorno-Karabakh region is an important transit route for the supply of oil and natural gas to the European Union and Turkey from Azerbaijan which produces oil up to 800,000 barrels per day. The pipeline along this route delivered 9.2 billion cubic meters of natural gas to

Turkey in 2019 and is due to start supplying Greece and Italy with up to 3 per cent of the EU's total supply next month.

In perspective

On 5 October, NATO Chief Jens Stoltenberg called for a ceasefire. However, Turkey's hardline stance on the conflict raises questions on NATO's effectiveness. Further, the Minsk Group, formed under the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), to mediate between the two countries over the 1992 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, has failed to address the conflict today. As the Group is headed by France, Russia and the US, the conflict would pave the way for Turkey to marginalize the Minsk Group. Azerbaijan, too, has said it has lost patience with the OSCE's

failure to resolve the conflict and demands Turkey be included in any further negotiation.

On 7 October, Iran warned if fighting between Azeri and ethnic Armenian forces in the South Caucasus prolongs, a regional war is inevitable. If so, the main external actors would be Russia and Turkey. Since the US role in the region has been decreasing, other powers like France and Iran may also enter the conflict which could lead to scenarios similar to those in Syria and Libya or the East Mediterranean.

Peace and Conflict in 2021

Europe and the Americas

The US: Trump impeached by the House, as a disorderly transition looms large

D. Suba Chandran, 14 January 2021

In the news

On 13 January 2021, the US House impeached President Donald Trump for the second time. The vote was passed with a majority with 232-197; ten Republicans joined the Democrats in passing the vote. Nancy Pelosi, the House Speaker, was quoted stating: "We know that the president of the United States incited this insurrection, this armed rebellion, against our country...He must go. He is a clear and present danger to the nation that we all love." A section amongst the Republicans, who have criticized Trump, consider the House's latest move would not be the best way to go. Kevin McCarthy, the House Minority Leader, was quoted to have stated: "A vote to impeach would further divide this nation, a vote to impeach will further fan the flames, the partisan division."

On 13 January, according to a New York Times report, the National Counterterrorism Center and the Justice and Homeland Security Departments have warned of instability. Quoting a bulletin, the report says, "The 'boogaloo,' a movement that seeks to start a second civil war, and extremists aiming to trigger a race war 'may exploit the aftermath of the Capitol breach by conducting attacks to destabilize and force a climactic conflict in the United States'."

On 12 January, the House formally asked Vice President Mike Pence to make use of the 25th Amendment that provides a provision to remove President Trump on the ground that he is "incapable of executing the duties of his office." However, the Vice President refused to follow that option; according to Pence, such a course would neither be in the US's best interest nor consistent with the American Constitution.

On 12 January, the Army Secretary finalised to strengthen Washington's security with National Guards, which would be armed to

secure the Capitol Hill against the Trump supporters. This is being done to prevent the latter from disrupting Joe Biden while he takes over as the next American President on 20 January 2021.

On 12 January, the YouTube, "in light of concerns about the ongoing potential for violence," suspended President Trump's social media account. In a statement, it also said that it had removed new content uploaded in Trump's channel. Earlier Twitter and Facebook had also suspended the accounts of Trump.

Issues at large

First, the political fallout of the violence in Capitol Hill. The violence inside the Capitol Hill led by Trump supporters' has brought many Republicans to condemn the act and the entire Democrats – both in the House and in the Senate. One of the reasons for the Democrats to push the resolution despite being a minority in the Senate emanates from this recent development. Though the House led by the Democrats would have preferred the Vice President to remove Trump from office, using the 25th amendment, they got ready to initiate the impeachment process. Outside the Capitol Hill, there is larger support for the move. Many Americans consider the violence on 7 January led by Trump's supporters as sedition and an attack on the US democratic values and institutions.

Second, setting an accountability process against Trump, even if the impeachment process does not get a necessary vote in the Senate trial. To impeach Trump, the resolution also needs two-thirds majority support in the Senate. The Democrats do not have that number; even if the Republicans favour the resolution, it can be done only on 19 January, when the Senate reconvenes. 19 January would be the last day for Trump as the President. So, what would the impeachment achieve? The House is aware of this fact but wants to hold Trump accountable, for inciting the mob to target the Congress.

Third, the emergence of right-wing groups in the US, including the "Proud Boys." Though this was obvious during the last one year vis-à-vis the Black Lives Matter movement, this is a pre-BLM phenomenon, highlighting the changes taking place within the American

society. Racial relations and democracy within the US, cannot be taken for granted anymore. Whether Trump was the product of the above phenomenon or aggravated the existing fault lines would need a larger discussion.

In perspective

First, the threat to democracy and internal harmony should be the clear and present danger for Joe Biden, as he takes over as the new President on 20 January. The fact that there are fears over violence on that day says so much about what should be Biden's immediate priority.

Second, American democracy and internal stability as a role model for the liberal societies elsewhere. The US has a duty to address both; democracies worldwide are under distress, with authoritarian rulers and protest movements. The US has to be a source of stability.

The US: President Biden issues 17 executive orders on day one

D. Suba Chandran, 21 January 2021

In the news

On 20 January 2021, Joe Biden became the 46th President of the United States. In an address towards healing and pursuing a practical approach, he declared: "Politics doesn't have to be a raging fire destroying everything in its path. Every disagreement doesn't have to be a cause for total war. And, we must reject the culture in which facts themselves are manipulated and even manufactured." He also pledged to the fellow Americans on the first day of becoming the President, "I will be a president for all Americans – all Americans. And, I promise you, I will fight as hard for those who did not support me as for those who did."

On the same day, Kamala Harris was sworn in as the Vice President of America, the first woman to occupy the office.

On the same day, in a record during the recent decades, President Biden showed urgency and a well-planned strategy as he issued several directives on the first day of assuming office.

These directives cover a wide spectrum of internal issues focussing on COVID-19 management to rejoining the Paris Agreement and relaxing the visa restrictions for people from Muslim and African countries.

Issues at large

First, a relatively smooth transition, despite the Trump tantrums and political uneasiness in the national and State capitals. The last two weeks, especially since the 6 January break-in at the Capitol Hill by a mob of pro-Trump supporters, there has been a tense situation in Washington and across the rest of the US. Within the Congress, the Democrats led by the House Speaker Nancy Pelosi passed a House resolution impeaching Donald Trump for the second time. This happened after former Vice President Mike Pence refused to relieve Donald Trump using the provisions under the 25th Amendment. Outside the Congress, there was a fear that the Trump supporters would violently intervene during 19-20 January 2021, disturbing the swearing-in of Joe Biden. Across the States and in Washington, security forces were strengthened to avoid any untoward incident.

Second, the fallouts of Trump's exit. Dealing with the domestic and global fallouts of Trump's actions during his Presidency, especially the last year would be a bigger challenge for the new President and his team. Internally, the nation stands divided. It is easy for Biden to say, as he did while swearing-in that through the "Civil War, the Great Depression, World War, sacrifice and setbacks, our better angels have always prevailed...we can do that now." Easier to say; the road ahead for Biden to ensure that better sense prevails needs larger support, greater dialogue and more importantly a bigger heart with patience to heal. The swearing-in of Kamala Harris, the first woman to be the Vice President of the US, should provide the social space that Biden is looking for. However, this should not become a false start; there were similar expectations when Obama became the President. After two terms of Obama, the US has to witness a "Black Lives Matter" movement, highlights structural issues within the US. The task before Biden and Harris is challenging.

Third, the long list of directives that Biden issued on day one of assuming his office underlines the urgency in which the US has to engage the rest of the world, with a positive framework. During his last four years, Trump ensured that the US broke or left international commitments – from the Paris Agreement to the WHO. Biden's first day efforts hint the changes to come. Rest of the world should welcome.

In perspective

For Biden, the challenge is not just rebuilding, but building better – both internally and externally. A vibrant and engaging democracy in the US is an international need of the day. With spaces for democracy and dissent shrinking across the world, what happened in the US was during the last few months was disappointing to those who believe in the values of democracy, and its process. Biden has to rebuild these values better so that the American democracy becomes a beacon again.

Internationally, Biden has to build a better US engagement with the rest of the world – both at the State and society levels. While Trump tried to engage with the authoritarians from Russia to Saudi Arabia to North Korea, he let down the American allies in Europe. Biden has to rebuild ties across the Atlantic and also across the Pacific. His first-day directives on climate change and the migration shows his positive intent. He has to build further and consolidate.

Never before the rest of the world was looking at a new American President, with so much hope and expectations. Biden has this responsibility.

Russia: Pro-Navalny protests turn anti-government

Harini Madhusudan, 28 January 2021

In the news

On 23 January 2021, following the arrest of opposition leader Alexey Navalny, protests erupted in Russia and have begun to escalate into a movement against the leadership at Kremlin. What began as a call for the release of Navalny has garnered support from

hundreds of thousands of protesters driven by long-term frustration towards the government and the failing economy. Dozens of Navalny associates in various cities were detained before the protests. Additionally, more than 50 journalists were "arbitrarily detained" during the protests.

On 23 January, more than 3900 people, including Navalny's wife, have been detained. Navalny released a feature-length video on YouTube titled, "Putin Palace" that has attracted 67 million views. The palace is said to be situated at Gelendzhik by the Black Sea and alleged that people close to Putin paid for the palace.

Issues at large

First, Navalny in the limelight. Since August 2020, Navalny has been in the news after a near-fatal poisoning of a military-grade nerve agent. In the later months of 2020, his team released a recording of an intelligence operative confessing to the attempt of killing him. In December 2020, marking the end of his probation, the Russian police began forcing his return, with a warning of seizing his assets. By 19 January 2021, Alexey Navalny was ordered to be jailed for 30 days after his return from Germany. The hasty process to arrest him drew much attention. In a video statement released after the ruling was announced, Navalny said, "Don't be afraid, take to the streets," "Don't come out for me, come out for yourselves and your future."

Second, responses to the arrests and protests. The public protests saw many youths take to the streets. There is strong criticism against detention and human rights groups have joined the Western governments in calling for Navalny's release and condemning the crackdown on peaceful protests. G7 leaders have said that the detention is politically motivated and the Russian forces are using violent suppression against the protesters. The Reporters Without Borders (RSF) have called on the EU to impose sanctions on Russian officials for the journalists' arbitrary detention. The US has announced that they support the immediate release of Navalny. While Navalny accuses the Kremlin of carrying out the poisoning against him; Kremlin accuses Navalny of being supported by the US.

In perspective

The arrest of Navalny and the subsequent dissent on the protesters has drawn global outrage with a chorus of calls for his immediate release. He can be seen as a driving force of the protests. However, Russia's current situation emphasizes the underlying issues of rising costs of living and corruption at multiple levels of the system. Navalny's team has called for more demonstrations on 31 January and 2 February when a court is scheduled to consider motions to convert his suspended sentence into a real prison term. Hence, we can expect the protests to gain further momentum in the coming weeks.

Russia: Alexy Navalny sentenced to jail; protests intensify against his arrest

Harini Madhusudan, 4 February 2021

In the news

On 2 February, a Moscow City Court declared Alexy Navalny guilty of breaking the terms of an earlier case from 2014. He was initially sentenced to three-and-a-half years; since, he had failed to regularly report to the Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN), the Court has stated that his excuse for non-appearance as insufficient, converting his suspended judgement into a real one.

On 2 February, public protests followed the arrest; an additional 1,400 people have been detained.

Issues at large

First, Russia's approach to Navalny. He is considered Putin's harshest critic and is in a personal battle with Russia's leadership. During the court session, he has called President Vladimir Putin a "poisoner", blaming the latter for the attack against him in August 2020. With the arrest now and the detention of the majority of Navalny's colleagues from the anti-corruption party, Russia has taken a firm stance to suppress the movement against him.

Second, domestic and international support for the release of Navalny. On 23 January, 3,900

people were detained after thousands of demonstrators turned up in over 100 cities demanding his release. Last Sunday (31 January), the protests continued. Protests erupted on the day of his arrest where videos of the police beating the protesters emerged on social media and the protesters were heavily outnumbered by the security forces who were seen in helmets and body armours. Navalny has millions of fans across Russia for his criticism of Putin and the United Russia Party. Internationally, Australia, Germany and the UK have raised concerns over the rationale behind his arrests. Boris Johnson called the court ruling "pure cowardice," on Twitter. The Council of Europe stated that the judgement "defied all credibility." However, Russia upholds its 'foreign interference' argument towards the protests.

Third, the Yves Rocher case. In 2014, Navalny was found guilty for embezzling 30 million roubles from two companies, including the cosmetic company Yves Rocher, and was sentenced for three and a half years. He is said to have already served up to 10 months in house arrest. For years he led nationwide protests against the ruling party, but in 2018 he was barred from challenging Mr Putin at the ballot box, because of the court conviction for embezzlement.

In perspective

The leadership in Russia would want to keep Alexy Navalny in jail for as long as possible to suppress the movement against President Putin. The immediate priority would be to ensure Navalny can no longer organize/ call for unauthorized street protests against his arrest or the corruption. The enthusiasm of the demonstrations has already seen a downfall and can be expected to fizzle out in the following weeks. The Russian government is seen determined to crack down on the situation before it expands further.

US and Iran: Biden and Khamenei on sanctions and renewing nuclear negotiations

D. Suba Chandran, 11 February 2021

In the news

On 7 February, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran made a statement on the removal of sanctions as a precondition for Iran to return to its nuclear commitments. The Washington Post referring to the State TV quoted: “If (the U.S.) wants Iran to return to its commitments, it must lift all sanctions in practice, then we will do verification ... then we will return to our commitments.” The report also quoted the Ayatollah saying “This is the definitive and irreversible policy of the Islamic Republic, and all of the country’s officials are unanimous on this, and no one will deviate from it.”

On the same day, when Joe Biden was asked in an interview whether the US would remove sanctions first in order to get Iran back to the negotiating table, he responded negatively saying that Iran should stop enriching Uranium first.

On 10 February, the Wall Street Journal, referring to an IAEA report that it had access to, reported that “Iran has produced a material that is banned under the 2015 nuclear accords and could be used to form the core of a nuclear weapon.” According to the WSJ, the “material produced was a small amount of natural uranium metal.”

Issues at large

First, the new US administration and an old issue in the Middle East. Curbing Iran’s nuclear capability to produce nuclear weapons has been one of the primary goals of the American administrations under different Presidents during the last few decades. Until the Obama administration, sanctions were used as a primary tool to prevent Iran from pursuing the nuclear weapon option. Under Obama, the US tried to approach Iran with a negotiation strategy, thereby halting the sanctions approach. Along with a few other countries, the US in July 2015 signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA); besides the US, China, France, Russia, the

United Kingdom and Germany are a party to the agreement. In 2018, Trump announced unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA without any consultation with other members, and reimposed sanctions on Iran, as a part of his new maximum pressure strategy.

Second, the policy options for the new US administration. Biden earlier did underline the need for the US to return to the JCPOA. He was a part of the Obama administration, that negotiated the JCPOA with Iran. However for Biden, so much had happened between July 2015 (when the Iran nuclear agreement was signed) and January 2021 (when Biden became the President). In a statement last week, Biden announced the “US is back” and “diplomacy is back” strategy and outlined his intentions on Yemen and Saudi Arabia; however, he was silent on Iran.

This underlines the huge differences within the US policymaking institutions on Iran – from the Congress to State Department. Biden will have to build consensus within the US on Iran, before reaching out to Iran.

Third, Iran’s maximum pressure strategy. Ironically, it is Iran and not the US, that has been pursuing a maximum pressure strategy since Trump withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018. A series of statements in the recent months and actions have announced Iran’s intentions to go ahead with its threats to take the nuclear weapon road. Trump administration’s regional approach (from the Middle East peace plan to assassinations) also had a target-Iran, as an underlying strategy. In return, Iran has been pursuing the nuclear weapon option, to pressurize the US and the others to get back to the JCPOA.

In perspective

Sanctions have not worked in the past. And it would not in the future. Biden will have to build consensus within the US and return to the JCPOA. Iran will have to stop the nuclear weapon route as a strategy and fulfil its JCPOA commitments. Any other option is fraught with danger and regional instability.

France: Lower House approves Macron's anti-separatism bill in a pledge to fight Islamic extremism

Sourina Bej, 18 February 2021

In the news

On 16 February, the lower house of the French National Assembly approved the “Respect for the Principles and Values of the Republic” or the ‘anti-separatism’ bill brought by President Emmanuel Macron to fight Islamic radicalism and defend the republic. The lower house dominated by Macron’s centrist La République En Marche party, voted 347 to 151 in favour of the bill. It will now be put to vote in the conservative-led upper house or the Senate where it is expected to approve. “It’s an extremely strong secular offensive. It’s a tough text...but necessary for the republic,” said Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin to RTL radio ahead of the vote.

Issues at large

First, the bill in brief. The bill, once enacted as a law, will impose measures such as sanctions for online hate speech, tighter controls on home-schooling, limits on donations to religious groups from abroad, and a requirement for all associations in France receiving public funding to sign a contract pledging to respect Republican values. Among the more than 70 separate articles, the law expands the ability of the French State to close places of worship and religious schools, as well as ban preachers it deems “extremist.” Second, rising Islamic extremism and politicization of the attacks. The bill was introduced by Macron in the backdrop of a series of attacks with the recent being in October 2020 when a teacher Samuel Paty was beheaded for showing his pupils the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed. Paty's killing prompted the inclusion of the specific crimes of online hate speech in the bill. His beheading by an 18-year-old Muslim Russian refugee of Chechen ethnicity bore the hallmarks of a similar attack on the French magazine Charlie Hebdo. In 2015, the office of Hebdo was attacked, for creating these comic strips on the Prophet. Hebdo has remained one event where the French laïcité (secularism) was in direct conflict with one's religious norms and the

beheading of Paty further deepened the social conflict. Macron has since politicised the attacks and called Islam to be in crisis. His bill has the public support as Paty is seen as a symbol of French free-thinking that has been attacked by the Islamic radicals.

Third, a colonial idea of laïcité challenged in a multicultural French society. French society has witnessed a slow social integration of its Muslim population. The post-colonial French society is multicultural and yet one of its communities, the Muslims, today still live as ethnically ghettoized as in the colonial period. Also, France follows a strict separation of religion and state, formalized through Art 1 of its constitution, wherein to be a French secular means absence of religious symbol in public space. However, the contemporary interpretation of laïcité has been illiberal and its politicisation only meant increasing anxiety towards Islam. The public discourse fuelled by political leaders has been a public prohibition towards headscarf irrespective of whether the person is a public servant or not. France has remained colour-blind but the Muslims in France are not the French Muslims. This identity crisis and what it means to be a French today is further convoluted by the bill which sees France and its republic values at odds with Islam.

Fourth, the French state and propagation of civic liberalism. French nationalism itself is defined by civic expression of its liberalism. This French liberalism has propelled the State to defend these values through strict policing and the bill has been the likely extension. Macron and Darmanin have been particularly accused of seeing a whole marginalized community through the acts of few and pandering them as a threat. The passage of the bill would legalize what Macron calls the development of a “counter-society” that rejects secularism.

In perspective

First, the anti-separatism bill is yet to be adopted as law and since its drafting, the term ‘separatism’ remains problematic. With no legal definition to the term, its fuzziness could probably be a case for more abuse from the State. Today one reads in every French newspaper how a cloth (hijab) or type of meat (halal) are signs of social separatism which could be legalised through State action.

Second, with Macron passing the bill, he could formalize the ground for the popularity of the political right. With campaigning ahead of presidential and parliamentary elections, the right-wing opposition Republicans (LR) party and the far-right National Rally have both called for more restrictions on Islamism and garner the public mandate.

Switzerland: Referendum calls for ban on face coverings in public

Harini Madhusudan, 11 March 2021

In the news

On 8 March, Switzerland voted narrowly in favour of a ban on face coverings in public. The referendum was passed by 51.2 per cent in favour of the ban on face-coverings. The proposal to ban was put forward and campaigned by the right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP) with slogans like "Stop Extremism! Yes to the veil ban." Formally, there was no mention of 'Islam' in the campaign and the referendum was essentially promoted as an attempt that is aimed at stopping violent street protesters from using face coverings. However, the voting process is widely being referred to as the burqa ban. As a response to it, a leading Swiss Islamic group said it was "a dark day" for Muslims in Switzerland.

Issues at large

First, the narrow vote and Islam in Switzerland. About five per cent of Switzerland's population of 8.6 million people are Muslim, most originating from Turkey, Bosnia, and Kosovo. Switzerland in 2013, had considered a ban because the Swiss Justice Minister said that the veils made her uncomfortable; 65 per cent of the electorate voted in favour to ban face veils in public areas. Hence the 2021 decision opens old wounds. The narrow win between 51.2 per cent against 48.8 per cent further expands the principle of legal inequality and the stark divide among society. The Swiss parliament has been mildly sceptical in passing the referendum and is seen looking at alternatives to accommodate the use of face veils. The

tourism industry alliance too has announced that they do not encourage the ban.

Second, the larger debate in Europe. Many countries across Europe have, in the past, debated and put into force a ban/ partial ban on the usage of head scarfs or religious symbols in public spaces. To name a few, Germany, Austria, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Denmark, Russia, Bulgaria all have legislations related to face-covering in their own countries. The ban on face coverings thus brings up the debate of multiculturalism in Europe on the pretext of public anxiety over the influx of migrants, the debate pours into discussions on religious freedoms, secular traditions as against extremism, or terrorism. France stands as the closest example of the same; it banned face veils in 2011.

Third, the growing right-wing politics. The recent years have seen substantial growth in popular sentiments against particular communities within the European Society. While some politicians argue for the need for greater assimilation, the issue generally plays out as a strong point in the mandates of right-wing/ populist political leaders. People of Switzerland are regularly invited to vote on various issues in national or regional referendums. Ahead of the vote, the chairman of the referendum committee and an SVP lawmaker described Muslim face coverings as "a symbol for this extreme, political Islam which has become increasingly prominent in Europe and which has no place in Switzerland." So, the motivation behind the campaign could necessarily have been targeted towards the practices of one community.

In perspective

Policies like these set dangerous long-term trends within societies and the wearing of veils in public have been an increasingly controversial topic in European countries. The choice to not use the word Islam in the referendum has been an interesting move by the campaigners. Switzerland follows France in taking popular measures on the role of religious practices in public lives. The small margin of the results of the referendum, however, stands as the highlight of this initiative.

The US: The George Floyd trial begins

D. Suba Chandran, 11 March 2021

In the news

On 8 March, the George Floyd trial, officially referred to as the trial of State of Minnesota v. Derek Chauvin began in a County District Court in Minneapolis. On the first day, the trial was postponed, with a question over whether the former police officer Chauvin should be charged with a third-degree murder charge in the case relating to the killing of George Floyd. On 10 March, the Minnesota Supreme Court has announced that it would not intervene in the trial, thus removing the potential delay to the trial.

On 9 March, three jurors were selected who would for the part of a 12 member jury that would look into the trial. On 10 March, two more jurors were selected. Judge Peter Cahill, who is overseeing the case, has planned to keep three weeks to finalise the selection of the jury.

Issues at large

First, the legal issue over what should Derek Chauvin be charged with. Chauvin, the police officer who was responsible for the death of George Floyd last year has been charged with second-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter. Besides Chauvin, there were three more police officers with him at that time; they have been charged with abetting second-degree murder and manslaughter. The third charge against Chauvin - with third-degree murder was dismissed by Judge Peter Cahill last year, for which an appeal was made at the Minnesota Supreme Court.

Second, selection of the jury for, what should be one of the most important trials during the recent years. According to the requirement, there should be 12 jurors for the trial, and selecting them according to a set procedure itself would be a challenge. Multiple questions have been posed to the potential jurors that would include their views on the Black Lives Matter movement, the number of times they had seen the video of the death of George Floyd, interaction with the law enforcement etc.

Third, the pressure on the trial. The supporters of the BLM consider that the trial needs no witness and the video itself is sufficient. They also consider the case as open and shut, and expect that Chauvin should be declared guilty with a maximum punishment. As the trial began on Monday, the BLM returned to the streets in Minneapolis; in the next few weeks, one should expect a larger street presence and public pressure.

Fourth, international attention. The trial would be watched at the global level. Last year, the BLM movement in the US also kicked off a series of similar movements across the world. Everyone would be watching the trial closely; For them, it is not only Derek Chauvin who is on trial.

In perspective

The issue is no more limited to justice to George Floyd, who was killed last year. His death has triggered a larger movement – the BLM, across the US and elsewhere in the rest of the world. Hence, the trial is not limited to an individual who got killed and holding a police officer accountable for the same. The trial is about social justice, racial equality, the role of institutions (then police, and now the judiciary), and American values. It is not Chauvin who is on trial; it is the US.

The UK: Restrictive Anti protest bill passes second reading in Westminster

Sourina Bej, 18 March 2021

In the news

On 16 March, the conservative government of the UK passed in its second parliamentary reading, the Police, Crime, Sentencing, and Courts bill. Also termed as the anti-protest bill, the proposed legislation aims to restrict groups to come together in large numbers and nosily protest in England and Wales. In the second reading, the first chance MPs get to vote on a proposed law; the bill was passed by 359 votes to 263. Since its introduction, the bill has come under heavy public criticism.

On 13 March, amid the criticisms against the bill, clashes between the police and the mourners at a vigil took place that led the British government to call for an investigation.

The mourners assembled in a protest held in memory of Sarah Everard, a 33-year-old woman who went missing earlier this month and was allegedly murdered by a police officer of that same police force. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner said on 14 March, that she is "more determined" than ever to lead the organization, and is not considering resigning.

Issues at large

First, the rationale and fallouts of the bill. The bill gives police the power to impose severe restrictions on protests if they suspect that the protestors "may cause serious disruption to the activities of an organization" or could cause "serious unease, alarm or distress" to a passer-by. This would eventually mean that every protest outside Parliament or anywhere in the country could come under restrictions. The bill also gives the Home Secretary the power to change the legal meaning of the term "serious disruption" by a statutory instrument, effectively sidestepping the Parliament. In the future, if the Home Secretary or one of her successors decides that a protest was illegal, they could unilaterally change the law.

Second, protests as a norm and the State's restrictive pushback in controlling the street disorder. From climate protest such as the Extinction Rebellion, Black Lives Matter (BLM) to anti-lockdown protests, the UK has experienced since 2020. While the protests have created space for assembly and expression, the BLM protest chose to attack systemic racism and shun white colonial history. Also, the protests during the COVID-19 pandemic saw street disorders and damage to colonial-era statues. Over the last year, the Conservative MPs have also spoken about this one-sided expression of civil liberties and free speech. Moreover, the decision to pass the anti-protest bill had finally begun. The MPs have recalled that the public order legislation of 1986 is no longer fit to manage today's protests like that of BLM and Extinction Rebellion. The new bill will restrict the protestors' voices and make defacing statues and monuments punishable by up to 10 years in jail.

In perspective

The proposed bill comes amid the second wave of COVID-19 cases, and any violation of

the lockdown norms has become a concern for the State. The past protests have violated the COVID-time restrictions, and less power to the police had made them ineffective to control any acts of violation. Thus, the bill, by premising itself on ensuring public safety, has sought to provide a positive. Unilateral power to any security force, without a check mechanism, could often rob the expressive public space within a liberal democracy. One must be wary of how delicate the boundaries are in civil society and state relations.

The US and allies sanction China; Beijing retaliates

Harini Madhusudan, 25 March 2021

In the news

On 22 March, the US, UK, European Union, and Canada announced sanctions against four officials, former and current, in the Xinjiang province for alleged human rights abuses. The US had placed sanctions on two of the officials back in July 2020. The sanctions have also been placed on the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, an economic and paramilitary organization from the region. On the same day, China announced the imposition of sanctions on 10 European Union citizens, and four EU entities, calling the sanctions a "gross interference" in its internal affairs and a violation of international law.

On 23 March, the Foreign Ministers of China and Russia met in Guilin and condemned the sanctions that have been placed on them by the West. The two sides called the sanctions unilateral and called on the international community to oppose them.

Issues at large

First, the increased international focus on Xinjiang. During the recent period, a BBC documentary describing the systemic assault on women within the re-education camps was released. The United Nations had revealed that more than one million Uighurs and other primarily Muslim Turkic-speaking residents in the region are known to be held in these "vocational skills training centers." In February 2020, the Canadian Parliament had declared China's treatment of the Uighurs as

'genocide.'

Second, the US strategy in building a coalition to condemn China on human rights. The coordinated efforts by the four western countries come around the same time when the US following the same: the Quad meeting, the two-plus-two meeting, the US-China talks in Alaska, and the visits by the Secretary of State to various strategic partners across the world. The sanctions aim to send a clear signal of unity by acting together in condemning China. Third, China's response. On Xinjiang, in February, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, during his address at the UNHRC, announced that China welcomes the High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit Xinjiang. He stated that there were over 24,00 mosques in the region, and the basic facts would show that there has never been genocide, forced labour, or religious oppression in Xinjiang. The Chinese side is visibly disappointed with the EU joining the sanctions regime and placed sanctions on 10 EU individuals and four entities for "maliciously spreading lies and disinformation."

In perspective

The sanctions have been announced at a time when the US is seeking to repair the relations with its NATO allies. Though the scale of the sanctions placed is not alarming, the coordinated efforts by the four countries reflect a strong message. Chinese human rights violations, as the reason for the sanctions, figure to be ill-timed, considering the fact that there are multiple ongoing human rights violations that have not been addressed by the same groups of nations. The tit-for-tat nature of the sanctions is a sign of brewing hostilities, as well as a clear expansion of the number of actors in the dispute between the US and China.

Russia and Ukraine: Provocation and conflict escalation at the borders

Harini Madhusudan, 7 April 2021

In the news

On 1 April, the US pledged to stand by Ukraine in the likely event of a Russian

"aggression." The statement came after the Ukrainian President announced that Russia was increasing its troop presence on the border. Through the week, there has been an increase in the military build-up on the borders near Crimea, and eastern Ukraine and a rise in the fighting between the government forces and pro-Russian separatists in the border region. This is seen as a violation of the Minsk Protocol of 2015.

On 26 March, Kyiv blamed Moscow responsible for four Ukrainian soldiers' death, but Russia has denied any involvement. While warning against the provocations from the Ukrainian side, Russia revealed that the four soldiers had died after a landmine exploded while the soldiers were inspecting a minefield. They state that the Russian movement in the region is only a part of their military exercise.

Issues at large

First, the Russia-Ukraine conflict since 2014. It began with the then President Viktor Yanukovich suspending preparations to implement an association agreement with the European Union. In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, after unrest in Kyiv toppled the Kremlin-friendly Viktor Yanukovich. A civil war followed; the pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine's Donbas region successfully declared Donetsk and Luhansk regions' independence. The EU brokered a ceasefire agreement in 2015. However, there have been repeated incidents reported of violations of the ceasefire. The disputed territory between Ukrainian forces and the Russia-backed separatists is spread across the 500 km border, and efforts at peace talks have been stalled for the last six years.

Second, the recent developments. There has been a significant increase in the Russian military presence, first in Crimea, which is home to Russia's Black Sea Fleet, and second, near the border between Russia and the conflict zone in eastern Ukraine. The New York Times reported that an estimated 4,000 Russian troops had been deployed to the border with Ukraine, citing an unnamed US official, while also reporting that in response to the troop build-up, the US military's European Command has raised its alert level to a "potential imminent crisis." In Crimea, people have complained of months-long water

shortages that were partly triggered by Ukraine switching off supplies through the North Crimean Canal, as a possible source of tensions. Another reason could be the forthcoming parliamentary elections in Russia.

Third, the international response. The US White House has expressed its firm support for Ukraine in a call to Zelenskyy on 2 April. By 5 April, UK's Boris Johnson and the EU Foreign Policy Chief, Josep Borrell, declared their 'unwavering support' to Ukraine. The Russian Presidential spokesman has stated that the situation in eastern Ukraine at a boiling point and said, the deployment of NATO troops near the conflict zone or Russia's borders would trigger a strong response from Moscow. Russia has also stated that its troop movements are defensive in nature and have claimed for weeks that Ukraine has also been moving military units toward the conflict zone.

In perspective

There is a pre-war paranoia that the military build-up of Russia and Ukraine could lead to confrontations, specifically with NATO also strengthening its troops in the region. Both sides, Russia and Ukraine, have made public statements against the conflict escalating, but their actions on the ground seem to lack the same spirit. It is also likely that the provocation is to test waters with the new leadership in the US. Coupled with Navalny's issue and the Nord Stream 2 issue, one can notice an increase in the international scrutiny on Russia and its activities in the region.

Northern Ireland: Riot breaks out in Belfast as post-Brexit trade arrangement sets in

Sourina Bej, 14 April 2021

In the news

On 7 April, rioters hijacked and torched a bus and hurled petrol bombs at police in Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland. This marks the seventh night of continuous rioting on the streets of the Northern Irish capital that has currently left 90 police officers injured, according to a news report in the BBC. In the sporadic rioting that began in March, violence

has spread from the loyalist areas of West Belfast, as hundreds gathered on each side of the 'peace wall' separating the loyalist Shankill Road and the nationalist Springfield Road. Clashes between the two communities and police occurred near the wall, built to prevent further violence between the two groups after three decades of sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland.

Issues at large

First, the post-Brexit tensions. Since the start of 2021, tension was brewing when post-Brexit trade barriers between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK came into effect. Preserving peace in Northern Ireland without allowing the UK a back door into the EU's markets through the 500km UK-Irish land border was one of the BREXIT talks' challenges. The arrangement eventually designed to retain Northern Ireland and Ireland as an open land border, saving the peace process built on the 1998 Good Friday accord. However, the BREXIT divorce deal did lead to a few customs and border checks on some goods, a remainder on the consequence of a violation of the Northern Ireland Protocol. This created a sense among both the unionists and loyalists of an unequal arrangement as against the rest of the UK.

Second, the hardening of the Irish sea border as larger discontent. As land border remained open, control and check were imposed on the Irish sea that led the unionist group to distrust the UK government. Posters and graffiti have marred the walls in Belfast, calling for "No Irish Sea Border. Ian Paisley, Jr, a senior MP of Democratic Unionist Party, which supports BREXIT but opposes the Irish sea border, said in late January that discontent over the new arrangements was so great that some sections of the unionist community were "starting to sense they are sitting on a powder keg." While the causes for the violence are multifaceted, "there has been this brewing fear on the Unionist side that they are not as British as people in Birmingham," writes Feargal Cochrane, author of Northern Ireland: The Fragile Peace.

Third, intra-sectarian political differences. The riot comes against the immediate backdrop of worsening relations between the leading parties representing the unionist, loyalists and the nationalist groups. The seven nights of

violence were sparked by a decision from Northern Ireland's Public Prosecution Service not to prosecute 24 high-ranking members of Sinn Fein, the party, who had breached COVID-19 regulations by attending a funeral for Bobby Storey, a prominent member of the Irish Republican Army. However, it is noteworthy that the violence has unfolded around working-class Unionist areas of Belfast close to the coast, indicating this riot is still not a uniform sentiment across Northern Ireland.

Fourth, distrust against the UK and return of old rivalries. The introduction of the Internal Market Bill during the Brexit transition period and its subsequent dropping has resulted in a deep trust deficit between the British government and groups in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's population is divided between Protestant Unionists and Catholic Nationalists. More than two decades after the Good Friday Agreement peace deal brought the sectarian "Troubles" to an end, old rivalries and the question of political equality amongst the groups are ensuing in post Brexit scenario.

In perspective

A change in the Northern Ireland protocol could probably be the next challenge for the Johnson government. At the beginning of March, Northern Irish loyalist paramilitary groups informed the British Prime Minister that they would not back the Belfast Agreement again until the Northern Ireland Protocol was amended to ensure uninterrupted trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. If the riot continues, it remains to be seen whether historical precedents repeat themselves to spiral the violence throughout the North.

The US: In the George Floyd murder trial, the jury finds the police officer guilty

D. Suba Chandran, 21 April 2021

In the news

On 20 April, the 12 member jury, after ten hours of discussion, found Derek Chauvin guilty following three weeks of deliberation. The former police officer, responsible for the

death of George Floyd, was charged with three counts - second-degree murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter.

On the same day, President Biden, in an address, announced: "This can be a giant step forward in the march toward justice in America." As a part of his address, he also said: "It was a murder in full light of day, and it ripped the blinders off for the whole world to see... For so many, it feels like it took all of that for the judicial system to deliver just basic accountability."

Later, George Floyd's brother said: "We have to protest, because it seems like this is a never ending cycle... I'm going to put up a fight every day, because I'm not just fighting for George anymore, I'm fighting for everybody around this world."

Issues at large

First, the overwhelming role of the video of the police officer kneeling on George Floyd. The defence tried to argue that George Floyd's death was due to drugs in his system and related to his heart condition, and Derek Chauvin, the police officer, was not primarily responsible for Floyd's death. The defence also tried to argue that the police officer was only performing his duty, and his kneeling down was in line with the police training. However, the prosecution brought in witnesses that include police officers and medical experts that disproved the above two perspectives. More importantly, the video shot by someone in the street proved to be the primary case, making the jury conclude their verdict, calling Chauvin guilty.

Second, the larger social and political trial, outside the Court. Even before the trial could begin, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement closely followed the case and placed the entire judicial system on trial. Many BLM leaders openly said: it was not Derek Chauvin who was being tried but the entire American system. The BLM also looked at the trial, not only as that of justice for George Floyd but also for the entire African American community. It was seen as a test case of racial equality.

Third, the verdict against Chauvin as a beginning. The jury has given the verdict. The sentence has not been given yet. The Court is

expected to give the sentencing; given the three counts on which Chauvin is found guilty, he should receive up to 40 years in prison. However, will he is the question. A section within the BLM also talks about "one down, three more to go" referring to three other police officers, who were also dismissed along with Chauvin.

In perspective

First, the fallout of the verdict on American society. According to reports in the media, many parts of the country were getting ready to address the protests across the US if the jury's verdict was otherwise. A report title in the Washington Post ("The Chauvin verdict had cities nationwide braced for unrest. Instead, they got a celebration") would reveal the nature of peace, accountability and justice in terms of racial relations within the US. A section believed that the jury would not find Chauvin guilty because of similar cases earlier. The African American community feels that the system is against them. Is the verdict on Chauvin's case an exception or likely to become a new normal for the US in terms of accountability?

Second, the verdict, on the one hand, should be seen as what Biden called as a "giant step forward in the march toward justice in America." On the other hand, it should also give a fillip to the Black Lives Matter movement, as George Floyd's brother said: "I'm not just fighting for George anymore, I'm fighting for everybody around this world."

Colombia: As protests turn deadly, President Márquez withdraws contentious tax proposal

Lokendra Sharma, 5 May 2021

In the news

On 3 May, Colombia's Finance Minister Alberto Carrasquilla resigned following days of deadly protests over a controversial tax reform proposal that he had piloted. In a statement reported by Reuters, he said: "My continuance in the government will complicate the quick and effective construction of the

necessary consensus." His resignation came a day after President Ivan Márquez announced his decision to withdraw the tax reform proposal from Congress. He said: "I am asking Congress to withdraw the law proposed by the finance ministry and urgently process a new law that is the fruit of consensus in order to avoid financial uncertainty." However, stressing the need for tax reform, he added: "The reform is not a whim, it is a necessity."

Earlier, on 28 April, Colombia's unions had given a call for a national strike against the tax reform proposal, which has since spiralled into a countrywide protest, accompanied by a brutal police response. According to The New York Times, at least 19 people have been killed and hundreds injured in the violence.

Issues at large

First, the social discontent in Colombia. The scope of protests has only expanded since it began on 28 April, reflecting a larger discontent in society that stems from rising inequality, economic downturn due to the pandemic (and lockdown) and systemic issues in policing. People are also unhappy with the forced displacement of thousands of people as different armed groups fight amongst each other to occupy the space left by the FARC group, which was disbanded after the 2016 peace agreement. Due to the factors above, protests have continued despite the withdrawal of the proposal.

Second, the tax reform proposal as an immediate trigger. President Márquez has pushed for tax reform to increase revenues to lower the fiscal deficit, boost the economy ravaged by the pandemic and fund a welfare policy called Ingreso Solidario, which supports poor households. The proposal entails expanding the tax net, eliminating income tax exemptions and increasing the value-added taxes on goods and services. The working classes and middle classes, however, have opposed these proposed measures citing their already deteriorating economic situation.

Third, brutal police response making the situation worse. The security forces and riot police forces have been accused of live firing and driving motorcycles into protesting people. They have killed unarmed protestors, including children. On 3 May, General Vargas,

head of Colombia's police force, said that 26 investigations into police misconduct had been opened.

In perspective

Even as the state initially responded to the protests brutally, it did the right thing withdrawing the proposal, saving the country from more mayhem. However, the protests have nevertheless continued, reflecting larger discontent. In that context, withdrawing the proposal is not enough. Unless the larger discontent is addressed, protests over different issues will keep erupting.

President Márquez has announced that he will build a consensus on tax reform; however, given the intensity of anger and protest, it will be difficult to pacify the masses and reach a consensus. His regime faces a tough choice: while at one end, there is a need to address the rising fiscal deficit, at the other, taxing people will be contentious. He may have to find a third way forward to raise revenues.

Scotland elections: SNP's win revives independence call, a united UK remains on edge

Sourina Bej, 12 May 2021

In the news

On 9 May, the newly elected leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP) Nicola Sturgeon told British Prime Minister Boris Johnson that another referendum on independence was inevitable. Sturgeon was speaking after her party won another electoral victory for the fourth consecutive term. "The First Minister reiterated her intention to ensure that the people of Scotland can choose our own future when the COVID-19 crisis is over," the media office of Nicola Sturgeon said in a press statement. "(She) made clear that the question of a referendum is now a matter of when - not if," read the statement. However, a statement from Boris Johnson's Downing Street office after his talks with Sturgeon made no mention of the referendum. Johnson spoke to Sturgeon on the occasion of a summit where he invited the leaders of Scotland, Wales, and Northern

Ireland to discuss how the four nations, including England, can together overcome "shared challenges."

On 8 May, SNP emerged as the leading party with 64 seats, just one short of an overall majority. Together with its Green allies, who won eight and also favour independence, SNP is likely to control the agenda for independence in Scotland.

Issues at large

First, the rekindling of the idea of independent Scotland. SNP's win only brings to the fore the deep-seated demands for independence among the Scots from the UK. In its pre-election manifesto, SNP had pledged to hold a new Scottish independence referendum. In the 2014 plebiscite, Scotland voted by a margin of 55 per cent to 45 per cent to remain united with the UK. However, ever since the 2016 referendum in the UK, which culminated with Brexit, the desire for complete autonomy among the Scots have pushed the support for another referendum. The Scots had opposed the decision to move out of the EU in 2016 by more than 62 per cent.

Second, call for a second plebiscite and leadership of SNP. The call for the second plebiscite has become stronger under Boris Johnson, who is widely disliked in Scotland, and his steadfast persuasion of hard-line Brexit has dented the economy of Scotland. The resultant has been disruption to exporters, and in particular, Scotland's fish and shellfish industries lost the benefits of free trade with the EU. This has further angered the Scots, and the discontent received its political momentum with SNP's Nicola Sturgeon. She reiterated the high handedness of Westminster, represented by Boris Johnson, in denying them a second plebiscite under the 1998 Scotland Act. Sturgeon's leadership has borne her another public mandate which today has become the mandate for independence.

Third, Brexit rejuvenates Scottish nationalism. Johnson and his predecessors have long argued that the issue was settled in the 2014 referendum. However, the situation drastically changed with Brexit. The 62 per cent opposition votes towards the divorce in Scotland essentially rekindled a sense of being denied a voice in the Brexit process. The SNP had strongly argued that Scotland was being

pulled out of the EU against its 'democratic will,' when in all reality, Britain chose its nationalist interest to be independent of the EU. The election outcome is likely to be a bitter clash between the Scottish government in Edinburgh and Johnson's administration in London, with the nationalists arguing on democratic authority and the conservatives siding with the law as a defensive tool.

In perspective

First, in the long term, another referendum is probably a complicated and costly event for both Scotland and Britain. With the Scottish nationalists dominating the Parliament, it will be difficult for the British conservatives to duck the calls for a plebiscite. SNP has crafted its political argument for independence, urging that its legal sanctity is only a matter of time. But the British government is attempting to win the political argument for union through the legal lens. If Sturgeon forces the plebiscite, Johnson could settle it in the UK Supreme Court.

Second, the fears that call for independence in Scotland could tear through the UK may probably be an overstretch as the systemic rules are deep-seated (as one could observe in the post-Brexit scenario). The fears that Northern Ireland, which also voted to remain in the EU in 2016, may also witness similar support for reunification could most likely also remain rhetoric.

Colombia: Three weeks of protests

Vishnu Prasad, 19 May 2021

In the news

On 17 May, the Colombian government said that it would consider a list of demands put forward by demonstrators as country-wide protests moved into the third week. Deutsche Welle quoted a presidential advisor as saying that they had received a 'document' and that it was yet to be analyzed by the government.

As of 17 May, at least 50 people had died since the protests began, according to a report in Deutsche Welle, while 524 had disappeared.

Issues at large

First, controversial tax reforms as the initial trigger. The reforms, put forward by right-wing president Ivan Duque Marquez and aimed at pulling Colombia out of a pandemic-induced financial crisis, had imposed service tax on essential goods, widened the tax bracket and eliminated tax benefits. Duque's decisions caused uproar in the country where the poverty rate had crept up to 50 per cent while the unemployment rate had risen to 15 per cent. The new tax regimen had prompted trade unions to call for a strike on 28 April. On 2 May, Duque had withdrawn the tax regimen, while a day later, his finance minister had announced his resignation. However, these developments did not pacify protesters.

Second, the violent response by the government. The police have been accused of resorting to extreme violence to quell the protests, with deaths and injuries mounting by the day. On 16 May, Reuters quoted Colombia's national police director general Jorge Luis Vargas who said that 122 disciplinary proceedings had been initiated against policemen since the protests began. The extreme violence led to the nationwide expansion of the protests, which were initially confined to Bogota and Cali's capital in the southwest.

Third, a multi-dimensional expansion of the protests. The demands of the protesters had evolved from rolling back the tax reforms to a long list that includes universal basic income, free university tuition and dismantling of the riot police force. The protests also saw a geographical expansion with separate incidents triggering escalations in different cities. In Popayan, it was the suicide of a young woman after alleged police harassment, while in Jamundi, it was the fatal shooting of a student protester. After initially being led by trade unions, the protesters now belong to a wide array of socio-economic classes, with students, religious groups, LGBTQ+ activists and indigenous communities now taking to the streets.

In perspective

First, the protests are a big headache to the Colombian government, which is already struggling to deal with the coronavirus pandemic in the country. With Colombia fast

running out of hospital beds, it is feared that the protests will lead to the virus spreading even faster. The government is also facing challenges in ensuring the distribution of food, fuel and other essential supplies, with transportation routes blocked by protesters.

Second, the protests are also an ominous sign for the rest of Latin America, with many countries sharing the same societal fault lines that have been laid bare in Colombia. In 2019, similar protests in Ecuador had quickly spread to Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru, Venezuela and Colombia. It remains to be seen if these protests too will lead to instability across the continent.

Colonial Pipeline incident: The Reign of Ransomware

Jeshil Samuel J, 19 May 2021

In the news

On 14 May, the cybercrime group, DarkSide (infamous for the recent Colonial Pipeline hack) announced that they would be closing down operations due to increasing pressure from the US and several law enforcement agencies. Cybersecurity firms FireEye and Intel 471 noted that the hacker group had informed their associates that they had lost access to their operations infrastructure and funds collected through recent attacks (Colonial & Brenntag).

On the same day, Toshiba announced in a public statement that its European subsidiaries had also become victims of a ransomware attack by DarkSide. Toshiba's spokesperson later informed media outlets that it was attacked on 4 May and the company had not paid any ransom.

On 13 May, Bloomberg reported that within hours of being attacked by ransomware on 7 May, Colonial Pipeline had paid nearly USD 5 million in Bitcoin to DarkSide, contradicting earlier statements made by the company.

Issues at large

First, the rise of ransomware attacks. Ransomware is a type of malware that encrypts data in a victim's system and requires

a private key (which the hacker has) to decrypt the data. In order to get the private key, victims are forced to pay a ransom. In 2016 alone, the number of ransomware created increased by 752 per cent compared to the previous year; 2016 also marked the advent of ransomware-as-a-service as Advanced Persistent Threats began selling ransomware via affiliate programmes. This new business model incentivized and increased ransomware attacks, making them even more lucrative and successful. The ongoing pandemic has witnessed a 150 per cent increase in ransomware attacks since many businesses had to operate remotely. Cryptocurrency tracker Chain analysis reported that the ransoms paid to cybercriminals in 2020 alone amounted to USD 370 million.

Second, the growing influence of Advanced Persistent Threats (APTs). APTs are highly sophisticated groups of cybercriminals who engage in cyberterrorism, cyberespionage, cybercrimes and hacktivism. These groups are usually state-sponsored due to their scale of operations and precise targets. Each APT has its own agenda. DarkSide, for instance, was outspoken about its apolitical nature, the goal of gaining more money, and habit of giving a portion to charity. The rise in APT activity could also be directly tied to the pandemic. The cybersecurity measures of numerous companies could not guarantee safe and secure remote working conditions for employees. The recent trend amongst APTs is their ability to form cartels or disperse into newer groups. DarkSide, for example, is considered to be an offshoot of another prominent, persistent threat actor called REvil. This is one reason why cybersecurity experts find it hard to believe that groups like DarkSide would just shut down their operations. In reality, when APTs feel pressure from law enforcement agencies, they usually stay dormant for a while or disband the group to form another.

Third, the influence of cryptocurrency in abetting ransomware attacks. Cryptocurrencies have been used as the go-to form of ransomware demands and payments since 2015. Cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin were created to form a decentralized financial system that would not require any singular entity to control the transactions. The opaque transaction processes embedded within cryptocurrencies like Monero have made it a

favourite of ransomware operators. Popular currencies such as Bitcoin, on the other hand, make it easier for hackers to legitimize and circulate the illegal ransom. This has been one of the main reasons why governments are critical of cryptocurrencies. Once the ransom is paid, it becomes very hard for law enforcement agencies to trace and retrieve it.

In perspective

The reign of ransomware and APTs such as DarkSide will continue as long as victims such as Colonial Pipeline are ready to pay a ransom. Law enforcement agencies have strongly advised individuals and businesses not to pay ransom to cybercriminals. But, the fear of personal or confidential data being leaked or deleted pushes most of the victims to pay. Businesses should follow good cybersecurity practices such as proper maintenance of system logs and multiple data backups to minimize the impact of ransomware attacks.

Belarus: Lukashenko remains stubborn, despite sanctions post-flight diversion

Sourina Bej, 24 May 2021

In the news

On 23 May, citing a security threat onboard, Belarus diverted a Ryanair flight to Minsk to detain Roman Protasevich, a journalist and vocal critique of President Lukashenko. On 24 May, a video clip of Protasevich was shown on Belarusian state television. The journalist was seen sitting at a table with folded hands and saying he was in satisfactory health and that his treatment in custody was "maximally correct and according to law." He added that he was giving evidence to investigators about organizing mass disturbances.

On 25 May, the European Union agreed on fresh sanctions against Belarus, promising to bar the country's airline Belavia from its airspace. "This is an attack on democracy," said Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission. "This is an attack on freedom of expression. And this is an attack on European sovereignty. And this outrageous behaviour needs a strong answer."

Amid the outrage from Western Europe, Moscow responded in support of the Belarusian President. The Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the 'episode needs to be investigated — but that it couldn't be rushed.'

On 26 May, President Lukashenko, in an address said: "I acted lawfully to protect our people..Our ill-wishers at home and abroad have changed their methods of attacking the state...They have crossed many red lines and crossed boundaries of common sense and human morality."

Issues at large

First, the unfolding situation. While flying over the Belarusian airspace, pilots onboard Ryanair Flight 4978 had received a warning on potential security threat, and a MiG-29 was sent to escort the Boeing 737-800 to Minsk. The emergency landing took place minutes before the plane was meant to cross into Lithuanian airspace. While no security threat was found onboard upon searching the plane, passengers, and their luggage as the plane took off, Roman Protasevich was not on board. The Belarus Transport Ministry had later clarified the emergency turn saying it received an email from Hamas, claiming it had put a bomb on board the plane.

Second, Lukashenko's firm hold since 2020 protests. For the past 26 years, Lukashenko often referred to as Europe's last dictator has maintained a tight grip on power by retaining much from the country's Soviet past. His position has dwindled after the presidential election results in 2020 triggered a country-wide protest. Further, since September 2020, more than 34,000 people have been arrested and any domestic journalists who reported the protests are facing up to 12 years of jail term. Protasevich had been one such opposition activist, living in exile in Lithuania. In a country where the media remains muzzled, his Telegram channel Nexta brought to the fore the police violence against protesters.

Third, Europe's sanctions. The current sanctions by the EU add the most recent set of sanctions that were imposed after Lukashenko started armed arrests and crackdown on the protestors. Von der Leyen had put on hold a €3 billion EU investment and the economic

package until Belarus "turns democratic." Lithuania has shut its airspace and the UK Foreign Secretary said Britain was suspending the operating permit of Belarus's national airline. The sanctions since last year had little impact, as Lukashenko with continued Russian support has been able to stifle the opposition movement and the protests have largely fizzled out.

Fourth, Russia's support. Moscow and Minsk have close political, economic, and military ties, and Lukashenko has relied on Russian support amid Western sanctions. For Belarus, Russia is an economic and political partner sustaining Lukashenko's leadership. For Russia, Belarus forms an economic and political influence in the region and is a 'convenient bulwark against what it sees as the European encroachment.'

In perspective

First, the sanction will have little impact as it looks to punish the hijacking rather than attacking the regime. A senior advisor to Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya, rightly said the EU's attention span was "very, very short."

Second, the sanctions could push Belarus closer to Russia but Putin and Lukashenko have been known to be uncomfortable allies with a fragile allegiance, born out of necessity. Lastly, the leadership's extent of insecurity in detaining an onboard exiled journalist risking an emergency landing of an international flight.

Denmark: New legislation to relocate refugees outside Europe

Sourina Bej, 9 June 2021

In the news

On 3 June, Denmark passed a law enabling it to process asylum seekers outside Europe. Voted in favour by 70 lawmakers, the new law now establishes a system where an asylum-seeker will need to apply in person at the Danish border and then be flown outside Europe to be hosted in a third country. If their application is successful, they would be granted refugee status and be allowed to live in

the host country, but not in Denmark. Knowing that one will be sent back, "we hope that people will stop seeking asylum in Denmark," said Rasmus Stoklund, the Social Democrat government party's immigration speaker to broadcaster DR.

On 5 June, a similar anti-refugee measure was adopted by Greece where it used high-tech "sound cannons" to stop crossovers from Turkey. Both the law and the measure have been criticized by the European Commission wherein the commission spokesperson said: "external processing of asylum claims raises fundamental questions about both access to asylum procedures" and equal protection.

Issues at large

First, externalizing the burden of hosting refugees. At a time when Denmark is receiving the lowest number of refugees in Europe, the new law aims at conceptualizing aid and welfare schemes to contain the refugee influx within the borders of the African countries. The vision to externalize the burden of hosting refugees to another host country started with a report in 2002 by the Danish Centre for Human Rights and the European Commission. It became functional when Denmark's immigration minister, Mattias Tesfaye, whose father was an Ethiopian immigrant, visited Rwanda in April to sign agreements on asylum matters. Denmark, along with Austria, has pledged support for an UN-operated refugee camp in Rwanda, set up to receive refugees stuck in Libya. The Danish media has reported the government negotiating with Tunisia, Ethiopia, Egypt and Eritrea to set up refugee centres on Denmark's behalf.

Second, growing political reluctance, social paranoia and fractures within the EU towards migrants. Since the 2015 refugee crisis, Denmark, Spain and Italy have adopted restrictive policies with an ethnonational approach in dealing with immigration. With welfare dualism such as reducing social benefits for new residents, Denmark revoked the residence permits for 94 Syrian refugees on the ground that the security situation around Damascus has improved for them to return. While the eastern European countries like Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic had hardened their border police to stop the influx, the West European countries have attempted to integrate the refugees through

housing settlements. However, across Europe, the inflow of refugees and along with it a scope for multiculturalism has stymied as political leaders exhibit anti-immigration attitudes. Complete sealing off the borders to "irregular" migrants or sending troops to push back refugees are compounded by equal public suspicion towards anyone "non-Western." Third, Denmark and the EU's effort at the uniform rule for refugees. The Danish law is incompatible with the EU international law that stresses individualism and universal human rights and further complicates its efforts to have a uniform regulation for refugees. Along with raising the bar for asylum seekers, the EU has remained divided when different countries use different policy instruments to deal with the same crisis. In 2020, the UK considered building asylum processing centres on Ascension Island, a remote territory in the Atlantic Ocean. Merkel's Germany has famously "managed this" crisis through its nationwide housing policy and at the same time became the first EU country to lift its ban on deportation to Syria. France, Spain and Italy have exhibited strong anti-immigrant sentiments as they continue to receive most refugees. The result has been to think of a deal with Turkey which would again externalize the refugee burden. The host countries battle upholding their liberal ethos with hardening internal anti-migration and anti-refugee attitudes causing social exclusion, documentation hurdles, subsidiary protection and restrictive free travel within the EU.

In perspective

Denmark's law sets a precedent of obvious discrimination but the language is now spoken by both the extreme left and the right ideology-based political parties. Denmark seeks to solve the problem of internal integration by looking outside. The new law will likely deepen the boundaries favouring segregation and apathy towards non-West multiculturalism. As a region, the EU could rethink its integration policies beyond housing and as identity challenges that will now be further complicated with issuing of multiple identity cards for a single refugee.

The US: Juneteenth approval a step in the right direction

Vishnu Prasad, 23 June 2021

In the news

On 17 June, President Joe Biden signed the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act, which made 19 June an official federal holiday to commemorate the end of slavery in the country. Biden said: "I have to say to you, I've only been president for several months, but I think this will go down, for me, as one of the greatest honors I will have as president. By making Juneteenth a federal holiday, all Americans can feel the power of this day and learn from our history — and celebrate progress and grapple with the distance we've come (and) the distance we have to travel." It became America's first new holiday since Martin Luther King Day in 1983.

On 19 June, the holiday celebrations were marred by acts of violence across the country that left at least five people dead. In Oakland, California, seven people were shot at a Juneteenth celebration, leaving one dead. In Colorado, masked gunmen fired 114 rounds into a Juneteenth party, killing one and injuring four people.

Issues at large

First, a brief history of Juneteenth. The day — an amalgamation of June and nineteenth — is the anniversary of enslaved African-Americans in Galveston, Texas, being told that they were free. Texas was one of the last Confederate states where slavery was still institutionalized. The proclamation by the Union forces, who had taken control of the town towards the end of the American Civil War, came on 19 June 1865. This date has since been celebrated as a holiday by the African-American community to commemorate the end of slavery in the country.

Second, the end of a long fight by African-Americans on Juneteenth. Prior to Biden's declaration, only a few states recognized Juneteenth as a paid holiday. Previous attempts to declare the occasion as a federal holiday were met with resistance. Last year, one such bill had been blocked by Wisconsin Senator Ron Johnson, who cited the costs of

an additional holiday. Barack Obama, as a senator, had co-sponsored a similar bill; however, he was unable to get it passed even after he became president. Third, the inequality that African-Americans still have to face in the US. The declaration comes barely a month after the first anniversary of the George Floyd murder, which sparked widespread protests across the country against police brutality towards African-Americans. It also comes during a time when Republican-controlled states are passing restrictive voting measures, designed to prevent African-Americans from exercising their franchise.

In perspective

Despite official recognition of the holiday, recent events show that there is still a long way to go. The violence that marked the celebrations exemplify this. There have also been criticisms that while an official holiday has been declared, little is being done to educate people about the struggle that Juneteenth is meant to honour. Nevertheless, it remains a step in the right direction.

UNODC World Drug Report: 36 million struggled with drug use disorders globally in 2020

Jeshil Samuel J, 30 June 2021

In the news

On 24 June, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) released the annual World Drug Report. Divided into five separate booklets, the report individually examines the policy implications in combatting illegal drugs, the supply and demand for illegal drugs, the market trends towards cannabis and other opioids, the market trends towards cocaine and other amphetamine-type stimulants, and finally, the impact of COVID-19 on drugs. The report aims to foster greater international cooperation in combatting the drug problem and assist member states in addressing challenges that may arise regarding the same in the future.

The key findings of the report are as follows. First, the number of people using drugs

increased by 22 per cent between 2010 and 2019, partly because of the increase in the global population. Second, nearly 275 million people used drugs globally in 2020, and over 36 million struggled with drug use disorders. Third, cannabis has become more potent in the last ten years. However, fewer young people see it as a harmful drug. Fourth, the sale of drugs on the dark web increased fourfold between 2017 and 2020, amounting to annual revenue of nearly USD 315 million. Fifth, the number of drug users in Africa is estimated to increase by 40 per cent by 2030. Sixth, drug markets have made a quick recovery from the pandemic, and the trafficking of drugs has increased alongside contactless drug transactions. Seventh, the increased use of technology during the pandemic has led to innovations in drug prevention and treatment services, enabling healthcare professionals to treat more addicts.

Issues at large

First, the fallouts of drug abuse. Drug abuse does not stop with affecting the abuser, it also takes a toll on the socio-economic conditions of their families and country. In many cases, drug abuse has far-reaching repercussions like domestic abuse, compromised livelihood, involvement in criminal activities, unhealthy relationships, and suicidal tendencies. In 2019 alone, the impact of drug abuse on the American economy was estimated to be USD 193 billion. That same year, there were around 50,000 recorded deaths in the US that resulted from overdosing on opioids. At present, more than 11 million people are addicted to injecting drugs, and around half of them suffer from Hepatitis C. These individuals are also at higher risk of succumbing to new diseases as they do not use new or sterilized needles all the time.

Second, the changing dynamics of drug trafficking and sales. The pandemic forced drug dealers to explore new methods and platforms to sell drugs. The rapid growth in technological innovation may soon create a globalized market with a wider reach. Drug sales and marketing in popular e-commerce platforms and social media are stark reminders that accessibility to drugs is increasing. Drug trafficking has also increased due to the rise in demand, resulting in larger shipments being

trafficked using private planes and waterway routes. Contactless delivery of drugs has also become popular with the help of cryptocurrencies for buyers and mail or drone deliveries for sellers.

Third, the fallouts of the pandemic. The pandemic has worsened the economic conditions of numerous countries leading to a spike in the global unemployment rate. The rising unemployment rates could push more people to work as daily labourers in illicit crop farms or for drug traffickers. The pandemic has also fostered poverty, inequality and mental health conditions, which have pushed many people into using drugs. This increased usage of drugs will inevitably lead to an increase in drug use disorders.

Fourth, the epidemic of misinformation. This year's theme for the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking was "Share facts on drugs. Save lives". The large scale spread of misinformation by drug advertisers and sellers has led youngsters in particular to have a false perception of the potency of drugs like cannabis.

In perspective

The report suggests major additions to government policies that could help tackle the drug problem more effectively. A few of the suggestions include increased funding for research on the potency of drugs, regulation of cryptocurrency markets, updating scientific standards regularly, constant transaction of intelligence between law enforcement agencies, and improved socio-economic conditions for marginalized communities susceptible to drug usage. However, most of these solutions are easier said than done.

An increase in funding for research and rehabilitation has been a problem even for developed countries. Improving the socio-economic conditions of marginalized communities might not be possible due to the financial impact of the pandemic. As long as unemployment is on the rise, so will the usage of drugs.

Heatwave: Canada, US, Europe, and Siberia scorched in record-breaking temperatures

Akriti Sharma, 7 July 2021

In the news

On 29 June, Lytton, a village in Northwest Canada recorded the country's highest-ever temperature of 49.6 degrees Celsius following which the authorities issued evacuation orders.

On 28 June, Portland recorded its highest ever temperature of 46.6 degrees Celsius. Similarly, on 27 June, Seattle recorded 42.2 degrees Celsius.

On 4 July, Finland's Lapland recorded 33.5 degrees Celsius which was its hottest day since 1914.

On 30 June, US President Joe Biden said: "Climate change is driving the dangerous confluence of extreme heat and prolonged drought. We're seeing wildfires of greater intensity that move with more speed and last well beyond traditional months, traditional months of the fire season," adding, "Right now we have to act and act fast. We're late in the game here."

On 2 July, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said that the situation caused by the heatwave was "unprecedented," adding, "Lives have been lost, and the risk of wildfires is at a dangerously high level."

Issues at large

First, the global increase in the frequency of extreme weather events. In the recent past, extreme weather events like cold waves, heatwaves, droughts, floods, cyclones, have been recurring with high frequency and intensity. From July 2020 to November 2020, the world witnessed 30 storms breaking all previous records. Similarly, wildfires across the US, Brazil, and Russia have been recurring each year, serving as an alarm for climate change.

Second, the global rise in temperature. On 1 July, the World Meteorological Organization announced that Antarctica had recorded its highest ever temperature of 18.3 degrees Celsius. Polar regions have been witnessing a

rise in the temperature resulting in glacier melt. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2020 was the second warmest year after 2016. At least 23 countries have recorded a temperature of 50 degrees Celsius in 2021.

Third, the cause of the heatwave in the US and Canada. A heat dome effect has been created over the high-pressure regions of Canada and the US, due to which the hot air is trapped over the region. The heat dome traps hot air for several days and nights, which causes a sudden increase in the temperature, which is higher than the average temperature. Extremely high temperatures have increased the risk of wildfires across the country. According to British Columbia Wildfire Service, 1,700 lightning strikes were recorded on 2 July 2021. Moreover, there has been a sudden increase in deaths over the past week. British Columbia Coroners Service has recorded 719 sudden deaths in the past week which is three times the normal deaths. Many emergency cooling centres have been put up across Vancouver and other cities to temporarily prevent people from health risks due to the heatwave.

In perspective

First, climate adaptation. Climate mitigation and adaptation should go hand in hand. Since extreme weather events are increasing globally, there is a need for more focus on climate adaptation measures. This would help in addressing the extreme weather events effectively and reduce the health risks due to climate change.

Second, the need for effective management of extreme weather events. Developing efficient early warning systems, climate-resilient infrastructure, disaster risk management, sharing of information and resources should be stressed upon.

Third, the fingerprints of climate change. Such events serve as an alarm for the fact that climate change is real. Climate action is urgently needed. Even though the countries announce ambitious targets in the Paris Climate agreement, not much attention is paid to the fact whether the countries are domestically doing enough to meet the targets.

Bosnia: 26 years after the Srebrenica Massacre

Harini Madhusudan, 14 July 2021

In the news

On 11 July, the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina gathered in thousands to commemorate the 1995 Srebrenica massacre; the day the killing began. They also reburied 19 newly identified victims whose remains were found in mass graves and recently identified through DNA analysis. The massacre is known as the only acknowledged genocide since World War II; 26 years after the genocide, only a handful of the officials and the military officers have been brought to justice, for the organized killing, burial, and cover-up operation. An estimated 20,000 people were involved in the gruesome massacre of up to 8000 Muslim Bosniaks from Srebrenica.

On the eve of the anniversary, Milord Dodik, the Serb member of Bosnia's presidency, denied that what happened in Srebrenica was genocide and stated to a newspaper that the mourners are "burying empty coffins."

Issues at large

First, a brief history of the massacre. The Srebrenica Massacre took place on the sidelines of the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia that followed the disintegration of Yugoslavia. They were unleashed by the territorial ambitions and nationalistic passions that set the Bosnian Serbs against the Croats and Bosniaks, the two other ethnic factions. During these years, Bosnia and Herzegovina were under attack by the Serbian and Croatian forces, who were each trying to carve a Greater Serbia or a Greater Croatia. An estimated 100,00 people were killed during this war. The Serbian forces were attacking villages, towns, and cities in Bosnia with an aim to "ethnically cleanse." At the time, under the protection of the UN and NATO forces, the Muslim town in Eastern Bosnia, Srebrenica, had been classified as a safe zone for non-Serbs.

On 11 July 1995, the Bosnian Serb army overruns Srebrenica which caused tens of thousands of refugees to flee to the Dutch forces' compound. Mladic, who led the

Bosnian Serb army, ordered the evacuation of all elderly, women, and children civilians, and all the men of fighting age were taken as prisoners. In the days following this, more than 8000 Muslim men and boys were systematically butchered by these forces and dumped the bodies in mass graves. In order to try and erase the evidence, the forces with the help of a few civilian companies dug them and reburied them in other locations. By 17 July, witness accounts emerged of harrowing accounts of murder, rape, and torture.

Second, the regional and global responses. The international response led to the Bosnian Serb political leader being indicted on 24 July, and the military chief Ratko Mladic on 16 November by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. However, over the years, only a handful of the perpetrators have been indicted for the various roles they have played in the massacre. A total of 48 individuals have been sentenced in the past 26 years, and four have been given life sentences. In 2003, Bosnia and Herzegovina conducted their own set of investigations and came up with a list of names of those who played a part in the crimes in and around Srebrenica, but to date, even the direct perpetrators captured from 1995 are yet to be indicted. Additionally, even though the massacre has been declared a genocide by international and national courts, but Serb leaders in Bosnia and neighbouring Serbia continue to downplay or even deny the evidence of what happened. Two days before the 26th anniversary, a Srebrenica Genocide Denial report was published, which identified at least 234 instances of genocide denial in regional public discourse and the media in the past year. On the same day, the Bosnian media reported the celebrations of the Serbian War in the backyard of a Church right above the memorial centre, with provocative music.

Third, justice and reconciliation. International Tribunals were set up to bring to legal liability the perpetrators of the genocide. The Bosnian government in 2003 issued a public apology over the incident, and in 2019, the Dutch supreme court also upheld partial liability of the Netherlands to the deaths caused under their watch. Legal and symbolic justice have been offered at various stages through the past 26 years. Attempts have been made to engage with the survivors and make a record of their

experiences to deal with the denialism and the revision of history. However, delayed justice, outright political denial, and the sheer depth of the loss from the massacre remain haunting.

Fourth, the counternarrative of historical denialism: two popular narratives from the Serbian side remain. One group believe that there were killings but state that the fatalities have been overstated and deny the role of Serbia supporting the Bosnian Serb regime. Another set of people believe the genocide never happened. The issue of Srebrenica never resonated in the Serbian society, and those that call the Srebrenica genocide in Serbia face condemnation and lawsuits.

In perspective

The parallels of denialism and the slow pace of bringing the perpetrators to justice remain a glaring reality of the massacre. This could be a reflection of the popular sentiments among Eastern European leaders against the Muslims in the region. The responses to the genocide have largely been legal or symbolic; it would be useful to see if a humanized approach to dealing with the delayed justice and losses would be helpful to the families that lost their loved ones. A large part of the narrative and the denial of the genocide is used as a divisive element in the Bosnian and Serbian societies, which are counterproductive to the creation of a safe environment for communities to co-exist.

France: Parliament passes bill aimed at checking Islamic extremism

Sourina Bej, 28 July 2021

In the news

On 23 July, the French Parliament passed the bill strengthening the government's role to check mosques and other religious organizations as part of its fight to prevent Islamic radicalism and defend the republic. The 'Law Reinforcing Respect of the Principles of the Republic' was passed by the National Assembly with 49 votes in favour, against 19. Also known as the anti-separatism bill, it was first approved by the lower house on 16 February 2021.

Issues at large

First, the bill in brief. The passed bill empowers the government to permanently close houses of worship, dissolve religious organizations without a court order, if their members are found to be inciting hatred. Religious organizations will now have to get government permits every five years to continue operating; also, they would need annual certification of their accounts if they receive foreign funding. The bill makes it a criminal offense for anyone, in the name of religious ideology, pressures civil servants, and other public-service providers to deviate from French secular values. Unauthorized posting of someone's personal details to expose them to harm is punishable with EUR 45,000 and up to three years in jail. The passed bill also mandates parents who home-school their children to obtain government authorization to ensure their children are taught the right French secular values. Second, France's struggle with Islamic extremism. The new law comes in the immediate background of strings of terrorist attacks. In October 2020, a middle-school teacher Samuel Paty was beheaded after the father of one of his students posted a video online complaining about the teacher's decision to display cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad to his class. The attacker, an 18-year-old Chechen refugee, acted after seeing the video. Two weeks later, a Tunisian man killed three with a knife at a church in Nice. The attacks remain those incidents where the French laïcité (secularism) was seen by the larger French society to be in direct conflict with one's religious norms, especially Islam. Macron has since politicized the attacks and called Islam to be in crisis. The law attempts to legalize and uphold Paty as a symbol of free-thinking French who has been under attack from the Islamic radicals. Third, Macron's attempt at reinterpreting French laïcité. The bill framed by Macron at the outset aims to respond to the spread of Islamist extremism. But at its core, it is a State's exceptional attempt at solving the problem of extremism with another extreme of creating parallel societies where civic laws will take precedence over personal freedom to practice one's own religion. Called laïcité, it is a strict separation of religion and State wherein to be a French secular means absence of religious symbol in public space. The law

re-enforces laïcité as political and social anxiety towards Islam.

Fourth, public support for the law. Macron's course correction of illiberal elements in the French society through security and legal means has public support. The anguish and exclusionary remarks favouring the burkini or headscarves ban is a larger public expression of how Muslims remain alienated in French society. Passing the bill, further provides a social space to the project of homogenizing the republic where being French cannot coexist with simultaneous religious identities.

In perspective

Macron, in passing the bill, formalized the ground for the popularity of conservative politics with favouritism of one's national historicity. The right-wing opposition Republicans (LR) party and the far-right National Rally have both called for more restrictions on Islamism. However, the new law is the first attempt by a Western liberal democratic republic at legalizing the socio-political alienation of its minority by its ethnic majority.

Canada: Burning churches, and the indigenous community issue over a painful past

Wonchibeni Tsopoe, 28 July 2021

In the news

On 19 July, a Coptic Orthodox church burned to the ground in British Columbia, as the burning of churches continues in Canada following the recent discovery of graves of indigenous children. According to Toronto Sun reports, more than 50 churches were vandalized, and five Catholic churches were razed during the last few weeks.

On 3 July, the Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, denounced the burning and vandalism of Catholic churches. On 6 July, Mary Simon the first indigenous Canadian governor-general made an address in her first language, Inuktitut and promised to work towards healing the nation at what she described as an 'especially reflective time.'

Issues at large

First, the historical linkages to the current unrest. The fabric of Canada's nation-building has come at the expense of its indigenous people. The government's "National Policy" is believed to have given the authorization to establish residential schools to assimilate indigenous communities and to suppress their dissent. The schools were designed to isolate indigenous children from their families and cut all ties to their culture. The indigenous community needs better representation of their culture which the State fails to address. Second, the recent revelation of the unmarked graves. Thousands of unmarked gravesites were uncovered, out of which 215 were graves of children. The children are believed to be students of Kamloops Residential School as the graves were found near the city of Kamloops in Southern British Columbia. Also, in June the Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan announced the finding of estimated 751 unmarked graves. Followed by 160 undocumented and unmarked graves near the Kuper Island Industrial School. The unravelling of more unmarked graves is leading to further unrest and uproar in the State. Third, the indigenous uprising. Not only in Canada but also in other North American countries, there have been similar uprisings related to indigenous communities and their demands. Although these movements organize themselves to approach and tackle these issues may differ, the objective in all of these movements are similar; the right to preserve their culture and traditions and certain and other such rights.

In perspective

For years, the indigenous community has faced oppression. Canada, from its pre-colonial past until today, had aimed to undermine indigenous people identity. Discrimination against the indigenous community is deep-rooted, and the role of the State is very minimal in addressing these issues. Systemic racism has been continuing for decades, and the emotional baggage attached to it is rather hard to reconcile. The Canadian government has to take a proactive step to meet the demands of the indigenous community. Furthermore, reconciliation will be best served only if the government works to

implement and practice the laws that cater to the indigenous community.

Peru: Protests a sign of challenges facing Castillo

Vishnu Prasad, 4 August 2021

In the news

On 31 July, protests were held in the Peruvian capital of Lima against new president Castillo's decision to appoint a hardliner Marxist as his Prime Minister. Guido Bellido has been accused of sympathizing with the terrorist group Shining Path, which had been engaged in a violent effort to seize power in the 1980s and 1990s.

"Terrorism, never again," Al Jazeera reported the crowd as chanting, with many holding placards bearing anti-communist messages. Many in the protests were linked to the Popular Force Party, whose leader Keiko Fujimori had lost narrowly to Castillo in the elections. Media outlet TeleSUR reported that a group of 300 protesters reached within a block of the presidential residence of Saturday, which led to reinforcement of security.

Issues at large

First, Bellido's alleged defense of the Shining Path. The controversy seems to have been sparked by comments that Bellido made on Friday after taking up his parliamentary seat. According to France24, Bellido said: "The country was a disaster, there were Peruvians who mistakenly took a path — are they Peruvians or not? What do you have against the senderistas (Shining Path)?" This touched a nerve with a lot of Peruvians for whom traumatic memories of the violent uprising by Shining Path still remains raw. According to a 2003 report by a commission to investigate the Peruvian conflict of the 80s and the 90s, the Shining Path had been responsible for the deaths of more 30,000 people in the country.

Second, an erosion of Castillo's credibility. Castillo had been accused of having links to far-left terrorist groups, including the Shining Path, during the election campaign. These had been strengthened with the group allegedly distributing anti-Fujimori pamphlets,

threatening people who voted for her. Castillo had refuted those allegations by pointing out that he had been a Rondero, a member of peasant patrol groups who had fought against the Shining Path. Nevertheless, appointing Bellido will only strengthen these suspicions further.

Third, Fujimori's ability to prevent Castillo from ruling. That many of the protesters belong to Fujimori's party, show that she still has the ability to mobilize her supporters and create unrest in the country. While Castillo's Peru Libre is the largest party in the parliament, Fujimori could still form a right-wing coalition against him, preventing him from passing legislation or even impeaching him. Castillo has not done himself any favours with Bellido's appointment likely to alienate many moderates in the parliament.

In perspective

The protests, just a couple of days after Castillo's swearing-in, sees his reign as president off to a tumultuous reign. Bellido's appointment has dashed hopes that Castillo would adopt a more moderate approach. Like Castillo, Bellido too is a political novice who has never held public office and it remains to be seen if either of them can navigate the choppy waters of the Peruvian political landscape. Castillo is Peru's sixth president since 2016.

The role that Fujimori has played in engineering these protests is important. With her still not fully accepting the election results, it is probable that such disruptions will become a regular feature of Peruvian politics.

Crimea Summit: Seven years on, Ukraine calls for the peaceful return of Crimea by Russia

Sourina Bej, 25 August 2021

In the news

On 23 August, Ukraine held an international summit focusing on the Russian occupation of Crimea. The Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy created the Crimean Platform and, in his inaugural speech, said: "Ukrainian Crimea was a guarantee of regional stability. Now it is a powder keg." The event drew

leaders from more than 40 countries, and they adopted a joint resolution on "peacefully ending the Russian Federation's temporary occupation" of Crimea. The European Council President Charles Michel said: "Brussels would never recognize Crimea as part of Russia." "This flagrant violation of international law is still on the international agenda," said Latvian President Egils Levits in support of Ukraine's call for the peaceful return of Crimea by Russia. The Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov called the summit "extremely unfriendly" towards Russia and added, "the attitude is absolutely unambiguous. We treat it as an anti-Russian event."

Issues at large

First, seven years of Russian annexation of Crimea. Since the March 2014 annexation of Crimea, the region has undergone systemic integration by Russia. The residents have been issued Russian passports, and the Kremlin has spent around Euro 2.6 billion to construct a bridge connecting Crimea to the Russian mainland. Local residents and advocacy groups have reported harsh discrimination against the Crimean Tatar community, but the majority Crimean population remains ethnolinguistically closer to Russia. The presence of the Russian military in Crimea serves as a geo-peripheral base with a strategic depth for Kremlin.

Second, Russia's claims in Crimea. Putin clarified that he views the annexation of Crimea as non-negotiable. Crimea's historic, linguistic and cultural ties served as a justification for the annexation in 2014. The referendum results claimed more than 80 per cent of Ethnic Russian voted to be a part of Russia. 15 per cent of Crimean Tatars who opposed the annexation suffered systemic exclusion. The referendum was deemed illegitimate by most of the world's governments owing to the Russian military presence. Russia's claim over Crimea stems from its historicity, now, bolstered by Putin's article titled, 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,' published on 12 July 2021. Putin conceptualized the geographical belonging of Crimea and Ukraine within the larger Russian nation-building process, drawing on Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians being descendants of Ancient Rus.

The Malorussian cultural identity within the greater Russian nation forms one of the many identity constructs that have formalized Russia's stronghold in Crimea, along with the geopolitical moorings.

Third, Ukraine's response. On the domestic front, Zelenskiy's government has worked to demonstrate support for Crimea, which was designated as an autonomous zone under the Ukrainian Constitution. In March, the Ukrainian government had adopted a Strategy of Deoccupation and Reintegration of Crimea. It also passed a law granting Crimean Tatars special status as an indigenous community. The parliament repealed a law creating a "free economic zone" that critics said was used as a mechanism to bypass sanctions. Ukraine's support for the Tatars was also visible when the summit was not hosted in Russian, which is the native tongue of a majority of residents in the region. Language has become deeply politicized in the seven years of conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The conflict in the Donbas has also reached an impasse. Earlier in 2021, Putin had authorized a military build-up at the border, further pushing Ukraine's domestic policies concerning Crimea.

Fourth, responses by international actors. Post-2014, sanctions and international condemnation followed Russia's annexation. Yet little was done to formalize a peace process, for instance, the Normandy Format. The summit lacked West European leaders, Macron and Merkel. Moreover, the countries sent their second-tier ministers as representatives. Merkel, who is nearing the end of her fourth and final term as the Bundeskanzlerin, visited Putin in Moscow last week. Germany clarified that its top priority is securing an agreement to guarantee Ukraine five more years of natural gas transit revenues from Russia.

In perspective

The summit and the lukewarm response from the West highlight the deep-rooted divide within Europe over the conflicts in the Balkans. The Black Sea peninsula remains a region of resource interest. The political/geopolitical divide between the Eastern and Western periphery leads to little Balkan interest. Looking through the Russian lens at the Balkans, the ethnolinguistic conflict

remains subsumed in the larger geostrategic milieu. What the summit fails to ponder is the need for charting a Balkan dialogue/diplomacy independent of either the Russian tilt or support from Western Europe.

Europe: Pride Marches in Serbia and Ukraine

Joeana Cera Matthews, 22 September 2021

In the news

On 18 September, hundreds joined Serbia's annual Pride parade in Belgrade. Celebrating 20 years since their first parade, organization committee member Marko Mihajlovic said: "In the past 20 years the situation has improved LGBT noticeably but not decisively... (The participants of) this year's Pride demanded a law on same-sex unions. We want this to be the last Pride that we don't have this law."

On 19 September, over 7000 people attended Ukraine's annual March in Kyiv for Equality, supporting the rights of the LGBTQ community. Ukraine ombudswoman Lyudmyla Denisova asked radical groups to refrain from violence and wrote on Facebook: "(the Constitution recognizes all people) equal in their rights from birth, regardless of any characteristics, including sexual orientation and gender identity."

Issues at large

First, the pride rallies. Kyiv's tenth Pride rally saw marchers calling for substantial changes to be made concerning how they were treated. Banners referencing eight demands made to the Ukrainian authorities, including the legalization of LGBT civil partnerships and other laws against LGBT hate crimes, were seen. A similar scene was witnessed at Belgrade; marchers were heavily policed and demanded the adoption of a law on same-sex unions. The slogan of this year's parade was 'Love is the law'. Last year, due to the pandemic, Kyiv cancelled its rally while Belgrade held it online.

Second, the opposition to LGBTQ. Concerns of violence loomed during Ukraine's Pride rally; around 100 far-right activists counter-

demonstrated in a nearby park. Despite recent progress, homophobia and opposition to same-sex partnerships are prevalent in Kyiv. LGBTQ rights groups claim police were downplaying homophobic or transphobic motives of attacks as 'hooliganism', which further contribute to the problem. LGBTQ associated groups and events are regularly attacked by conservative groups and members of far-right organizations. In Serbia, consistent with past marches, police avoided clashes between far-right protesters who burnt the rainbow flag and pelted stones and eggs at the marchers. According to polls conducted in Serbia, homosexuality is widely considered to be a 'disorder.'

Third, the government response. The Serbian and Ukrainian governments largely support the rights of the LGBTQ community and actively work towards substantive measures. Ever since pro-West leaders came to power, the Ukrainian government has increased support for LGBTQ rights. Amendment banning LGBTQ discrimination at workplaces was also a long stride in ensuring the rights of the community. Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic, who is openly gay and has attended previous marches, is said to have been unable to join this year's rally. However, the Serbian law on same-sex unions remains stalled since President Alexander Vucic refuses to ratify the law without which it won't come into force.

Fourth, Europe's LGBTQ stance. Widespread criticism against bloc members who promote state-sanctioned homophobia is becoming increasingly common. Poland and Hungary, which have been reprimanded through legal and financial actions, are prime examples. The European Commission – responsible for approving and handing out the bloc's pandemic recovery fund – has yet to approve Hungary's reconstruction funds. This delay is due to Budapest's failure to repeal its anti-paedophilia law, which is a disguised anti-LGBTQ law.

In perspective

Over the past decade, support for the LGBTQ community and their rights has significantly grown globally, especially in Europe. This could be due to the increased presence of Pride parades, which call for safeguarding the community's rights and ability to live peacefully without being victims of hate

crimes. Meanwhile, providing leadership in the global arena, the EU has reiterated it will not tolerate undemocratic and inhumane acts committed against any community by member states. It has since discovered ways to discipline those states which fail to comply with its measures.

The US: Migrant situation worsens as the American border officials begin deporting the Haitians

Vaishnavi Iyer, 30 September 2021

In the news

On 17 September, approximately 13,000 Haitians gathered near the Del Rio bridge in Texas connecting to Mexico.

On 21 September, US border officials were heavily criticized for their mistreatment of migrants. They rode on horseback using whips to prevent the migrants from entering the border. President Joe Biden called the treatment an "embarrassment" and ensured "consequences." Calling it "strapping," he said: "Of course, I take responsibility. I'm president." Referring to the border agents, he said: "I promise you those people will pay," adding, "It's simply not who we are."

On 22 September, Special Envoy to Haiti, Ambassador Daniel Foote resigned in protest over the deportation of the migrants stating it as "inhumane and counterproductive."

On 23 September, US officials noted that nearly 4000 migrants had not moved; others already returned to Mexico and 3200 waiting for their migration process in custody. Another 19,000 migrants have begun moving from Columbian forests waiting for the Panama border crossing. About 1400 of the migrants have been returned to Haiti.

Issues at large

First, the Haiti migration to the US. Haitians have regularly been migrating to the US. The earthquake of 2010 left many Haitians in search for a better life, many left to countries like Brazil and Chile. An unstable economy and strict immigration rules in these areas left the migrants helpless, with many crossing into US borders. Constant setbacks in Haiti,

triggered by the pandemic and the political instability with the assassination of President Jovenel Moise, has only led to more despair.

Second, the response from the US government. The Title 42 policy is set to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the facilities where the migrants are currently being held. With reference to the same US has been sending the migrants back to Haiti. Moreover, US agents patrolling the border with migrants encamped under the Del Rio bridge are facing heavy criticisms for their inhumane handling of the situation. In an attempt to seemingly defend the actions of the border patrol, Mayorkas said: "I'm intensely and immensely proud of the men and women of the US Customs and Border Protection. In fact, in Del Rio, Texas, I saw them act heroically." However, Biden has condemned the border treatment and has vouched for consequences. The US is still continuing its efforts to send Haitians back.

In perspective

First, Haiti's arduous decade. While Haiti has been a victim to natural calamities and socio-economic-political unrest, the sitting government has not accounted for much effort to help its own population. Ariel Henry supported the American evacuation of the migrants and seemed to sympathize with the US.

Second, American immigration policy debate. Within the IR perspective, migration is a debatable right. Last year, only 22 per cent of Haitians won a formal approval as compared to 98 per cent of Venezuelans and 83 per cent of Salvadorans. The Haitian number for this year remains at 31 per cent. Biden administration has the responsibility to distinguish itself from the Trump administration and indulge in the systematic rebuilding of the asylum facilities. More importantly, he must address the main cause of the irregular migrations. Given the migration, the US is also suffering consequences of roadblocks, airport chaos, addressing border agent harassment and has resorted to using the Trump era policy to return the Haitians. With the current Covid-19 situation in the US and increased migration from other countries from the south, it is hard to hold the US accountable to accommodate every migrant. The increased human rights issues against the larger

backdrops of national sovereignty of the US and a global pandemic help push for a larger debate on migration as a right amidst such extraordinary circumstances.

Brazil: Anti-Bolsonaro protests across the country

Porkkodi Ganeshpandian, 7 October 2021

In the news

On 2 October, thousands of Brazilians gathered across Brazil to protest against President Bolsonaro. The protests were peaceful, displaying messages on posters and inflatable gas canisters. The protests spanned across more than two hundred Brazilian cities, including Sao Paulo and Rio De Janeiro. The protestors highlighted their unhappiness over the handling of the pandemic, dwindling economic opportunities and called for the impeachment of President Bolsonaro.

Issues at large

First, the pandemic mishandling. Brazil has lost over 600,000 lives during the pandemic, the second-highest death toll after the US. Bolsonaro has been accused of promoting crowds at the height of the pandemic's destructive waves, discouraging the use of masks and other COVID-appropriate behaviour, and not taking adequate steps to ramp up the health sector.

Second, Brazil's spiralling economic woes. The pandemic disrupted the economy; high inflation has made the situation worse. It has impacted the prices of essential goods such as food, electricity and fuel. Unemployment has drastically increased, thus leading to massive poverty and starvation.

Third, the fallouts of pro-Bolsonaro rallies. On Brazil's independence day, pro-Bolsonaro rallies were organized to mobilize in supporters. Recent polls indicate Bolsonaro trailing his leftist opponent Luiz Inacio Lula Da Silva. The ongoing anti-Bolsonaro protests are a direct response to the rallies held a month back, expressing the general discontent and opposition of the citizens.

Fourth, the growing discontent against Bolsonaro outside the streets. He has been candid about his disregard for other political institutions of the State, particularly the judiciary. Recently, the Brazilian supreme court has approved several investigations against Bolsonaro. More than a hundred requests have been lodged with the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies to impeach the President.

In perspective

The protests against Bolsonaro are gathering momentum. This could force the right-wing lawmakers in the lower house to support the impeachment of Bolsonaro. However, the opposition is not united. There is a marked hesitancy in the right-wing parties joining the ongoing protests and in the predominantly leftist protesters accepting them into their united front. There is also a silence from the Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL, Free Brazil Movement), which was advocating a third way from Bolsonaro and Lula Da Silva in the protests held in September. Second, the protests indicate a possible change in the upcoming presidential elections in Brazil in 2022. The protests could also unite the heterogeneous population of Brazil such as the indigenous communities and ordinary citizens.

BREXIT: France threatens to curb energy supplies to the UK over restricted fishing rights

Sourina Bej, 7 October 2021

In the news

On 6 October, the French fishing fleet owners threatened the Jersey administration, in addition to the UK government, with a two-week deadline to grant them licences to catch in the UK waters. Upon the end of the deadline, the French fleets could block the Channel Tunnel and the ferry port of Calais, preventing imports from entering Britain, before the holidays began. The potential blockade follows after Jersey refused to grant fishing licences to 75 French fishing vessels to access its waters from 30 October.

On 6 October, the French Prime Minister Jean Castex told the Parliament that the UK is not honouring the fishing rights agreement under the Brexit deal. The Prime Minister said: "Britain does not respect its own signature. Month after month, the UK presents new conditions and delays giving definitive licenses ... this cannot be tolerated." Furthermore, France talked tough while hinting at curbing the energy imports through Britain.

Issues at large

First, row intensifies amid fuel shortages. The tension over fishing rights comes in the immediate backdrop of fuels shortage, increasing gas prices, and hoarding of daily essentials in the UK. The escalation followed signs of stockpiling of Christmas products such as frozen turkeys due to fears of empty shelves in Britain. Aldi, one of the biggest daily purchases supply chains in the UK, said it is selling 1,500 frozen turkey crowns a day. The panic buying is followed by two weeks of chaos at the petrol pumps after forecourts ran dry of petrol and diesel because of a shortage of tanker drivers. Amid this, the threat from France to curb energy imports adds to conflict escalation.

Second, the geo-economic tussle over the Channel. France and the UK have been at loggerheads for several months over fishing permits in the Channel Islands. The French fishers have been protesting against the UK system, which requires the EU fishermen to prove prior fishing activities to gain fishing permits. Britain had countered these protests on the ground that the terms agreed in Brexit trade talks support the limited access to the Channel. In this, the Jersey port had become the recent flashpoint when the post-BREXIT regulations were implemented. According to the rules, 41 permits have been issued based on fishing history between 2017 and 2020 to French fishing vessels to operate in Jersey's waters. France responded, saying no such consultation about any new conditions affecting all boats has been agreed upon during Brexit transition talks.

Third, energy blockade as negotiating tool in post-BREXIT reality. As the UK limits the fishing rights in the Channel, France has resorted to threatening with an energy

blockade. According to the latest UK government statistics, France exported a net 8,700 gigawatt-hours of energy to Britain in 2020. The warning by France comes as Britain is set to enter a "difficult winter." But any action on energy may come with practical issues for France as Britain is also a transit point for electricity export. However, the threat to block is a new form of negotiating tactics to pressure the UK to hold their end of the Brexit-deal bargain.

Fourth, structural faults and a bureaucratic quagmire for inward-looking Britain. No one in the UK had voted for lower standards, Brexit red tape and documentation obstacles. Fishing communities throughout the UK had voted to leave the EU, only to find that additional costs have left them struggling to export their catches to Europe. In the current tension where there is also a lack of lorry drivers, there is a fear that red tape would kill 80 per cent of the industry when fish caught in the Channel are not exported, the vast majority of it to France.

In perspective

The intensification of the fishing row could probably expand into a bilateral conflict over marine resources. The Channel had been historically at the heart of power tussle in Europe, but Britain's attempt at political isolation has costed its efforts at economic globalization. In addition, France's aggressive posture over fishing rights also signifies a nationalist attempt by Paris in drawing and sharpening its political boundaries with the UK.

Belarus: Pushing migrants into Europe as a State sponsored strategy

Joeana Cera Matthews, 28 October 2021

In the news

On 22 October, attending an EU summit in Brussels, European Commission Chief Ursula von der Leyen said: "The people used by Lukashenko are victims, we must help them." Adding to von der Leyen's refusal to fund barriers at the border, French President

Emmanuel Macron said: "... we should protect ourselves. But we should never do so by abandoning our values."

Separately, the UNHCR's Regional Director for Europe Pascale Moreau called for "urgent action" on the refugee crisis and said: "They are held hostage by a political stalemate which needs to be solved now... Pushbacks, that deny access to territory and asylum, violate human rights in breach of international law."

On 22 October, the BBC published an article where Syrian migrants trying to reach Germany were interviewed. Idris, one among them, stated: "We're crossing the borders illegally. We don't know what will happen. We can't trust anyone, not even our smuggler... Pray for us."

Issues at large

First, the Belarusian regime's strategy. Refugees from various parts of the Middle East are flown into Belarus, then pushed into the EU via Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Led by President Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus has been successfully exploiting the bloc's commitment to refugee rights. The idea seems to be that if they keep pushing in migrants, the EU will reconsider its decision to sanction Belarus and stop choking their economy. The move has, however, raised concerns within the bloc regarding the ability of an unpopular country, such as Belarus, to create chaos in the bloc. Doubts also loom large whether Minsk's is a retaliatory measure to the EU or individually to Poland, given the fact that Warsaw has and continues to harbour critics of the Belarusian regime.

Second, the objective. In May 2020, Lukashenko promised to retaliate against the EU sanctions by flooding the EU with 'migrants and drugs.' Despite being termed as an effort at 'hybrid warfare' by the EU, such inhumane moves are not new when considering countries like Belarus and Russia. Turkey, too, engages in a similar instrumentalization of refugees. Allegations exist regarding Moscow and Minsk nationals entering the bloc, along with migrants, in an effort to spy, provoke, or simply create chaos. It is as though Putin's 'little green men' have donned a different disguise.

Third, the EU's apprehensions. Migration is a weak point in European policymaking. Despite the 2015 migrant crisis, the EU's migrant policy remains unreformed. Acknowledging this, von der Leyen said: "as long as we do not find common ground on how to manage migration, our opponents will continue to target that." The European Commission recently proposed tightening visa restrictions on members of the Belarusian government along with exploring additional sanctions against individuals and entities. Poles and Balts, after using barbed wire fences and declaring emergencies, are now considering the construction of a permanent wall at their borders. Despite its desperate attempts at reducing migrant inflow, the EU's 'vulnerability' continues owing to its dependency on third nations, like Belarus and Turkey, to stem inflows.

In perspective

First, a wake-up call for the EU. A small country like Belarus succeeded to create chaos in the EU by exploiting its very evident weakness. The EU's present rule of law crisis with Poland will only worsen the bloc's ability to unanimously decide on a migrant policy. The EU needs to keep its internal differences aside and unite as a bloc if it expects to see an end to the crisis at hand.

Second, the larger agenda. The EU needs to be wary of Belarus' larger agenda; it does not seem to end with migrants. Along with Russia, energy manipulation has already begun. Soon enough, the duo might cash in on other weaknesses.

Third, the humanitarian crisis. Lukashenko has instrumentalized some of the world's most vulnerable people and left them in a no-man's-land. They now struggle to survive with the Belarusian troops pushing them into the bloc while Polish and Baltic forces fight to keep them out.

UK-France Fishing row: Conflict over catching rights escalates with slim signs of a thaw

Sourina Bej, 4 November 2021

In the news

On 3 November, France released the British trawlers that were detained amid the ongoing conflict over fishing rights. The Scottish-registered scallop dredger Cornelis Gert Jan left the northern French port of Le Havre, and the trawler's owner said, "the boat was detained last week, saying it did not have a license." Since October, the conflict over boat licenses to fish across the English Channel escalated, propelling France to threaten to block the UK goods.

On 1 November, French President Emmanuel Macron announced that talks over equitable fishing rights would continue as he stepped back from the threat to impose complete customs checks on the UK goods and ban the UK boats from entering some French ports. Even though the French transport minister called their position in the talks "a constructive one," the UK government spokesperson said the Brexit minister would "reaffirm our existing position" when they meet France on 4 November.

Additionally, on 3 November, tensions also eased when a French court ruled that a British scallop dredger seized by French authorities could leave immediately with no requirement to pay the EUR 150,000 deposit.

Issues at large

First, the geo-economic tussle over the Channel. France and the UK have been at loggerheads over fishing permits in the English Channel Islands for several months. The French fishers have protested against the UK system, requiring the EU fishermen to prove prior fishing activities to gain permits. Britain had countered these protests on the ground that the terms agreed in Brexit trade talks support limited access to the Channel. In this, the Jersey port became a recent flashpoint when the post-BREXIT regulations were implemented. France had responded, saying no to any new conditions affecting all boats that had been agreed during the Brexit transition

talks. Currently, France threatened a series of measures against the UK unless more licenses were granted by 2 November. On 6 October, the French fishing fleet owners threatened the Jersey administration with a two-week license deadline.

Second, post-Brexit conflict expansion. With conflict escalating over fishing rights, the UK now confronts tensions surrounding both its land and water borders. While the UK sees the English Channel as its bilateral conflict with France, the latter sees the right to fish as part of the Brexit agreement. Similarly, another fallout of the Brexit transition talks has been over the Northern Ireland protocol. The UK and EU are deadlocked over revising the Northern Irish protocol, the Brexit agreement that kept the region in the EU single market, and the customs union to prevent a land border. The UK's Brexit minister is due to meet the European Commission vice-president Maroš Šefčovič for further talks on 5 November, as both sides try to settle the issue before the end of 2021. With both fishing rights and trade rights in its water and land borders respectively in question, the UK will steadily hurdle to holding its end of the agreement.

Third, talks return to ease post-Brexit tensions. After three years of talks with the EU, the UK exited the union in 2020, however, in over a year, the two sides have now returned to the negotiating table to ease the tensions over the implementation of the Brexit agreement. Furthermore, the difference in the letter and spirit of the agreement for both the UK and the EU have challenged constructive talks. The French spokesperson said technical talks would continue on, including with some officials from Guernsey but cautioned against expecting any big breakthrough. While not ruling out progress, they said they did not anticipate resolving the issues at the Paris meeting.

In perspective

First, the current tensions are a rerun of the Jersey island conflict and an expansion of similar sentiments across the coastline. It involves boats from Boulogne and other northern French ports, which are much better placed to create a real crisis in Franco-British relations.

Second, the leader's approach to conflict resolution has been insufficient. There is a danger that the French government, who is seven months from an election and angered by the submarine dispute, could be seen relishing a confrontation with Britain. French fishermen's leaders – even pro-Macron members of the National Assembly – are talking about blockades of Calais and the Channel Tunnel. Similarly, Johnson's populist approach to conflict resolutions risks equal escalation as well.

Cuba: Between bouts of demonstrations

Porkkodi Ganeshpandian, 18 November 2021

In the news

On 15 November, demonstrators had carried out a peaceful but somewhat diminished demonstration in Cuba, calling for greater recognition of human and civil rights in Cuba. The peaceful protests had been planned for weeks, despite the lack of permission from the Cuban government for the protests. The anticipatory and preventive move of the state included the besieging of homes of activists and the denunciation of prominent protesters. The Cuban government had also stated that the protests were the results of the illegal interference of the United States into Cuban affairs.

In spite of these measures, protesters had shown their opposition by dressing up in white and displaying white objects around their homes, and posting the scenes on social media platforms like Facebook. Forty protesters have been arrested for protesting in Cuba. The state has declared these protests illegal as per Cuba's 2019 constitution.

Issues at large

First, the increasing repression of the state. One of the primary agenda behind the peaceful protests in Cuba is the demand for greater recognition of civil rights and freedom. This demand has been particularly boosted due to the fate of the protesters of the July protests. Activists had intended to hold another massive, peaceful demonstration similar to the July event to demand more freedom, and the

release of those unfairly arrested in July. However, the state's swift repression of any dissent has vastly subdued the intensity of the protests of 15 November.

Second, the negative impact of the covid19 pandemic. Due to the covid19 pandemic, the tourism industry, one of the key revenue sources for Cuba with 10 percent GDP deriving from this sector, was severely impacted. Moreover, the handling of the pandemic was dismal, with deaths per million in Cuba at least six times higher than the global average.

Third, the failing economy. Cuba is also subjected to the sanctions imposed by Donald Trump during his presidency, and the continuous trade embargo since 1960. This impacts its economic recovery. This has exacerbated the crisis of the Cubans in procuring even the essentials for daily life due to a raging inflation. Illegal migration to neighboring countries, particularly the US, has also increased due to these conditions in Cuba.

In perspective

The fear of the swift and ruthless crackdown of any dissent in Cuba largely undermines the impact of the 15 November demonstrations in the state. However, analysts have stated that the repression, bordering on suppression, is an indication of the disquiet of the Cuban government regarding its security and stability in Cuba. Furthermore, with the dismal status quo in the economic and civil rights conditions in Cuba, the protests would undoubtedly recur. Activists had sought to reenact the intensity of the July protests in November, and this trend is set to continue in Cuba, with the opposition calling for prolonged protests till 27 November.

It should also be noted that the frequency of protests in Cuba would require a constant deployment of Law-and-Order forces to quell dissent, which may prove impractical in the long run. Furthermore, the vast international support to the Cuban protests, as indicated by the leaders of the Facebook group Archipelago, is bound to grow, further boosting the efforts of demonstrators in demanding their rights and freedom. These factors would undoubtedly sow the seeds for a more tolerant and lenient regime in Cuba in the future.

Colombia: The protests continue

Vishnu Prasad, 2 June 2021

In the news

On 28 May, at least four people died in Colombia after police took on protesters who attempted to lift roadblocks. Protesters were back on the street after talks between the government and protest groups had broken down. On the same day, President Ivan Duque announced that he was deploying the military to the town of Cali, which had been hit by violence.

On 30 May, the United Nations called for an independent investigation into the number of casualties that had happened since the protests began on 28 April. UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet voiced 'deep concern' over the violence.

On 31 May, Colombian authorities announced that they were investigating ten police officers who allowed civilians to shoot at demonstrators in Cali.

Issues at large

First, the expansion of the protesters' demands. The agitation started on 28 April as a reaction to a new tax regime imposed by the President. However, a month later, these demands expanded to such an extent that the strike committee submitted a list of requirements that had to be met before they even came to the negotiating table. The issues have now grown to address Colombia's economic inequalities, police and health systems.

Second, the failure of both the government and protesters to negotiate. There was initially some light at the end of the tunnel, with both the Colombian government and the protesters seeming close to a consensus on a pre-agreement. However, these talks have since stalled, with both parties accusing the other of going back on the agreed conditions.

Third, the use of the military to clamp down on protesters. One of the reasons for the protest to spiral out of hand was the violent manner in which the initial strike was dealt with by the Colombian police force. But now, with Duque sending in the military, violent clampdown appears inevitable.

Fourth, the growing international condemnation of Duque's handling of the crisis. With the United Nations joining a growing chorus of international bodies calling for an end to violence against the protesters, the pressure is piling on Duque.

In perspective

Despite some positive developments, the chaos in Colombia looks far from over. With the coronavirus pandemic still raging on in the country, the government's loss of control in certain parts of the country, shortage of essential supplies and the violence unleashed by the police has made life difficult for the people.

It also remains to be seen if these protests will spread across South America. The economic inequalities that sparked the protests in Colombia hold true for most of South America. Multiple signs of discontent have been visible across the continent in recent weeks with Brazil and Argentina seeing major protests and Chile witnessing a pushback against the government in a poll to elect drafters of a new constitution. In 2019, similar protests in Ecuador had spread quickly to the rest of the continent.

Colombia: Two months of protests

Lokendra Sharma, July 2021

In the news

On 1 July, Colombia's President Ivan Duque said that he plans to present a new law to Congress which will introduce stringent measures to curb vandalism, roadblocks and attacks on police. This statement came days after the country marked two months of protests that started against the now-withdrawn tax proposals but have since expanded to include a host of demands.

According to Reuters, Duque said: "We've seen some acts of vandalism that have destroyed public infrastructure, that has burned municipal courthouses, that have also attacked commercial premises and clearly we need to toughen penalties". He added: "Peaceful protest is a constitutional right that we all have, and peaceful means without violence and without violating the rights of others".

Issues at large

First, two months of continuous protests. The protests started on 28 April against a controversial tax reform proposal by the Duque administration that sought to raise tax revenues. After violent protests, Duque withdrew the proposal and then Finance Minister Alberto Carrasquilla, who piloted it, resigned from his post. The protests, however, have continued regardless. The talks between protestors and the government at the end of May, which showed some progress, also collapsed in June. Even though the national strike group has suspended weekly protests to prepare drafts to present to Congress at the end of July, protests have continued in small pockets in the country.

Second, the expansion of demands. Stemming from a larger discontent in society, the inclusion of multiple groups in the protest movement — youth, middle class, unions and the indigenous communities — has resulted in a commensurate expansion of demands. This includes basic income, better employment opportunities, police reforms and respect for human rights. The indigenous communities also recently toppled the statue of explorer Columbus — after whom the country is named — demonstrating their opposition to colonialism and bringing to light the exploitation suffered by them to date.

Third, Duque's heavy-handed response. While Duque took the right step early into the protest movement by withdrawing the tax reforms, he has also been blamed for a brutal police response that has killed several dozens of protestors, according to right groups.

In perspective

The last two months have exposed the discontent boiling in the Colombian society, which initially found an outlet in the tax proposals. The strong-arm tactics approach by Duque has not been helpful in addressing it. His new announcement of bringing a new stringent anti-vandalism law, when a law for that very purpose already exists, is only going to make matters worse.

Colombia will only come out of this tense stalemate if the negotiation process with the wide array of protesting groups is restarted and

the Duque administration takes steps to address genuine popular demands.

Cuba: Anti-government protests, triggered by COVID economy and structural issues

Lokendra Sharma, 14 July 2021

In the news

On 11 July, thousands of Cubans marched in Havana and Santiago against the communist government led by President Diaz-Canel. The protestors called on Diaz-Canel to step down and also chanted "freedom." Protests were largely peaceful, with some instances of violence and police detentions. On the same day, in a broadcasted address, Diaz-Canel asked: "all the revolutionaries in the country, all the Communists, to hit the streets wherever there is an effort to produce these provocations." Further, the Cuban government blamed the US for fomenting protests in the country.

On 12 July, US President Biden made a statement backing the protestors. He said: "The Cuban people are demanding their freedom from an authoritarian regime." He added that the US "stands firmly with the people of Cuba as they assert their universal rights" and also called on the Cuban government "to refrain from violence in their attempt to silence the voices of the people of Cuba." On the same day, Mexico and Russia issued statements warning against any outside interference in the internal affairs of Cuba, indirectly targeting the role of the US.

On 13 July, a Reuters report, citing an exiled human rights group Cubalex, said: "At least 100 protesters, activists, and independent journalists had been detained nationwide since Sunday."

Issues at large

First, the demands by protestors. The protests come in the backdrop of the rising cases of COVID-19 and a shrinking economy particularly affected by the declining tourism sector. Protestors are demanding an end to hunger, better economic opportunities, and a more reliable electricity supply. People are also unhappy with the government's handling of the pandemic and medicine shortages.

Second, a new leader and a new generation. The protests are the largest in nearly three decades; the last such protest took place in 1994 when the country was reeling under severe economic distress after Soviet Union's collapse. The leadership was recently passed on to Diaz-Canel from the Castro brothers — Fidel and Raul — who ruled for nearly six decades. These protests are the first test of Diaz-Canel's leadership. It will be much more challenging for him because of three reasons: widespread use of the Internet and social media platforms by the country's disillusioned youth which render propaganda ineffective; Diaz-Canel lacking the charisma and popular appeal which Castro brothers enjoyed; lastly, though importantly, the receding of revolutionary ideology with a generational shift.

Third, the economic issues. Cuba has been subjected to a severe economic embargo by the US for the last six decades. Former US President Trump had imposed even more sanctions amidst the pandemic and reinstated some sanctions which were earlier lifted by the Obama administration. In part due to the US embargo, along with other factors like the pandemic and domestic policy issues, the Cuban economy shrank by 11 per cent in 2020.

In perspective

Due to the three-fold challenges of social media and lack of charisma and receding ideology, Diaz-Canel would only find it difficult to respond in a heavy-handed, repressive manner similar to what the Castro brothers did in the past. Therefore, rather than calling for counter-revolutionaries to mount a resistance, Diaz-Canel should pay heed to genuine demands for change and reform, of both political and economic nature. Failure to do so would only keep the Cuban society perpetually at the edge.

While the US has certainly played an interventionist role historically not just in Cuba but in the wider Caribbean and Latin American region, Diaz-Canel's attempts of putting all blame on the US for fomenting the protests is unhelpful. The US, on its part, should move beyond its hypocritical rhetoric and end the most enduring and inhuman embargo on Cuba.

Peace and Conflict: Issues

GENDER

South Korea: The 'Comfort Women' issue returns to haunt

Avishka Ashok, 25 February 2021

In the news

On 18 February, the United States Department of State said that Japan's trafficking of women for sexual services during World War II was a grave violation of human rights. The statement comes after a Professor from Harvard University, who has now been urged to apologise, claimed that the Korean women were in voluntary contracts with the Japanese military and were not forced into prostitution.

On the same day, the Minister of South Korea suggested that Japan could seek help from their mutual ally, the United States, to resolve the issue. Chung opined, "I believe that the two governments can sufficiently address issues through close dialogue, and we have been persuading the Japanese side in that direction."

On 24 February, South Korea urged for the issue to be looked at as a "Universal Human Rights Issue" to restore their dignity at the UN Human Rights Council. He opined, "Current and future generations should learn valuable lessons from the painful experience of the comfort women."

Issues at large

First, the unresolved comfort women issue. The relationship between South Korea and Japan has not been 'cordial'; both countries share a history of various unpleasant incidents, since the Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula. Post-1945, Seoul and Tokyo repeatedly tried to resolve the issues and start afresh. However, the issue of systemic rape and forced sexual labour of women have proved to be a tough issue to be resolved. Second, the periodic tensions between Japan and South Korea, and the comfort women issue continues to be an obstacle in establishing peaceful relationship. In 2015, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe

apologized for the wartime crimes and South Korean President Park Geun-Hye approved an agreement to address the issue. However, the victims of the tragedy completely denounced the agreement, calling it a "humiliating diplomacy" as it failed to include the affected women, nor did it reflect their views and demanded that Japan make official reparations for its actions.

Third, the comfort women issue within the larger global threat to the dignity of a woman. The United Nations has adopted various resolutions to protect the dignity of women and punish perpetrators of sexual violence in conflicts. Resolution 1820 acknowledges the use of sexual violence as a war tactic and resolution 2106 emphasizes holding individuals responsible for crimes against women. Despite undertaking numerous such resolutions, the UN has not been able to prevent the exploitation; for example, the case of the Yazidis in the Middle East. Reality presents a dangerous trend for women all over the world.

In perspective

Japan's refusal to admit its responsibility in subjugating and exploiting women during the World War presents the current and future generations with a dangerous precedent where crimes of the powerful are forgiven without much consequence. Japan could be shying away from accepting the responsibility of the Korean Comfort Women as it will coerce Tokyo to also look into its crimes towards women from other nationalities during the war.

Despite being a bilateral issue, the international community must look at the problem through a humanitarian lens and restore the honour and dignity of thousands of women who suffered at the hands of the Imperialist greed of countries during the World Wars.

International Women's Day: Women across the world #ChooseToChallenge

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 11 March 2021

In the news

On 8 March, the world commemorated International Women's Day, celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women while calling for action for accelerating gender parity. The campaign theme for International Women's Day 2021 was 'Choose To Challenge.' The theme explains a challenging world as an alert world, as a society one can choose to challenge and call out gender bias and inequality as well as choose to seek out and celebrate women's achievements. Thus, collectively helping to create an inclusive world. The theme highlights that from challenge comes change, thereby urging society to #ChooseToChallenge.

The United Nations Women Executive Director, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, marking the day, said, "We need women's representation that reflects all women and girls in all their diversity and abilities and across all cultural, social, economic and political situations. This is the only way we will get real societal change that incorporates women in decision-making as equals and benefits us all."

Issues at large

First, different regions call on different demands. From Mexico to Japan demonstrations and events were staged to mark the day. Across Latin America, women rallied for an end to violence against women, femicide and greater rights for women. Across Europe, women demonstrated under the motto: 'In the face of social emergency, feminism is essential,' and voiced concerns over domestic violence. In South Asia, women marched demanding an end to patriarchy, toxic masculinity, and gender-based violence. Across East Asia, women marched in defiance of power-grabbing generals and patriarchal governments and called for gender equality, justice and improved welfare for women.

Second, the struggle against patriarchy continues. Although women have come a long

way breaking past the glass ceiling and other social barriers, patriarchy and its various strains continue to remain a challenge. An indicator of this is the representation of women in leadership roles. According to the United Nations, only three countries in the world have 50 per cent or more women in parliament. Women are Heads of State in only 22 nations. Globally 119 countries have never had a woman leader as a Head of State. The UN adds that at the current rate of progress, gender parity will not be reached in parliaments before 2063 and gender parity for Heads of State will not happen till the year 2150.

Third, the surge in violence against women. According to the World Health Organisation, globally one in three women experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime, mostly by an intimate partner, a stark reminder of the scale of gender inequality and discrimination against women. In 2019, according to the UN Women, 243 million women and girls aged 15-49 have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner. Emerging data show that violence against women and girls has intensified since the outbreak of COVID-19. Violence against women and girls is pervasive but at the same time widely under-reported. Less than 40 per cent of women who experience violence report these crimes or seek help of any sort.

Fourth, the disproportion between awareness and effect. Although there has been a rise of awareness concerning women's rights, the disproportion between the letter and the spirit remains. Moving from awareness to action continues to be a challenging task, with multiple barriers from societal restrictions to institutional bias restricting the progress.

In perspective

As the world celebrated International Women's Day, it is important to reflect on the numerous achievements of women and the progress made thus far. However, the fight is not over yet; taking a cue from the generations that have passed, the present generation must begin to sensitise the importance of women's right and help create an environment where women can thrive rather than struggle.

Society and governments need to prioritize women's right by prevention and redress issues such as violence, discrimination and hate against women and girls. Finally, tearing down the patriarchy, as pessimist as it sounds, is next to impossible. However, what women can do is unite and lift each other when most things standing in front of them are set to bring them down.

Australia: Women fight against sexual violence

Avishka Ashok, 18 March 2021

In the news

On 15 March, close to 80,000 people participated in the March4Justice protests, which took shape in 40 local events spread across Australia. The organization urged the public to sign a petition which demands four actions from the government: independent and timely investigation into all cases of gendered violence; complete execution of all recommendations in the Australian Human Rights Commission's Respect at Work report; lift public funding for addressing gendered violence; and enactment of a federal gender equality act that will audit parliamentary practices.

On 14 March, over 5000 women participated in the protests in Perth, Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Darwin, Adelaide, Hobart, Talbot and Wollongong also saw thousands of people protesting against the persistent sexual violence and inequality meted out to women and girls in the country and demanded the dismissal of the perpetrators from Parliamentary positions. Brittany Higgins, the first plaintiff, also delivered a speech in Canberra and said, "We fundamentally recognize the system is broken, the glass ceiling is still in place, and there are significant failings in the power structures within our institution."

Issues at large

First, the trigger behind the protests. Brittany Higgins, a former liberal-party political advisor, filed a complaint against a colleague who raped her while she was unconscious after being inebriated. She also spoke about how

she was silenced, and the incident was covered up in the days to come when she tried to raise the alarm at her workplace. In the days after Higgins' complaint, three other women also raised their voice against the same individual. This triggered a movement of numerous women standing up to express their experiences in Australian schools, workplaces and social settings where they suffered sexual abuse. The recent protests are a reaction to the continued mistreatment of women and the government's inadequate response towards women who complained about sexual abuse. Second, the dismissal of the case by the government. Even when women like Brittany Higgins come forward and talk about abuse, society tries to silence their voices to protect their interests. Higgins' initial complaints were ignored by the current Defence Minister, Linda Reynolds, who called her a "lying cow" in the wake of her revelation. The identity of the accused individual still remains to be unknown and is being protected by the media companies and former workplaces. When less than 10 per cent of the victims of sexual abuse worldwide seek legal assistance, the Australian government sends a dangerous signal to the perpetrators of crimes against women by their actions.

Third, Australia's worsening gender gap. According to the World Economic Forum, Australia ranked 15 in 2006 on the Global Gender Gap Index. In a matter of a decade, the rank plunged to 44 in 2020. Australia ranks 57 with regards to the political representation of women and 49 on the economic participation gap. Despite being in an equal league as other western countries in terms of infrastructure development and economic progress, Australia has been continually falling back on gender equality goals.

In perspective

The March4Justice calls for a cultural change in the values and behaviour of society. Despite immense anger, instantaneous changes are hard to come by because of the patriarchal society. The Parliament's lackadaisical approach and reluctance to react strongly on the matter reaffirms the fundamental discrimination towards women in political and social institutions, which create a hostile, dangerous and unfriendly environment for women everywhere.

Global Gender Gap Report 2021: Main Takeaways

Sneha M, 7 April 2021

In the news

On 30 March, the World Economic Forum released the Global Gender Gap Report 2021. The report provides a benchmark to measure gender parity across countries on four parameters: Political empowerment, economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, and health and survival. The report aims to track progress on relative gaps on the parameters mentioned above. The methodology used in the report has been constant since its first edition in 2006. On a scale of 0 to 100, the Global Gender Gap Index calculates scores that can be viewed as the distance to parity.

The key highlights of the report are as follows. First, the Global Gender Gap of 2021 stands at 67.7 per cent, with three new countries (Afghanistan, Guyana, and Niger). The gap has widened by 0.6 percentage points compared to the previous edition of 2019. Second, geographically, the Nordic countries continue to dominate the global top 10, with Iceland, Norway, Finland, and Sweden occupying the top five positions. Third, the Covid-19 pandemic has further widened the gender gap by a generation from 99.5 years to 135.6 years. Fourth, the gender gap globally in political empowerment remains the highest of the four gaps (only 22 per cent closed till date), followed by economic participation and opportunity (only 58 per cent closed); finally, gender gaps in educational attainment (95 per cent closed); and health and survival (96 per cent closed) are nearly closing. However, the report also points that the "last mile" of progress has been relatively slow.

Issues at large

First, the increased global attention on gender issues. From the landmark resolution of the United Nations Security Council on Women, Peace and Security in 2000 to the Global Gender Gap Index of 2021, they have all highlighted attaining gender parity to accelerate the global economy's growth. Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) also emphasize (Goal 5) on achieving gender

equality. The world aims at a more gender-inclusive environment, but overall action is missing from the scene in many countries.

Second, regardless of global opinion on gender issues, less has been done to eradicate the gender gap. The report rightly identifies a significant decrease in the total progress made towards gender parity since 2006. Hence, on average, over the past 15 years, the gap has been reduced by only 0.24 percentage points per year. The total global gender gap is expected to close in 135.6 years, which is more than the reported years in 2019.

Regionally, Western Europe has the narrowest gender gap (77.6 per cent so far) and is expected to improve even further this year. In contrast, South Asia (62.3 per cent) and the Middle East and North Africa have highest disparity (60.9 per cent).

Third, gender equality in isolation. Take Iceland, for example, which has topped the global gender gap index for more than a decade and has continued to do so. Progressive childcare policies, generous parental leave policies, and gender quotas in the political sphere are the backbone of its success. Therefore, countries looking at gender issues in isolation must revamp their policies and strategies to develop on the whole.

In perspective

The report rightly identifies gender-positive recovery policies and practices that can tackle these potential challenges. First, the study proposes that more funding be poured into the care system and fair access to care leave for men and women. Second, policies and procedures should be constructive in combating gender-based discrimination in the workplace. Lastly, an unprecedented scenario like that of the pandemic must be met with strict equitable policies to create more sustainable societies and economies.

Child labour: 160 million children, one in ten, are engaged in labour, says the new ILO-UNICEF report

Apoorva Sudhakar, 16 June 2021

In the news

On 12 June, countries observed World Day Against Child Labour marking the 2021 International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour.

On 10 June, a new report titled "Child Labour: Global estimates 2020, trends and the road forward" published by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) says progress towards ending child labour has come to a standstill for the first time since 2000. The UNICEF Executive Director said: "We are losing ground in the fight against child labour, and the last year has not made that fight any easier." Similarly, the ILO Director-General said: "The new estimates are a wake-up call. We cannot stand by while a new generation of children is put at risk."

The global estimates have been released every four years since 2000 with data pertaining to children aged between 5 to 17. The latest report reveals that in the beginning of 2020, "160 million children – 63 million girls and 97 million boys" were engaged in child labour; 86 million fewer than when the first global estimates were released in 2000. However, it says the COVID-19 pandemic is hindering progress and estimates that by the end of 2022, 8.9 million more children will be in child labour.

Issues at large

First, the persistent problem of child labour. The prevalence of child labour can be traced back to centuries; developed countries of the modern-day employed children as young as ten, as could be seen during the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century. However, with the passage of time, development, and the introduction of several conventions, child labour became concentrated in the developing countries of Asia, Latin America, and Africa. In the late 20th century, the ILO framed two Conventions on child labour; ILO Convention 138 on Minimum Age was adopted in 1973,

and Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour was adopted in 1999. Developed countries have made significant progress in implementing these Conventions; however, developing countries have not. For example, the latest estimates highlight that child labour in sub-Saharan Africa has been rising since 2012 against Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean where child labour has fallen. It says that the number of children in sub-Saharan Africa is greater than in the world combined.

Second, major highlights of the report. It says that roughly one in 10 children globally is in child labour. The absolute number of children in child labour, and specifically in hazardous work, increased by eight million and 6.5 million respectively. Further, it states that 16.8 million more children were in child labour in the 5 to 11 age group in the latest estimates against the 2016 estimates. Of the total 160 million, 112 million children are in agriculture, three-quarters of them from the 5 to 11 age group.

Third, major recommendations. The report calls for extended social protection of children and the need to "address the heightened risk of child labour in growing crises, conflicts and disasters." It also highlights the necessity of "addressing gender norms and discrimination that increase child labour risks." Further, to address the impact of the pandemic, it calls for "sound policy choices and resources allocation decisions."

In perspective

First, the grave reality in the report implies that the end of child labour is not possible in the near future. Second, the fact that the ILO, which was established in 1919, took nearly nine decades to frame a Convention on children in hazardous work, reflects that child labour was never an important issue for policymakers. Further, developed countries having lower levels of child labour is not praiseworthy; manufacturing units, supply chains - like the mining industry or textile industry - are enablers of child labour.

Abortion Rights: Texas bans abortions, while Mexico decriminalizes it

Vaishnavi Iyer, 8 September 2021

In the news

On 1 September, a Texas law banning abortion at six weeks took effect. On 7 September, Mexico decriminalized abortion. The laws passed reflect a stark difference in securing the rights of women. The Texas law is based on the detection of a foetal heartbeat and provides incentives to people who prevent abortion through cash rewards of up to USD 10,000.

Governor Abbott signed the bill when the US Supreme court was hearing a case regarding Mississippi law banning abortions after 15 weeks. Abbott praised the legislature saying: "worked together on a bipartisan basis to pass a bill that I'm about to sign that ensures that the life of every unborn child who has a heartbeat will be saved from the ravages of abortion."

President Biden has promised a "whole-of-government effort" directed by his Gender Policy Council to protect the rights of women in Texas and the constitutional right to abortion.

Issues at large

First, the Legislation. The law categorizes abortion as a civil violation, allowing people to sue anyone getting an abortion, including abortion care advocates. The bill makes no exceptions for pregnancies out of rape or incest. Mexico has annulled several provisions of Coahuila laws that made abortion a criminal act. While this decision could empower the mass outcry in Texas; it may also lead to more border crossings into Mexico to buy pills that are prescribed for abortion.

Second, involvement of the state in abortion health care. In Texas, abortion advocates lack support from the governor and await hearing of the Mississippi abortion law. While, Mexico has the world's second-largest Catholic population; the law has complimented the rising women's rights movement.

Third, the role of the Judiciary. The legislation is designed to deter abortions. Case in point Roe v. Wade, the Mississippi law hearing presents the US Supreme court with the

opportunity to reverse Roe v. Wade and weakening and limiting abortion rights to 15 weeks as per the Mississippi legislation. Fourth, the divide between the Senate and Supreme bench. Nancy Pelosi ensured taking up the Women's Health Protection Act on 20 September. It is, however, unlikely for the bill to pass given the Senate 50-50 party split. The Supreme Court is a solid conservative split in 6-3 with lawyers.

Fifth, the protests in Texas. A women's march is planned for every single state for 2 October, before Biden's next term begins. Uber and Lyft have pledged support to the protest movement and have promised to cover the legal fee of people sued under the law and donated USD one million to Planned Parenthood. Women took to the streets of Mexico to celebrate the realization of their historic struggle for equality, dignity, and rights.

In perspective

First, filibuster discussion. The Senate split is extremely evident at this point and brings back the discussion of the need to abolish the filibuster. In a moderate approach, there needs to be at least a conversation about the reformation of the filibuster.

Second, packing the court. In 2021, more than 561 abortion restrictive laws have been passed and 97 enacted. Texas lawmakers have opened doors for other Red states like Florida and Arkansas to pass more restrictive laws.

Third, gender rights taking a back seat. The law has failed in protecting the constitutional right of women and/or any gender to avail of health services. While Biden promised a whole-of-government effort, there have been talks about how Biden could pass legislation enshrining Roe v. Wade in the federal law which could consequently pre-empt the Texas law. While Mexico was able to decriminalize abortion owing to the growing feminist movement, it now has to undergo another battle to legalize abortion. Thus, the coming week is a major determinant of how far feminist and civic movements could influence the verdict both across and within the borders of Texas.

Nepal: Protest against a new law needing consent for women to travel abroad

Sourina Bej, 18 February 2021

In the news

On 10 February, the Department of Immigration in Nepal proposed a new law wherein women under 40 years of age would have to seek consent from the family and the ward office to travel abroad on a visit visa. "This girls/women in this age group are at a higher risk of human trafficking and other abuses. The new rule is proposed for their protection," said Tek Narayan Paudel, a spokesperson of the Department to Nepal daily Kathmandu Post. The proposal has triggered a widespread women's protests which led the department, later in the week, to clarify that the provision was only applicable to those travelling alone for the first time to the Gulf or Africa.

The protest against the proposal now coincides with a larger demand for safeguards of the rights of the woman in the country. Since 8 February, hundreds have rallied in Kathmandu demanding the conviction of the perpetrators in Bhagirathi Bhatta's rape and her subsequent murder. The protest programme led by students of Padmakanya Campus was organised as part of the ongoing Brihat Nagarik Andolan, a campaign protesting against Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's House dissolution move.

Issues at large

First, the rationale behind the administration's decision. The government's protectionist approach denies women their right to earn. In 1985, the Foreign Employment Act prohibited recruiters from providing jobs to women without the consent of guardians. In 1988, the Act was amended to include permission from guardians as well as the government. The latest proposal adds to an existing series of legal restrictions on travel for women. Even after the clarification, it discounts women's contribution to Nepal's migrant-led-economy. The rationale of the administration to tighten the women trafficker's network, turns a blind eye to the larger deplorable conditions of the Nepali migrant workers (across gender) in

their workplace over the years, ranging from being underpaid to getting laid off illegally to even their death.

Second, deeply entrenched patriarchal society. The protest is a stark reminder of the patriarchy, the culture of impunity, rising rape cases and silent trafficking networks in the country. Nepal is still a highly patriarchal society where caste and class of both the victim and the perpetrators provide impunity from justice. It's widely reported that victims of sexual assault are being prevented from seeking legal action in the name of local "settlement" and "reconciliation" involving community elders. Similarly, it took a decade for Nepal to legally ban the menstrual huts but not the social practice. This entrenched patriarchal mindset of feminine inferiority makes state institutions hesitant to investigate cases of violence and in turn adopt a protectionist approach to control attacks on women. While all along, trafficking of women for various labours including prostitution have continued. According to the annual human trafficking report of the National Human Rights Commission for 2018-19, nearly 1.5 million Nepalis of which 15000 women are at the risk of trafficking.

Third, civil society pressure. Weak criminal investigations, attempts by officials to protect perpetrators and the politicization of rape cases have led the civil society groups, amid the political crises, to pressurise the government to act. The proposal has been the fallout. Since 2020, around 2,144 rape cases have been registered with the Nepal police and the judiciary convicts sexual assault perpetrators a prison term of seven to 25 years. The National Women Commission has remained defunct since 2017 and political leaders apathetic to women issues. Similarly, Nepal's constitution, promulgated in 2015, has barred handing off death penalty making it difficult to prosecute convicts with harsh laws.

In perspective

Travelling on visit visas probably makes women vulnerable to abuse. But in a larger duty of the State to protect, the authorities have blind-sided the reasons for which women migrate and missed the opportunity to make applications for an employment visa more transparent. In the past, the State's protectionist approach has failed to yield

expected results as women have continued to go abroad through illegal routes and face abuse while being trafficked. The particular proposal increases the risk of incidents where sub-agents and traffickers could lure women more to trafficking and defeats the rationale of the State.

MIGRATION

Spain: A migrant crisis, as more than 5000 from Morocco enter the Spanish enclave

Mohamad Aseel Ummer, 19 May 2021

In the news

On 18 May, the Spanish government deployed troops in the North African enclave of Ceuta as over 5000 migrants have managed to cross into the Spanish territory by either climbing over the fences in the border between Ceuta and Morocco or to swim into the enclave's shores, one person was reported to have died during the attempt. The Spanish Prime Minister visited Ceuta and said: "We will restore order in the city and along our borders as quickly as possible." The Deputy Prime Minister was quoted to have stated: "What has taken place is an attack on our borders." The migrants include around 1,500 minors; nearly 2,700 of the migrants have already been deported back to Morocco.

On the same day, Home Affairs Commissioner of the European Parliament said: "The most important thing now is that Morocco continues to commit to preventing irregular departures and that those who do not have the right to stay are orderly and effectively returned." Her statement - "Spanish borders are European borders. The European Union wants to build a relationship with Morocco-based on trust and shared commitments. Migration is a key element in this regard," also underline the more considerable concern of the EU.

On 19 May, the BBC reported, "Morocco withdrew its ambassador for consultations after Spain's foreign minister told the envoy of her 'disgust' at what had happened."

Issues at large

First, the case of migration into Spain. Ceuta has become a hotspot for migrants from Africa attempting to flee to Europe for better living conditions. The enclave is the easiest and probably the cheapest gateway into Europe for African Migrants. The Tarajal and Fenediq are a few of the most used entry points for migrants from Morocco and other African Countries. Melilla and Ceuta are two North African Enclaves that migrants frequent from Africa in large numbers. The conditions in both regions have worsened in recent months primarily due to the COVID pandemic, putting authorities in a tight position.

Second, the case of migration into Europe outside Spain. The migrants make perilous voyages in rickety makeshift boats, resulting in drowning and killing the onboard migrants, and most incidents go undocumented. Outside Spain, Italy and Greece have also been the first destination for the migrants from Africa. Also, Asian migrants try to enter Europe through the north African countries.

Third, the migration challenge and reluctance in Europe. Legal and illegal migrations from Africa to Europe has become a matter of concern in recent years. Mainly because of the massive numbers of migrants, this raises various red flags causing these countries to remain reluctant in admitting the migrants. Spain, Italy, and Greece being the southern European countries, undergo tremendous pressure. The lack of adequate infrastructure to cater to the needs such as housing and education of migrants, weak financial conditions now coupled with the threat of COVID poses serious questions. There is an evident rise in hostility towards these migrants, as they are often pictured as violent and involved in crime, so some raise the question of security. Ultra-nationalist groups attack the idea of allowing migrants to put authorities in a further dilemma.

In perspective

The current influx has come in a heightened tension between Rabat and Madrid on Brahim Ghali, part of the rebel outfit of Polisario front, fighting for the independence of the West Saharan region from Moroccan authorities. Brahim was provided medical treatment in

Spain for COVID, which exacerbated the relations between both countries.

The Spanish authorities are deeply disturbed because the Moroccan forces allowed illegal migrants into Ceuta; this might tighten the ongoing tensions between both countries. The number of migrants has been steadily rising; nevertheless, the troops are engaged in continuous repatriation of the migrants. The Ceuta and Melilla region can expect to have large-scale security deployment in the future. Finally, migration as a crisis to the European community can pose challenges of unfamiliar character in the future.

Poland: The Belarus threat of pushing migrants into Europe

Harini Madhusudan, 11 November 2021

In the news

On 8 November, a strong international condemnation was directed towards Belarus when the European Union, the United States, and NATO blamed the Lukashenko government after thousands of migrants began to cross into Poland on the same day. They stated that the sudden surge in the number of migrants massing the Polish border is due to a coordinated attempt by the Belarusian authorities. During an emergency debate at the Polish Parliament, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki accused Vladimir Putin of being behind the migrant crisis at the borders and described the situation as an attempt by Russia to disrupt the region that it had control over during the Soviet era. "The security of our eastern border is being brutally violated. This is the first such situation in 30 years when we can say that the integrity of our borders is being tested," he said. The Belarusian Red Cross, on their Telegram Channel, stated that they were ready to provide assistance, in the form of food, hygiene kits, and other essentials, to the migrants at the Belarusian-Polish Border.

Issues at large

First, the ground situation across the Belarus border, and the threat for Poland. Since May 2021, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia have complained of a sharp rise in the number of

migrants crossing into their borders. Over 30,000 people have tried to cross the Polish-Belarusian border, which led Warsaw to declare a state of emergency and take up the measure to build a strong barbed-wire-fence at the border. Both Belarus and Poland have steadily increased the presence of their troops at the borders; with Belarus having an estimated 10,000 servicemen and Poland, up to 12,000 of their forces. Poland later plans to build a fortified border, equipped with sensors, measuring five meters in height. Poland has consistently stopped the migrants from moving across the borders and has maintained a strong response against the actions of the Belarusian government.

Second, the Belarusian strategy and the end-game. The Belarusian government understands the vulnerability of the situation of migration in the European Union strategy. Belarus has been known to be encouraging migrants and refugees from Africa and the Middle East to cross into Central Europe, and the wider European Union, which has begun to cause a major confrontation in the region. The Belarusian government has put the lives and health of the migrants at risk to provoke Poland and the EU. This is because Lukashenko expects the EU to remove the sanctions placed on his regime since the disputed elections in Belarus. Poland is the region that hosts the largest number of opposition leaders of the Lukashenko regime, which is likely the reason for the influx of people in large numbers to Poland. The border committee of Belarus insist that the people were arriving legally and countered the 'weaponization of migrants' argument saying, "the migrants were only exercising their right to apply for refuge in the EU." Lukashenko during this week stated that he wanted to avoid any military escalation on the border and said, he was not a 'madman' and knew what was at stake.

Third, regional and international responses. After a video was posted by the Polish defense ministry, Ursula Von der Leyen, announced that two top EU officials would travel to the main countries of origin of the migrants to prevent the nationals from joining the Belarusian trap. The US State Department called on Belarus to stop the manipulation of the situation, and NATO accused Lukashenko of using migrants as a "hybrid tactic." The

human rights groups have criticized the EU governments for pushbacks of migrants on the border with Belarus, calling out the weaponization of the situation where the migrants are stranded in terrible conditions. In the region, both Latvia and Lithuania have faced a sense of emergency with the rising number of people at their borders. Like Poland, Lithuania has also moved its troops to prepare for the influx of migrants. One statement called the latest influx a "form of revenge" by Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko against Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, to destabilize the region.

Fourth, the ground-zero and the humanitarian responses: The migrants who were promised passage into the region are seen stranded at the borderlands under terrible physical and weather conditions. During the week, Poland had summoned Belarus' chargé d'affaires over "unidentified uninformed individuals armed with long guns," on Polish territory. They state that Belarus has escalated the situation. In their official statement, the UNHCR called the images from the Belarus-Poland border, deeply concerning and called the using refugees and migrants to achieve political ends, unacceptable. "It's time to act now, we call on Belarus to avoid putting lives at risk," they said. The humanitarian groups have called on both Belarus and Poland to respect the dignity of the migrants and implored them to abide by their legal obligations to provide asylum. Red Cross and other organizations have taken up the charge to provide immediate food and health assistance to the thousands of people stranded at the borders.

In perspective

The migrant situation at the Polish and Belarusian border brings to the fore deeper concerns in the region. The Lukashenko regime's approach in getting the EU to waive the sanctions placed on their regime may never work in their favor. At the same time, the principles that the EU is built on, cannot have this situation challenge its foundations, it also cannot let the migration situation encourage these countries to take stricter border controls. This would go against the idea of the European Union as a region for free movement. Both sides seem to understand this conflicting situation.

It is extremely deplorable to leave the migrants

stranded at sub-zero temperatures without food and adequate shelter, they have been made a pawn in the game between Belarus, its neighbours, Russia, and the EU.

Moscow has largely kept itself away from the EU response to the elections in Belarus and the crackdown that followed, but it has offered the EU the option of following the methods from the EU-Turkey deal of 2016. It is important that the Russian side take a step forward and take a stronger stance in the Poland-Belarus border conflict.

Europe's other migrant crises: The United Kingdom and Italy

Vaishnavi Iyer, 18 November 2021

In the news

On 8 November, following days of waiting in the central Mediterranean, a boat carrying more than 800 migrants, including 200 minors and five pregnant women, was allowed to dock at Trapani, off the Sicilian coast. The ship was allowed to dock after rejections from Lampedusa and Malta. The Sea-Eye charity complained about the "appalling" state of the country's inability to assist.

On 14 November, around 1,185 migrants arrived in the UK, crossing the English Channel in boats and kayaks. The arrival marked the highest single-day crossing record. The Home Office termed the new number crossings "unacceptable." Whitehall sources accused France of "losing control of the situation". On the same day, Italy rescued more than 550 migrants in Calabria.

On 15 November, France retaliated against British comments on migration, stating: "we don't have any lessons to take from the British." He stated that, despite the British government's desire to blame the French, the French government is effectively managing the migrant issue in Calais and Dunkirk.

On 16 November, France cleared the Dunkirk camps, clearing 1500 migrants and 35 people smugglers. The French police said that: "663 people had already been transported on 23 buses to a shelter." The actions have been described by French officials as an attempt to "shelter" refugees over the winter months.

Issues at large

First the number and nature of daily crossings. Over this year, nearly 23,000 people have reached the UK via France. While for Italy, around 53,000 migrants arrived between January and October. Around 98 percent of migrants reaching the UK apply for asylum, while most migrants reaching Italy are pushed back to Slovenian borders.

Second, the state response. Italy has sent out 1300 migrants informally. A bilateral deal with Slovenia permits it to return unlawful migrants who cross their shared border. The UK government has introduced a plan for immigration to dissolve criminal gangs that enable cross-channel migration. The UK government has firmly maintained that migration journeys would soon be made unviable.

Third, a humanitarian perspective. As the countries push back against the migrants, they remain stranded between borders facing European winters, sexual abuse, and health hazards. Rejections from both Italy and Slovenia force migrants to move to Croatia scrutinized for their migrant abuse. During the pandemic, the Italian quarantine system included halting refugees in the open sea. The head of the Immigration Service Union in the UK mentioned that migrants slept on concrete floors, and more than 490 migrants shared two portable toilets for 24 hours. Most practices followed to restrict migrations are harsh and discriminatory.

In perspective

First, a European pattern. The EU has clarified for years that it will not allow migrants or refugees to cross its borders. This allows countries on the perimeter the ability to utilize refugees as "pawns". The EU has made concessions to Libya, Sudan, and Turkey to prevent refugees from entering Europe. This often entails grave human rights violations against refugees in order to deter them. The system broke this year.

Second, prevention of border entry. International law recognizes the right to seek asylum and the provision of an asylum option. The EU has made the journey more inaccessible, curtailing rescue and search operations and humanitarian aid.

Third, the difference with Belarus. Refugee

numbers have lowered by two-thirds since 2015. However, the Global crisis still remains. The EU has merely succeeded in transferring the crisis to poorer and more autocratic countries on its perimeter, thereby absolving itself of legal responsibility and the burden of having to confront the significant human cost of its policies. The crisis has been exploited by dictators and right-wing parties that have made use of the situation to promote their anti-establishment and anti-immigration ideologies.

PROTESTS

Myanmar: Pro-democracy protests continue despite the violence

Aparupa Bhattacharjee, 25 February 2021

In the news

On 22 February, millions of pro-democracy protestors held a general strike referred to as '22222' across Myanmar. On the same day, people protested in front of the Chinese Embassy for the latter warning the international community not to interfere in Myanmar.

On 23 February, a protest was held in front of the Indonesian Embassy apprehending Jakarta's push for re-election in Myanmar. However, the Foreign Minister of Indonesia (who is scheduled to visit Myanmar next week) denied such an allegation. On 21 February, several protestors joined a young woman's funeral; she was first among the five fatalities of the violence. On 23 February, the military government threatened action against the government health workers who had participated in the civil disobedience movement.

On 22 February, outside Myanmar, a pro-democracy protest was held by the Myanmarers in Japan and by the Rohingyas' in their camps in Bangladesh. Also, sanctions were imposed by the G7 and the EU on financial assistance or development aid to Myanmar.

Issues at large

First, the intensification of protests despite the violence. In the 2020 elections, a 70 per cent turnout regardless of the pandemic and 83 per cent of votes to NLD proves the support for democracy. People are not ready to give this away without a fight, as the protests include every age and class. Also, the protests are widespread and not limited only to major cities. People belonging to different ethnicities such as Chin, Shan, Mon and others have also joined the protests.

Second, the importance of the sanctions against the regime. Although the spokesperson of General Min Aung Hlaing has refuted any larger impact, it is not true. This statement came immediately after the US sanctions on the General and his associates, on 12 February. The sanctions make an impact; in 2010, they played a role when the military agreed to a façade democracy.

Third, the government retaliation against the protestors. This week has seen a major shift in the military's stand. As of 24 February, more than 600 have been detained. Several laws of the colonial-era Penal Code have been amended, redefining the meaning of high treason and sedition, to legalise the coup. It also pushed for new IT department legislation which enables them to interfere in the personal usages of the internet. The media has been warned against the usage of 'Junta' and 'regime'.

In perspective

First, the military's retaliation makes it evident that violence will increase in the upcoming weeks. But it may not demotivate the protestors. There is massive support for the demand for democracy which will act as fuel to instigate many more to join the on-going protests.

Second, one of the largest ramifications of the crackdown will result in an influx of refugees to the neighbouring countries. This has been a norm in Myanmar since the 1988 protests.

Myanmar: Protests escalate and expand to include Chinese targets

Aparupa Bhattacharjee, 18 March 2021

In the news

On 16 March, the Myanmar government sentenced ten civil servants to prison for joining the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). On the same day, the State Administrative Council (SAC) threatened pro-democracy protestors with the death penalty in townships under martial law.

On 14 March, a clampdown by the security forces killed more than 39 people, marking it deadliest since the coup. The escalated violence has resulted in total fatalities of more than 200 as of 17 March. On 14 March, according to South China Morning Post, more than 32 Chinese owned factories in Yangon were put on fire by a group of protestors. On the same day, two factories run by Japanese retailers were set ablaze along with many hotels and restaurants that are owned by the Chinese. Given the current scenario, on 16 March, the Chinese State Council's state-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission ordered their state-owned enterprises in Myanmar to evacuate staff.

Issues at large

First, the escalation of violence and a strong resolve of the protestors. Despite the increasing numbers of fatalities and detentions, the protests seem to be escalating in both determination and dimension. According to the Irrawaddy, more than 600 police officers and several more fire officials have joined the protest. Along with the police officials, artists, media persons, students, trade unions, and farmers across the country have joined the movement. Protests have now been referred to as the spring revolution. To worsen the situation, the ethnic armed forces such as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) have renewed the fight against the Tatmadaw after a temporary truce due to the ongoing pandemic. Protestors are cautious and coordinated while protesting in comparison to the early weeks in February.

Second, the tensions between the Burmese and

Chinese, despite the bonhomie at the governmental level. The tension between the local and the Chinese residing in Myanmar has been a source of conflict even before independence in 1948. The situation worsened with growing Chinese investments across the country since 2000 for three reasons: they were joint ventures along with the Myanmar military personnel; they only recruited local Chinese and brought their Chinese staff; and, they have shown no regards for the impact on the local environment and inhabitants. This persisting anti-Chinese sentiment flared up recently due to China's pro-military regime position in the UNSC and other forums. This could be a reason for the attacks on the Chinese factories, hotels and restaurants.

In perspective

First, the growing anti-China sentiments could have a larger impact internally. There are more than 1.6 million Chinese residing in Myanmar. Since the 2015 election, internal political improvement has attracted an influx of Chinese into the country. There were anti-Chinese riots in the past and during the 1930s and later in 1967; there were several deaths and injuries in these riots.

Second, in the coming months, Tatmadaw may have to deal with another trouble with the KIA. Besides the KIA, several ethnic armed groups are at loggerhead with the Myanmar military. The resurgence of these conflicts, along with the pro-democracy protests, will be double trouble for the regime.

Europe: Measures to curb pandemic trigger protests

Joeana Cera Matthews, 11 August 2021

In the news

On 7 August, widespread protests against the COVID-19 health pass were held across Europe. France saw its fourth consecutive weekend of demonstrations as 230,000 protesters participated in what the Interior Ministry reported as the largest turnout since July. Italy also witnessed similar protests. Efforts to fully inoculate their citizenry as the Delta variant spreads have triggered these protests.

On 6 August, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi said: "For things to get better, get vaccinated and respect the rules." On 4 August, French President Emmanuel Macron told in an interview: "A few tens of thousands of people have lost their minds to such an extent that they say we live in a dictatorship."

Issues at large

First, the health pass and related legislations. Hoping to contain the fourth wave of COVID-19, several European countries have implemented virus passes with different rules. The Green Pass or the health pass are extensions of the EU's digital COVID certificate which provides proof of a person's coronavirus status. The Pass would be required to enter public places like cinemas, museums, and restaurants. Though similar passes have been introduced across Europe, only France has adopted a blanket approach of imposing passes and a mandatory vaccination for health workers. Other countries which have adopted similar measures include Italy, Denmark, Austria, Belgium, Germany, and Britain.

Second, the consequent protests. The vaccine passes have spurred prolonged protests across Europe. Opponents claim that the Pass limits mobility making the vaccines obligatory. Considered a disguised blow to their fundamental freedoms, demonstrators condemn the 'oppressive rules'. French protestors accused Macron of infringing rights and segregating citizens. German protestors, on the other hand, clashed violently with the police. Protests continued in Poland as its government deliberated the need for restrictions.

Third, the larger agenda of the protests. Few anti-vaccine groups seek to influence the public debate beyond coronavirus. Their online discourses show mobilization against migrants and allegations of potential lockdowns to fight climate change, while far-right activists consider the protests a recruiting ground. Querdenker, Germany's main anti-lockdown movement, has managed to spread conspiracy theories about the government's attempts to contain the pandemic, calling them fascist and the campaign as a form of apartheid. In France and Germany, protestors have demonstrated alongside far-right activists

comparing their governments to the Nazi regime.

Fourth, the division within the protesters. Heterogeneous groups uniting against Macron have slogans reading - 'No to dictatorship' and 'Freedom'. Those directly affected by the new policies, like health workers and restaurant employees, are accompanied by those who are frustrated with the government's overreach. Hard-left anarchists, remnants of the "Yellow West" movement, and other anti-vaccine supporters form the protesters. Despite widespread protests, they still represent a minority opinion. Polls reveal limited support for the anti-mandate protests.

Fifth, the governments' response. European governments believe increased inoculation is the key to ensuring economic recovery. The visible success of their plans has further proved this point. Since Macron unveiled the plan, at least 7 million people have gotten vaccinated. Although he views the protesters as 'threatening democracy', French opposition leaders have voiced the need for 'respecting' protesters and their needs. Responding to the critics, minor relaxations were brought in the implementation. Amid fears of rising infections, Berlin had banned various anti-lockdown protesters from gathering.

In perspective

First, the issue of responsibility. The worsening pandemic creates an imperative need for governments to take substantial measures. Thus, the strict unilateral moves seem justified given the results.

Second, the protraction of protests increases the risks the protesters intend to avoid. The health pass is by no means a cure-all to the pandemic, but it is definitely a good place to start. T

Third, the upcoming elections in Germany and France. Despite a key leadership test in the picture, the governments are not seen to be backing down in their efforts.

Australia: Anti-lockdown protests amidst rising delta variant cases

Avishka Ashok, 25 August 2021

In the news

On 21 August, more than 4000 Australians gathered in Melbourne city to protest against the coronavirus lockdown, which has been deemed necessary by the state. Multiple protests were held across different states like New South Wales and Victoria and in Brisbane, Sydney and Canberra. However, the most violent protest took place in Melbourne, where protestors carelessly burst firecrackers, blasted loud music and wreaked havoc in the city. The authorities have arrested more than 250 people for breaching lockdown guidelines and issued fines to more than 200 citizens. On the same day, the police used rubber bullets, tear gas and pepper spray to diffuse the angry crowds from causing further cluster cases. On 20 August, the government in New Zealand also extended the lockdown in the country after observing a steady increase in the number of cases. While announcing the extension in lockdown, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said: "We have seen what happens elsewhere if we fail to get on top of it. We only get one chance."

Issues at large

First, the lockdown. Australia has been dealing with the highly infectious delta variant of the coronavirus since June 2021. With the gradual increase in the number of cases in multiple cities, the government has placed strict restrictions on the movement of the people. The delta variant threatens to spread at a much faster pace and is spreading quickly amongst the indigenous communities who were otherwise unaffected in the previous waves of the pandemic. On 24 August, New South Wales registered more than 753 cases, whereas Victoria acquired another 50 cases due to local transmission of the virus.

Second, the protests. The protesters in Australia believe that the lockdown must be lifted despite the rise in cases. The restrictions were imposed with the intention of lifting them within two weeks. However, neither the upsurge in cases nor the restrictions have been eased. Most of the attendees of the protests

seemed agitated by the idea of another lockdown which may portray the frustration of the public as a whole.

Third, poor vaccination drive. Australia has managed to completely vaccinate only 15 per cent of its population while 50 per cent have only taken one dose. The numbers are much lesser for the indigenous communities, where only eight per cent have been completely vaccinated, and 26 per cent have been vaccinated once. Although the country managed to protect its population in the initial waves sufficiently, the inoculation drive has been extremely delayed due to supply shortages and institutional mismanagement. Other than the government's inefficiencies, certain sections of the society also refused to vaccinate due to mistrust and incorrect information.

Fourth, premature celebration. Australia and New Zealand were lauded for their handling of the pandemic, after which most cities and towns proceeded to lift Covid related restrictions and enabled the public to move in public without masks and proper and regular sanitization. These actions may have been hasty for a pandemic that is still in the process of being discovered as countries inspect its origin and continuous mutation.

Fifth, anti-lockdown protests across the world. Contrary to the belief that most developed countries would have an informed population that would value the vaccines and prevent the overburdening of the healthcare systems, there has been an apparent pattern that suggests the opposite. Anti-lockdown protests have been observed in Germany, Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Hungary, Ireland, the UK, Finland, Romania, Switzerland and many more.

In perspective

Regardless of the frustrations faced by the public, it is imperative for the people to understand the reality of the ongoing pandemic. With the constant mutations of the virus and the current status of vaccine efficiency, it is hard to think of a day when one can assume victory over the virus, at least in the near future. As long as the origin of the virus is not certain, countries cannot prevent future outbreaks. Nonetheless, most anti-lockdown protests have been witnessed in the developed first world countries, raising

questions on the conduct and sensibility of these countries.

Thailand: Protests return for the fourth time in the last nine months

Vibha Venugopal, 8 September 2021

In the news

On 2 September, thousands of protesters gathered at the capital of Thailand at the Asoke intersection in Central Bangkok, calling out for the resignation of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha. Despite the warnings given by the police that protests were banned due to the coronavirus restrictions, the demonstration was one of the biggest such gatherings in the year. During recent protests, security officers used tear gas, water cannons, and rubber bullets against demonstrators who have thrown stones and firecrackers.

On 4 September, the prime minister and his five cabinet members won the no-confidence vote. This is the government's third censure motion, and it comes as pro-democracy demonstrators have been preparing for further rallies.

Lawmakers accused his government of mishandling the pandemic. They chastised him for the devastating economic impact, blaming the government's slow vaccine rollout on a lack of advance vaccine orders and deciding not to join the international COVAX vaccine-supply scheme.

Issues at large

First, return of protests. Since the beginning of 2020, Thailand has seen a series of protests targeting Prayuth's regime. The collapse of the Future Forward Party in February 2020, a party that frequently attacked Prayuth, sparked earlier protests. Later, the protests grew to include demands for Thai monarchy reforms. However, when the pandemic struck, the protests came to a standstill for a short time before resuming in July of last year. The impact of COVID-19 and the implementation of the Emergency Decree put the country under lockdown, sparked the protests this time.

Second, different trigger points. The underlying reason for the protests remaining

the same showcased different trigger points in terms of demonstrators calling for the prime minister to resign as a result of his bad handling of the COVID-19 outbreak, as well as a partial reallocation of Thailand's monarchy and military budget to deal with the problem; emphasizing the inequity ingrained in Thailand's political system, pushing for a total overhaul of the country's administration, constitution, and monarchy. As both sides reject compromise and the ruling party clings to power, tensions rise, swiftly protests erupt. Third, the four different waves experienced. From February 2020 until now, the protests only seemed to intensify and become a sign of widespread anger and desperation. The first wave demonstrated protests that were only restricted to individual institutions; the second wave emphasizing three major demands being put forth, namely: dissolution of the house, ending intimidation of the people and drafting a new constitution alongside anti-royal protests; the third wave bringing the country hit by the second wave of the pandemic along with the Coup d'état in Myanmar into shackles; the fourth wave which continues observing the pandemic worsening and increased violent protests against the Prime Minister.

Fourth, state responses. The junta inadvertently helped develop a new politically aware cohort free of the baggage of previous political parties by remaining in power for so long and preventing overt politicking. The government uses force and intimidation, arbitrary detention, arrests and changes, along with the Prime Minister criticizing the protests for worsening the country's economic situation.

In perspective

First, since late June, protests against Prayuth have gathered traction, as groups that demanded his ouster last year have resurfaced with newfound support from citizens enraged by the growing coronavirus crisis. Second, the demonstrators hold Prayuth responsible for the pandemic's handling, specifically his failure to procure a timely and appropriate vaccine supply. Only 13% of Thailand's population of over 66 million people have received all of their vaccinations, the continuation of turmoil and chaotic protests seem to continue with a sense of newfound objectives.

Europe: Protests triggered by COVID-19, climate change and homophobia

Joeana Cera Matthews, 15 September 2021

In the news

On 11 September, a multitude of protests and marches took place across Europe. Polish healthcare workers marched in Warsaw demanding better pay and work conditions. In response, Health Minister Adam Niedzielski said: "...if at this moment we have a budget for health that is 120 or 130 billion zlotys and there is a demand to increase that by 100 billion... it goes completely beyond the bounds of good sense and reason."

On the same day, thousands marched in Serbia urging the government to increase efforts to prevent industrial pollution. Responding to the march, Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic said: "only since 2014, Serbia, despite all the problems and difficulties, has found time for such an important topic." Hundreds of people also gathered in Madrid calling for better protection of LGBT rights.

Issues at large

First, climate change and pandemic as primary triggers. One of the major triggers is climate change. Many countries in Europe are either preparing for elections (like Germany) while others have just finished with their elections (like Norway); in both countries, climate change is a major election issue. The Serbian protesters, while expressing discontent in the governmental efforts, also denounced plans of developing a lithium mine. In Germany, a group of youngsters who are on the third week of their hunger strike claim that German political parties aren't conscious enough of the environmental crisis. Adoption of new measures by countries across Europe to reduce the pandemic's spread is another major trigger to the protests. Such protests made thousands gather in the Netherlands, Greece, Poland, and Turkey. While Greek protesters clashed with police forces over their demonstration against mandatory vaccinations, the Dutch protesters rallied under the slogan "Unmute Us" dissenting against the pandemic-induced nightlife ban. The French health pass protests,

however, saw a reduced turnout on its ninth consecutive weekend.

Second, other protest issues. Another widespread trigger is that of gender. The past months have seen a series of homophobic attacks in Spain, while other regions of Europe remain concerned about gender rights. Spain also witnessed a separatist march on La Diada (National Day of Catalonia), wherein thousands of Catalans rallied for their independence from Spain. The surging prices of electricity across Europe have also led to several protests in the region.

Third, the background. The increasing heatwaves, floods, and other natural disasters have hit the conscience of both the people and the governments. Focus continues on climate change, as well as efforts to reduce its impact. Gender and gender rights are also coming to the forefront all over Europe.

Fourth, governmental responses. In a step addressing the Spanish homophobic attacks, Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez chaired a meeting to discuss reducing hate crimes which have grown by 9 per cent a year since 2014. The Dutch government, after deliberations on easing COVID-19 restrictions, announced on 14 September that most social-distancing requirements would be dropped by 25 September. With regard to the raging electricity prices, the Spanish government adopted emergency measures that would channel profits from energy companies to consumers and help cap increasing gas prices. Poland's Health Minister, however, dismissed the health workers' claims, saying their demands were expensive and unrealistic. In Serbia, the lithium mine development – considered environmentally damaging by Serbs – is an economic booster to the government.

In perspective

The continuing protests indicate that Europeans are yet to come to terms with the pandemic restrictions and new governmental measures. The issue of climate is an immediate one in Europe. Green parties across the region have been pressurizing governments to take initiatives towards achieving the region's prescribed climate goals.

The triggers to the protest are issues that need long-term solutions and will affect the quality of life. It is important that the EU and the regional governments address these issues with the utmost gravity.

Brazil: Protestors call for the impeachment of Bolsonaro

Lokendra Sharma, 15 September 2021

In the news

On 12 September, hundreds marched in various Brazilian cities, including Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, to protest against President Bolsonaro. Organized by the Free Brazil Movement (MBL) and other conservative groups, protestors demanded the impeachment of Bolsonaro over his regime's disastrous response to the pandemic and attempts to subvert the country's democratic institutions.

Issues at large

First, Bolsonaro's unpopular policies and decisions. Even since assuming office in January 2019, President Bolsonaro has been embroiled in one controversy. This includes targeting indigenous peoples, deforestation and wildfires in the Amazon rainforest, disastrous handling of COVID-19 pandemic, which killed lakhs, efforts at undermining the country's democratic institutions and processes, and the faltering economy. The brewing discontent against him has been reflecting in his approval ratings, which have consistently fallen over the last few months.

Second, the polarisation in society. Aware of the rising sentiment against him, Bolsonaro led massive rallies on Brazil's Independence Day on 7 September in an attempt to drum up support among his right-wing constituency. On the same day, anti-Bolsonaro protests were also organized across the country. Elaborate security arrangements had to be placed to ensure both camps do not cross paths only reflect society's level of polarisation.

Third, Bolsonaro's tiff with the democratic institutions — judiciary, Parliament, and the electoral machinery. While Bolsonaro has shared an uneasy relationship with the

judiciary since he assumed office, his attacks on the judiciary have become more intense this year. He has called on the Senate to impeach Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes, who has opened multiple investigations against him. He is also unhappy with the judiciary for exonerating former President Lula da Silva, making the latter eligible for the 2022 polls. This unhappiness was publicly displayed on 7 September when Bolsonaro and his supporters made attempts to intimidate the judiciary. Bolsonaro has also targeted the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), which is responsible for overseeing the upcoming Presidential elections in 2022, as well as the Congress. His call for a return to paper ballots from the currently used electronic voting system has been rejected by Brazil's Congress, while the TSE has launched a probe over Bolsonaro's allegations of election fraud.

Fourth, the upcoming 2022 elections. Speaking to his supporters on 7 September in reference to the 2022 polls, Bolsonaro asserted: "Only God can remove me. I'm only coming out of this jailed, dead or victorious." While his approval ratings have fallen, his main contender, former President Lula da Silva from the leftist Worker's Party (PT), has topped pre-election survey polls. The 12 September protests have complicated this two-way contest by advocating a third way embodied in the slogan: "Neither Bolsonaro nor Lula".

In perspective

First, while the recent protests by conservative groups and their position on a third way bereft of Bolsonaro or Lula da Silva have added a new dimension to the 2022 elections, it is likely that the presidential race will largely remain a two-way contest. The 7 September protests drew a less than expected crowd due to the absence of Lula's PT is an early sign. Whether or not MBL will join forces with PT in the run-up to the 2022 elections is to be seen.

Second, Bolsonaro appears to have learnt a lesson or two from former US President Donald Trump, who lost the 2020 elections to Joe Biden. While Trump had intensified his 'elections were stolen' campaign only after his loss became evident, Bolsonaro has started preparing almost a year before elections take

place in Brazil. It is likely that he may impede a peaceful transfer of power if he loses.

Third, Brazil has entered into a very tumultuous period with stark domestic polarization, intensifying rivalry between the executive and other institutions of democracy, devastating pandemic, faltering economy, environmental destruction and wildfires in the Amazon. The domestic situation is only going to get worse as the 2022 elections get closer.

The US: Protests against the Texas anti-abortion law

Sambavi Parthasarathy, 9 October 2021

In the news

On 1 October, the most restrictive abortion law, which had come into effect since 1 September 2021 that prohibits women from terminating fetuses only after six weeks of pregnancy was evaluated again through a virtual hearing before Judge Robert Pitman of the US District Court. The federal judge questioned the State of Texas on why they had to go to such great lengths with this bill if they believed in constitutionality as they claimed. However, a nationwide women's march from 600 cities in a total of 50 states was witnessed the very next day implored more than ten thousand people to participate in the clamorous rally for abortion justice.

Issues at large

First, the difficulties in challenging the bill. Activists and lawyers in opposition to this bill have been finding the long-drafted law difficult to challenge, especially because of the way it is written and its immunity to be challenged as 'unconstitutional' since its enforcement is vested upon people and not officials of its State. The problematic law makes a rather narrow exception by only allowing termination of those pregnancies that endanger the mother's life while leaving those resulting from rape or incest to seek abortion elsewhere.

Second, the refusal of the Supreme Court. The stunning silence, followed by the refusal of the very Court that had legalized abortion with its landmark judgement in Roe Vs Wade case, has

led to numerous protestors voicing out for their rights. Around a thousand protestors walked in a clamorous procession to the Supreme Court, imploring Americans to engage in a nationwide protest, not only in Washington but also in Chicago, San Francisco, New York and other forty-six states.

Third, the virtual hearing. The Justice Department had sued the State for its restrictive law, also known as SB 8, the hearing of which took place on 1 October between The State of Texas represented by Will Thompson and The Justice department by Brian Netter. Robert Pitman, the federal judge, deliberately weighed both sides of the argument. The Justice Department emphasized the extent of difficulties and forced motherhood the bill promotes. He also criticized the enforcement scheme as an unconstitutional sidestep that impairs the fundamental rights of women and prevents them from challenging it. The State, however, argued that the entire law was constitutional and the department lacked the legal threshold for an injunction and that its lawsuit lacks merit. Pitman, however, has offered no timetable for the decision but assured the inclusion of their arguments.

In perspective

First, the probable imitation of SB 8. The 1973 landmark judgement did reshape American politics into those in favour of it and those against it. The Republicans pushed for the Texas abortion law does not to ban the practice itself but to bring out an imperative control of the State with its cleverly schemed 'constitutionality' factor; the implementation of which encourages other states to go ahead with strict measures. While the significant judgement of 1973 had made abortion every woman's right, the six-week ban refuses to see the fact that the realization of pregnancy itself might take six weeks. Second, the impact on women. This bill largely affects coloured, poor and even minors who might not have enough financial aid to apply for abortion since it's not covered as a part of health insurance making the women's march a significant event in exercising their willingness. Victims of rape or incest who are not exempted from this law might be forced to carry the child to term. It

poses an imperative to the very guaranteed fundamental right imploring women around the globe to voice out their support.

Europe: Restrictions lead to Widespread Protests

Joeana Cera Matthews, 25 November 2021

In the news

On 23 November, the WHO, on assessing Europe's declining coronavirus situation, warned: "Cumulative reported deaths are projected to reach over 2.2 million by spring next year, based on current trends."

On 22 November, Austria declared its fourth nationwide lockdown, forcing 8.9 million Austrians to be home-bound for all but essential reasons. Following this, Austrian Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg said: "It's a problem for the whole society because even those that are vaccinated, if they don't have access to an intensive care unit because they're blocked by those who are not vaccinated and got sick, so then they are affected as well." Following this, demonstrations were held in Vienna that saw a turnout of 35,000 people.

On 22 November, the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte condemned the rioters in Rotterdam who pelted stones and set fire to vehicles, saying: "There is a lot of unrest in society because we have been dealing with misery of corona for so long. But I will never accept idiots using pure violence just because they are unhappy."

On 21 November, Belgium's Home Affairs Minister Annelies Verlinden responded to the violent protests in Brussels, saying: "A mature democracy respects the opinion of a minority but does not accept that a few abuse their protest vote by force. Vaccinated or not: it is important that we continue to follow the measures."

Issues at large

First, a regional mapping of protests within Europe. The pandemic's fourth wave has led to the imposition of tighter restrictions across Europe. These have been followed by large-scale protests. In terms of the surge in infections and the protests, the hardest-hit countries include Austria, the Netherlands,

Belgium, and Germany. Countries such as France, Italy, Romania, and others have seen an increase in cases. However, they are yet to witness widespread violent protests.

Second, the multiple 'waves.' Similar to the pandemic waves, the protests seem to be occurring in waves. The initial waves of unrest due to the pandemic were seen in Spain, and Italy followed by the UK. The latest wave of opposition is primarily being witnessed in Western Europe where quiet periods are ensued by chaos.

Third, the multiple actors. The protesters are a mixed bag with members from far-right groups, anti-vaccine and anti-mask parties, and apolitical people refusing vaccinations. The Netherlands also saw antisemitism supporters comparing the government to a "Nazi regime", while the Austrian government was called a "coronavirus dictatorship." The diverse crowd is united by their "common mistrust in the system and politics, especially in the area of coronavirus." Further, there is a demographic divide in participation as the vulnerable groups of society, such as senior citizens and children, largely refrain from protesting.

Fourth, the multiple reasons. The freedom of choice is another reason for the opposition. Countering the argument of 'my body, my choice' is complicated. On 19 November, Austria declared vaccinations to be a legal requirement from February 2022. Propagated primarily by anti-vaccine groups, mandatory vaccinations are termed as a "restriction of human rights." The restrictions are set to severely impact the economy with small businesses bound to run into financial difficulties as their livelihoods, based on shoestring budgets, will leave them unable to repay loans. Many others' grounds for protesting relate to their frustration on being restricted from free movement. A general dissatisfaction regarding the government's ineffective measures has sabotaged the citizens' trust. In line with this sentiment, protesters in Belgium condemned the officials of acting in desperation as declining immunity meant they "no longer knew what to do."

In perspective

First, the immunity test. After more than a year of vaccination efforts, Europe's move to attain

herd immunity has failed. The forthcoming winter only provides an enabling ground for the already rampant virus to spread. It seems the worst is yet to come.

Second, coercion is detrimental in the long term. According to scientists, mandatory vaccinations could be a 'double-edged sword' as it could trigger hostility to future vaccination campaigns. Vaccine skeptics may end up completely rejecting it. Dabbling on consent will undermine the people's trust in their governments.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT

The Arctic: New report on accelerated melt and its consequences

Rashmi B R, 9 June 2021

In the news

On 4 June, a new study titled "Faster decline and higher variability in the sea ice thickness of the marginal Arctic seas when accounting for dynamic snow cover" was published by researchers in the reputed journal the Cryosphere. Using computer models to produce snow cover estimates from 2002-2018, the study analyzed the declining snow depth for the first time and concluded that the Arctic sea ice is melting twice as fast as previously estimated.

The research combined the results obtained by SnowModel-LG and satellite data and found that the rate of decline of sea ice thickness in three Arctic seas- Laptev, Kara and Chukchi, increased by 70, 98 and 110 per cent respectively in the considered time period.

Issues at large

First, the intersection of the Arctic and the world climate processes. Environmentally unsustainable actions impact the Arctic, and in turn, changes in the region will influence other parts of the globe. Polar vortex, changes in monsoon patterns in the Indian subcontinent, increase in sea level are some of the manifestations of this intersection.

Second, concerns over the Arctic melt. The region is certainly experiencing disproportionate effects of climate change, warming three times faster than the global average. Over the years, scientists have observed a decrease in the extent of sea ice, with a mere two per cent of the oldest ice covers existing, as opposed to 20 per cent in the 1980s. Older and thicker ice is being replaced by younger and thinner ice, a common trend now in the Arctic. The Climate Change Impact Assessment, a landmark study, reported a decreasing albedo, which implies more absorption of solar radiation. Extreme weather conditions, increased heat, ocean acidification, coastal erosion, flooding, wildfires, unusual lightning and precipitation are some of the serious signs of climate change being witnessed.

Third, Arctic governance. A greater aspect of the governance in the region is focused on climate change and the effects the region is facing. Most institutions in the Arctic are founded based on scientific cooperation to frame policies to mitigate climate change and support adaptation. There is increasing global attention on the regional developments and thus the participation of non-Arctic European countries and Asian countries like India, China, Japan, South Korea and Singapore.

In perspective

First, despite some pathbreaking studies on the Arctic, actions being taken by the stakeholders are not sufficient. Second, indigenous knowledge, experiences and perspectives should be taken into consideration and translated into tangible actions. Third, unsustainable economic activities by the Arctic countries themselves should be reconsidered, given the threats associated. Fourth, the consequences of a rapidly melting Arctic are multi-layered. There is a clear, profound impact on the ecology, politics, economics and society of the region. In this regard, studies such as the above are a welcome move and a step in the right direction.

Germany: Climate change in focus after floods kill more than 100

Sourina Bej, 21 July 2021

In the news

On 18 July, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel during her visit to Schuld, one of the two regions hardest hit by extreme rainfall in Western Germany, said, the number of such extreme weather events had increased in recent years, adding, "we have to up the pace in the fight against climate change."

On 14 July, in the Ahrweiler district, Rhineland-Palatinate, at least 117 people died after torrents of rainwater collected in the surrounding Eifel mountains and then a flash flood gutted through several villages. About 30,000 are currently without power, drinking water and gas. Along with Germany, Belgium also recorded a death toll of 27, according to the national crisis centre.

Issues at large

First, the nature of floods and extreme climate variability. Recurring flooding in Rhineland is relatively common yet this extreme deluge and swelling of rivers are rare in Germany.

According to the data released after the deluge and interpreted by the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, parts of Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia were inundated with 148 litres of rain per sq metre within 48 hours in a part of Germany that usually sees about 80 litres in the whole of July. The Köln-Stammheim station was flooded in 154mm of rain over 24 hours, obliterating the city's previous daily rainfall high of 95mm. With climate change, the events of hydro-meteorological extremes are expected to become more extreme. And the deluge coincides with the global trend of simultaneous extreme heatwaves across the Atlantic and cloudbursts.

Second, the response by disaster management mechanisms. In the Ahrweiler district, early warnings about record rainfall and expected floods did not make their way to the communities most at risk. In Erftstadt, south of Köln, the federal government's weather warning app advised many to stay inside their house, but by the next day, when the nearby dam was at risk of breaking, faster evacuation in keeping at pace with unfolding nature took

all by surprise. Even though the European Flood Awareness System sent out specific warnings four days before the downpour, the ensuing flash floods still appeared to be a crisis.

Third, the nature of social preparedness. An overreliance on digital tools such as warning apps is yet to materialize in the border villages. The war-period sirens, now used by fire departments, and over-dependency on radio and television announcements are among the many factors impacting pre-emptive response. The flash floods that came after midnight on 14 July shut down the electricity and the telecommunication networks, cutting off people in the affected areas from official communication. The swelling of the river and the increase in the water level by every minute was never be expected.

Fourth, emphasis on tackling climate change. The deluge has brought the focus on regional effort to tackle impacts of transboundary natural disasters and it comes at a time when the EU entered the next phase of introducing a climate policy to put the continent on a path to climate neutrality by 2050. The aim is to introduce a new emissions trading regime for the transport and building sectors, and in this Germany, itself has a national climate action plan to cut the greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 by making a complete switch to renewable energy.

In perspective

In a federally administered disaster management system, the fear of the unknown surpassed all forms of preparedness. The systemic gap was exposed in a situation of a transboundary disaster, and the cooperative federalism was hindered by timely Centre-state coordination. In addition, the aftermath of the deluge saw the question of economic and social reconstruction of the vulnerable communities become a campaign issue. While the global efforts at tackling climate change are focused on cutting carbon emissions, the floods in Germany calls for the need to build communities resilient to face recurring natural disasters.

Wildfires: Siberia to the US

Akriti Sharma, 21 July 2021

In the news

On 19 July, the Siberian city of Yakutsk temporarily closed the airport due to heavy smoke and wildfires. Yakutia's governor said: "The situation with wildfires in our republic is very difficult. I repeat that we are experiencing the driest summer in the past 150 years in Yakutia, and the month of June was the hottest on record. This, together with the dry thunderstorms that occur nearly daily in our republic, brought about significant wildfires."

On 18 July, the Russian Emergency Ministry said that it had deployed two amphibious aircraft to Yakutia to help tackle the fires. According to the officials, 247,000 acres of land had been engulfed by the fires in 24 hours. Also, Kremlin has said that the wildfires have been caused by climate change. On 12 July, wildfires in California had burned 83,256 acres of land resulting in the most destructive blazes the region has ever witnessed.

On 20 July, the wildfires in Oregon had burned 300,000 acres of land near the Bootleg Spring, followed by which thousands of people were evacuated. Nearly 2,000 firefighters have been deployed to douse the fire.

Issues at large

First, the regional expansion. The wildfires have not been limited to one specific region geographically. They have been occurring throughout the globe. The US, Brazil, and Australia have witnessed deadly wildfires in recent years. Wildfires have become a global disaster.

Second, the recurrence, intensity, and duration. Wildfires have become more frequent in recent years. Regions like Australia, Brazil, the US, and Russia witness wildfires every year. Siberia has been witnessing deadly wildfires for three consecutive years. The intensity of the wildfires has also increased, resulting in the burning of more areas geographically. The fire seasons are getting longer and the fire risks are increasing. According to scientists, if human-induced climate change was not there, such an event would have occurred once every hundred years.

Third, climate change as a cause and effect. The US and Siberia witnessed a deadly heatwave that is attributed to climate change. The heatwave and extremely dry weather conditions due to anthropogenic climate change resulted in blazes in the regions. In Siberia, permafrost is thawing which can result in an unstable land surface. On the other hand, the wildfires are destroying the forests which are the natural carbon sinks, and emitting greenhouse gases due to the burning of organic matter contributing to global greenhouse gas emissions. Additionally, the heavy smoke emitted by the burning of the forests and organic matter had resulted in poor air quality.
In perspective

First, the authorities in Siberia are only dousing the fires which are affecting the people. Most of the blazes which are not affecting the people are blazing unchecked. The geographical expansion of wildfires makes it difficult for the firefighters to control the fire. Such inadequate efforts to douse the wildfire can prove to be fatal for the planet's ecosystem.
Second, the preparedness and response. Since the wildfires are becoming more frequent and intense, the preparedness and response of such extreme weather events are significant. Wildfire emergency management should be efficient. Mitigation, preparation, response, and recovery should be stressed upon.
Third, the inability to control the fires. Wildfires have become a common event but the severe intensity of the wildfires makes it difficult for humans to control the blazes. However, with effective policy-making and use of technology, and effective early warning systems, wildfires can be controlled.

Code Red: Key takeaways from the IPCC report 2021 on Climate Change

Rashmi B R, 11 August 2021

In the news

On 9 August, Working Group I of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released the report "Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis", the first of the reports

as released as part of the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6), 2022. The report has been approved by 195 member countries of the IPCC. The UN Secretary-General António Guterres said that the report is a "code red for humanity. The alarm bells are deafening, and the evidence is irrefutable." The report puts across the physical science of the climate crisis, talking extensively about the human influence over the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere, land and biosphere at large. In a first, it also covers region-wise issues and analyses. Following are the key takeaways:

First, the global warming. There have been well observed anthropogenic-induced GHG concentrations since 1750. With four successive warmer decades, the estimated range of global surface temperature increase is between 0.8oC- 1.3oC, and the best estimate stands at 1.07oC. IPCC predicts that 1.5oC of global warming leads to increasing heatwaves, longer warm and shorter cold seasons, and a 2oC warming would affect agriculture and health severely.

Second, changes in the ocean and precipitation patterns. The report points to ocean acidification and increasing maritime heatwaves. Rainfall in the higher latitudes is predicted to increase, whereas it will decrease in the subtropics. At the global level, changes in the water cycle will lead to heavy rainfall and flooding and contrasting droughts simultaneously. Due to the rapid warming of the Indian Ocean, the littorals will experience changes in monsoon patterns, increased heavy rainfall in a shorter span of time, thereby giving rise to flooding.

Third, effects on the cryosphere. IPCC has observed that there is substantial thawing of the permafrost, a decrease in Arctic summer sea ice, seasonal snow cover and significant glacial melt. The greatest shrink in the Arctic Sea ice occurred between 2010 and 2019, though the intensity of melt has been observed since 1979. Data points to the human influence on the surface melting of the Greenland ice sheet over the past 20 years. It must be noted that scientists did not record significant decadal trends in the decrease of the Antarctic Sea ice area cover between 1979-2020 directly in proportion to the anthropogenic activities. The report also predicts a continuing shrinking of the mountain glaciers in all the places where

they are present. In regions like the Hindukush-Himalayan region, there will be a rise in precipitation and a decrease in snow cover.

Fourth, irreversible changes. The study shows that many changes that the planet has undergone due to GHG emissions are irreversible. This is particularly applicable to the changes in the ocean, ice sheets and global sea level.

Issues at large

First, studies on climate change. IPCC, as an important body of the UN assessing climate change, provides a plethora of scientific data and analysis to the policymakers, helping them take necessary actions. It creates a massive ripple through the detailed "Assessment Reports" prepared by its working groups. Along with the IPCC, numerous scientific bodies and NGOs warn the governments across the world about the impending climate crisis, calling on them to undertake mitigation measures.

Second, lack of action. IPCC and other prominent organizations and scientific bodies have released multiple reports and issued warnings to states to take adequate action. Multiple international agreements and treaties have not brought the countries on the same board about the need to curb unsustainable activities.

Third, differences on the basics. Since the time of the Kyoto Protocol to the Paris Agreement, basics are the bones of contention. Debates on carbon credits, common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR), development and climate change, transfer and access to green technologies continue to brew. Additionally, the developed countries continue to search for new sources of non-renewables both domestically and globally. Countries like the US, Norway and Russia have a substantial portion of their GDP drawn from the export of oil and gas.

In perspective

First, more evidence on the Anthropocene. In comparison to the Fifth Assessment Report (AR5) of the IPCC, the Working Group-I report of the AR6 emphasizes the "unequivocal human influence" on the earth's

system. This provides more impetus to already loud calls to formally recognize the end of Holocene and the beginning of the Anthropocene epoch.

Second, COVID-19 and its impact. The pandemic has severely affected the global economy and pushed millions into poverty. It is not a surprise if countries prioritize economic compulsions and sideline climate change. However, the pandemic has shown that the world is unprepared for a climate crisis. Responsible rebound adhering to sustainable development goals is the need of the hour.

Third, the report is a desperate call for action; however, translating it into action is a serious challenge. It sets a stage for the forthcoming COP-26, to be held in November 2021, and is sure to draw more attention to this report and pressure on countries to walk the talk.

Climate Change: Hurricane Ida destructs the US Gulf Coast

Avishka Ashok, 1 September 2021

In the news

On 29 July, hurricane Ida, a category 4 storm made landfall near Port Fourchon in Louisiana with maximum sustained winds of 150 mph and a minimum central pressure of 930 mb. It again made a second landfall as category 4 storm in the southwest of Galliano with maximum sustained winds of 145 mph and a minimum central pressure of 935 mb. It made landfall on the 16th anniversary of hurricane Katrina reminding the people of the devastation caused fifteen years ago. The hurricane was so strong that it reversed the course of the Mississippi River.

On 30 July, President Joe Biden said: "We know Hurricane Ida had the potential to cause massive, massive damage, and that's exactly what we saw." He added: "We're going to stand with you and the people of the Gulf as long as it takes for you to recover."

Issues at large

First, the vulnerability of the Gulf Coast. The coastline along the Gulf of Mexico is more

susceptible to tropical storms. Additionally, the coast is prone to receiving early-season cyclones. Louisiana, Texas, and Mississippi, central America, are more likely to witness the storms of severe category. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the US' coasts are vulnerable to cyclones and hurricanes, especially North Carolina and Florida.

Second, the frequent weather anomalies. The US has recently witnessed heatwaves and wildfires across the country. The risk of climate disasters is increasing in the region. Weather anomalies have become frequent and intense in the northern hemisphere.

Third, the impact of human-induced climate change. The storms are moving slower, producing more rainfall and generating increased surges along the coasts, which can be attributed to anthropogenic climate change. Hurricanes are getting intense because of the excessive warming of the oceans. Global warming facilitates the increased intensity of hurricanes. The recent Sixth Assessment Report by the IPCC states that the global proportion of the cyclones of category 3 to 5 have increased in the past four decades due to the rapid warming of the ocean. Hurricane Ida is said to have undergone a rapid intensification of 65 mph in 24 hours which is only possible if the ocean warming is occurring at an abnormal pace.

Fourth, inability to build resilience. The hurricane has destroyed the oil and gas refineries along the gulf coast, which will lead to an increase in prices. Even after the destructive landfall of Hurricane Katrina, which destroyed the industrial infrastructure in the region, it lacks the ability to build disaster-resilient infrastructure. With the increase in the frequency of extreme weather events, building resilient infrastructure is the key to reduce the loss.

In perspective

First, the early warning system. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration of the US has already predicted the landfall of a severe hurricane. Compared to Hurricane Katrina which took the lives of 1,800 people, Ida has only caused one casualty. The ability to manage disasters and hurricanes, in particular, has improved over the years. However, the infrastructural loss still remains

a concern. So far, building resilient infrastructure has not been successfully achieved.

Second, the climate disasters and the pandemic. The region is already facing the fallouts of the pandemic, and climate disasters like the hurricane make it worse. The US has witnessed heatwaves and wildfires in recent weeks, and their link with climate change is becoming clearer. Such events serve as the climate alarm and indicate that efforts taken towards the mitigation of climate change are not enough.

Global Peace Index: Last year, three of the nine regions in the world became more peaceful

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 23 June 2021

In the news

On 17 June, the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) released the 15th edition of the Global Peace Index (GPI). According to the report, this year's results show that the average level of global peacefulness deteriorated by 0.07 per cent, the ninth deterioration in peacefulness in the last thirteen years. Of the 163 countries in the GPI, 86 recorded improvements, 75 recorded deteriorations, and two recorded no change in score. Further, the report reveals a world in which the conflicts and crises that emerged in the past decade have decreased, only to be replaced with a new wave of tension and uncertainty as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and rising tensions between several major powers. It states that 2021 was the first year since 2010 that the indicators for the intensity of conflict and the number of conflicts improved.

Further, the report states that only three of the nine regions in the world became more peaceful over the past year, with the largest improvement occurring in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), followed by Europe and South Asia. Meanwhile, the largest regional deterioration occurred in North America; however, the MENA region remains the least peaceful region in the world.

Issues at large

First, violence continues to be one of the most

pressing issues for people globally. According to the report, the newly released Lloyd's Register Foundation World Risk Poll which examines attitudes towards risk and violence across 145 countries, cited violence as the biggest risk to daily safety in 49 countries with over 60 per cent of people at least somewhat worried about sustaining serious harm from violent crime. However, despite the high fear of violence across the world, most people feel that the world is getting safer, with nearly 75 per cent of people globally feeling as safe or safer currently than they did five years ago. Second, the unfolding impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on peace. According to the report, violent events related to the pandemic peaked in April 2020, with an average of 200 violent pandemic-related events per month from August 2020 to April 2021. Although it was thought that the pandemic might help reduce violence around the world, the impact of the pandemic on active conflicts was short-lived, with some of these effects likely to last for years to come.

Third, the cost of violence. According to the report, the economic impact of violence increased by 0.2 per cent over the last year, mainly due to the increases in military expenditure which rose by 3.7 per cent. However, the economic impact of terrorism fell by 17.5 per cent. In 2020, the economic impact of violence on the global economy

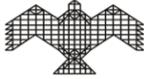
amounted to USD 14.96 trillion in constant purchasing power parity (PPP) terms which is equivalent to 11.6 per cent of global GDP. Fourth, the importance of Positive Peace. According to the report, the key to building peacefulness in times of conflict and uncertainty is Positive Peace. It states that uneven improvements in the Pillars of Positive Peace can lead to increased violence, highlighting the importance of a holistic, systemic approach to building Positive Peace.

In perspective

First, new triggers of conflict and new conflict zones. In 2020, new factors such as the pandemic have become triggers for the conflict. These triggers have not only created new problems but have also aggravated ongoing conflict, leaving authorities perplexed and people more troubled. Additionally, although regions that are least peaceful continued to be the same, new regions such as North America became a hotspot for the conflict due to various circumstances. Second, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Peace. Just as the report suggests, the pandemic is likely to have a lasting impact on ongoing conflicts and will have a significant impact on levels of conflict and violence.



National Institute of
Advanced Studies



About NIAS-International Peace Research Initiative (IPRI)

The International Peace Research Initiative (IPRI), initiated in 2018 at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), is a part of the Conflict Resolution and Peace Research Programme at the School of Conflict and Security Studies.

IPRI undertakes research on various issues relating to peace with special emphasis on radicalisation, sustainable peace, gender roles in peacebuilding and global protest movements. IPRI research are published as briefs, reports and commentary.



About Konrad Adenauer Stiftung

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is a political foundation. Established in 1955 as “Society for Christian-Democratic Civic Education”, in 1964, the Foundation proudly took on the name of Konrad Adenauer, the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. With 16 regional offices in Germany and over 120 offices abroad, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation is committed to achieving and maintaining peace, freedom and justice through political education. KAS promotes and preserves free democracy, social market economy, and the development and consolidation of the value consensus. KAS also focus on consolidating democracy, the unification of Europe and the strengthening of transatlantic relations, as well as on development cooperation.

KAS cooperates with governmental institutions, political parties and civil society organizations, building strong partnerships along the way. In particular, KAS seeks to intensify political cooperation in the area of development cooperation on the foundations of its objectives and values. Together with the partners, KAS makes a significant contribution to the creation of a global order that empowers every country to determine its own developmental priorities and destiny in an internationally responsible

