



NIAS-IPRI Brief

State of Peace and Conflict in East Asia in 2021

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Introduction

East Asia remained one of the important spaces of contest and cooperation in 2021. China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea and Mongolia along with the US remained active in shaping up the regional equations but no substantial change in their approaches towards one another was visible in 2021. The Covid-19 pandemic remained arguably the most concerning issue in the region which led to both economic and health crises. Strategic contests among the actors of the region remained unabated. Japan and South Korea's cooperation with China went hand and hand with elements of contests. The US-China relations, which has important bearings for the East Asia, continued to remain confrontational despite coming of a new President Joe Biden in the US. The relations between Japan and South Korea also remained strained even though there was change of leadership in Japan.

South Korea continued its engagement policy towards North Korea in 2021 and there have been few positive developments in inter-Korea relations. On the denuclearisation issue, North Korean response remained non-cooperative and it had more missile tests in 2021. Inside North Korea there were rumours about the health issues of the leader Kim Jong-un but he appeared to be in command so far. Actually, it appears that apparently North Korean leadership has consolidated its position in 2021. Mongolia also witnessed presidential elections in June 2021.

China's increased aggressiveness and the US attempts to counter it made it more difficult for the regional countries to have autonomous space to conduct their foreign policy in 2021, though countries like Japan and South Korea sought to maintain their security connects with the US and economic exchanges with China simultaneously in 2021.

Major Developments during 2021

The most important development in East Asia in 2021 could be arguably the further consolidation of power by Xi Jinping as well as more uncompromising assertiveness of China. In July 2021, the Chinese Communist Party celebrated its 100th anniversary and Xi Jinping was placed alongside Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. He was described as the 'principal founder' of the party's ruling ideology and the 'core' of its leadership.

China's assertive activities in East China Sea, South China Sea, Indian Ocean and along the Indian border were more frequent and more pronounced in 2021. In spite of pressure on China for its 'mishandling' or 'irresponsible behaviour' in the Covid-19 pandemic, China's aggression continued in 2021. China in August 2021 also tested a nuclear capable hypersonic missile along with sustained defence modernisation. In February 2021, China passed a new law which authorises the coastal guards to use lethal force in response to violations of 'national sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction' and Japan and the US felt that its application in the East China Sea would be problematic.

The new President of the US Joe Biden took over in January 2021 and tried to consolidate American connects with its allies such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and even QUAD countries. Biden overtly characterised China as a challenger to 'alliance security'. He continued with the tough China policy of the Trump administration and even though he had a virtual summit meet with the Chinese President Xi Jinping in November 2021, the contests between the countries appear to be unabated. The US-China relations have important bearings in the regional politics. Japan and South Korea which try to distinguish their security and economic interests and ready to work with China in economic sphere while keeping their security reliance on the US intact. The US insisted South Korea to be more forthcoming in joining Indo-Pacific strategy but South Korea continued to avoid it. Through a joint declaration between the US and South Korea in May 2021, South Korea expressed its agreement with the goal of free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific (FOIP) but conveyed that it would pursue such goal through its New Southern Policy. However, if the contests between the US and China get more intense, South Korea has also to face the consequences. In November 2021, China reduced supply of urea water to South Korea which is being used in diesel vehicles and it was alleged that China did it deliberately. The US-China rivalry would also shape up China-Japan relations and even though China and Japan have largely cooperating in their attempts to deal with the Pandemic and economic slowdown, if the US insists Japan not to participate in the Winter Olympic 2022 in Beijing, it would be a difficult choice for Japan. Throughout the 2021, Japan-China relations witnessed desire from both sides to remain engaged in their economic exchanges despite continued naval and air intrusions by China around Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. Former Australian PM Kevin Rudd said in July 2021 that Japan has managed its economic relations with China quite well in recent months by separating its security and economic interests.

Interestingly, Japan appeared more overt in its support to Taiwan in 2021. On 4 June 2021, Japan donated 1.24 million doses of the Covid-19 vaccines to Taiwan. Japan's Deputy Defence Minister Yasuhide Nakyama said in June 2021 that the way China has been encircling Taiwan and Japan must wake up. In July 2021, Japan's Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso told that China's forced intervention in Taiwan would be 'existential threat for Japan'. On 1 December 2021, the former Prime Minister of Japan Shino Abe said that any possible armed invasion of Taiwan would be dangerous for Japan as well as the US-Japan alliance. China expressed its displeasure with the Abe's statement. China in April 2021 had also criticised Japan for releasing radioactive water from the Fukushima nuclear plant to the Pacific Ocean.

China and North Korea trade links got severed by the pandemic in 2020 as North Korea sealed its borders. Its trade with China which was almost 90 percent of North Korean total external trade got substantially affected. In 2020, China's exports to North Korea fell by 81 percent and North Korea's exports to China decreased by 78 percent. In comparison to first ten months of 2020 when the imports from China was 487.5 million, in 2021 it has been just 191.5 million. In November 2021, it was reported that North Korea has been talking to China and Russia to resume cross-border train as well as other shipments routes soon. China and North Korea political connections appeared steady in 2021 and China tried to propose a resolution in the United Nations Security Council in November 2021 to lift certain economic sanctions from North Korea. Japan-South Korea relations also remained strained in 2021 and attempts of the South Korean President Moon Jae-in to reach out Japan did not succeed. Moon Jae-in conveyed in September 2020 to Yoshihide Suga just after his inaugural that he is ready to 'sit down anytime' to have talks to improve their bilateral ties. Moon Jae-in also had plan to visit Japan in July 2021 to participate in the inaugural ceremony of Tokyo Olympic and also have discussion with the Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, but Japan's unwillingness made him to cancel his visit. Japan kept on insisting that until 'appropriate action by South Korea is not taken on the forced-labour issue, any bilateral meeting would be useless. The new Prime Minister of Japan Fumio Kishida would also like to wait and deal with the new leader in South Korea because Moon Jae-in has less than six months in his office. Japan's North Korea policy remained unaltered during Yoshihide Suga or Fumio Kishida. Japan offers summit meets with the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un but gives utmost importance to the abduction issue of Japanese citizen. There has not been any noticeable response from North Korea.

South Korea in 2021 made more attempts to reach North Korea. In December 2020, South Korea passed a law forbidding sending propaganda leaflets to North Korea and in 2021 some progress in the inter-Korea relations has been visible. On July 2021, the cross-border communication lines between North and South Korea got restored which was closed since June 2020. The lines again got disconnected but in October 2020 they have again been restored. Moon Jae-in in September 2020 said at the UN General Assembly that South Korea would like to have an end-of-war declaration and North Korean media expressed 'appreciation' for the South Korean President's proposal. South Korea has reportedly been working with the US to make a draft of such declaration and the draft is in the final stage. It has been reported that North Korean denuclearisation issue would also be mentioned in the end-of-war declaration.

Contrary to South Korean reconciliatory attempts, North Korean ballistic missile tests continued in 2021. Between March and October 2021, North Korea has done seven missile tests. It is interesting to note that North Korea had no missile tests between March 2020 and March 2021. On 19 October 2021 North Korea had the latest missile tests which were reportedly a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM).

Contrary to the inter-state relations in East Asia, internal changes were much more salient in 2021. The leadership of Xi Jinping got more augmented in China and the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party was also celebrated. It was a busy year for Japan and Japan not only organised the Tokyo Olympic from 23 July to 8 August 2021 but also experienced a one year rule of Yoshihide Suga as the Prime Minister. After resignation of Suga as the Prime Minister of Japan, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party

(LDP) decided to make Fumio Kishida the 100th Prime Minister of Japan in October 2021. Japan also went for the general election on 31 October 2021 in which the ruling LDP won 259 out of 465 seats. South Korea domestic politics experienced bitter fight between the ruling and opposition parties since it is the last year of the current President Moon Jae-in. The main opposition party in South Korea alleged that Moon Jae-in administration has been too soft towards North Korea and demanded that Seoul should strengthen its security ties with the US. There were demands in South Korea to either make its own nuclear weapons or request the US to re-deploy its tactical nuclear weapons in the country. In January 2021, North Korea had the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea and Kim Jong-un got elected as the General Secretary of the Party. The Congress augmented political position of the leader Kim Jong-un. It seems that Kim Jong-un has decisively shifted the centre of gravity in North Korean politics from military to the party. North Korea in 2021 also appeared very weak in economic performance and Kim Jong-un stressed on economic growth of the country. In Mongolia, Ukhnaagiin Khurelsukh got elected as the new president of the country in June 2021. The elections were held according to the constitutional amendments of 2019 and he has promised to deepen democracy in Mongolia and would work for an independent judiciary. He also stressed that Mongolia would give importance to its relations with Russia, China and India and work for peace in the region.

Trends and issues in 2021

All the above mentioned developments in the East Asia indicate that the region has been dynamic in 2021. Through this dynamism following broad trends or issues could be highlighted for further consideration.

One, Japan and South Korea in spite of having reservation with China's growing assertiveness tried to work with China in the Pandemic management as well as economic and other exchanges. It seems that despite their concerns, they don't want to overtly compete with China. Two, the existing unabated rivalry between the US-China has been the biggest challenge for Japan and South Korea. Both of them tried to keep their security interests aligned to the US and economic cooperation intact with China. But it seems that the US and China have been pushing for a situation in which there would be no choice for Japan or South Korea but to choose one of them. Three, the relations between Japan and South Korea did not see any breakthrough in 2021. Japan has been following an uncompromising stand in which it expects that first South Korea resolves at least war-time labour issue to Japan's satisfaction and then only Japan would begin any meaningful dialogue with South Korea. South Korea on the other hand feels that in the last few years, because of political and historical mistrust, economic cooperation between the two countries has been suffering. South Korea says that since these intractable issues between the two countries are difficult to resolve, it's better to keep them aside and cooperate in all other possible domains. Four, South Korea relations with North Korea have slightly improved in 2021. The restoration of communication lines between the two Koreas brought renewed hope for the Korean peninsula. Five, North Korea's denuclearization issue remained elusive even in 2021. It has become increasingly obvious that even though North Korea has been going through economic hardship and also the Covid-19 pandemic related health problems, it does not appear to bargain its nuclear programme for it. North Korea has apparently strengthened processes and institutions of governance in the country through the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party and tried to compensate economic hardship with

political stability. Six, North Korea has further consolidated its nuclear and missile capabilities in 2021 and wants to put pressure on South Korea, Japan as well as the US to give concessions and talk to it on its own term. North Korea seems not ready to give up its weapons programme.

Brief forecast for 2022

In the 2022 also the above mentioned state of peace and conflict in East Asia is largely going to continue. The most important variable, which would affect continuity or change in the trends, would be state of the US-China rivalry. If the rivalry remains managed, countries of the region would be able to maintain the autonomy of their foreign policy. There is a possibility that the new Foreign Minister of Japan Yoshimasa Hayashi may try to reach out China as he has been the head of the Japan-China Parliamentarians' Friendship League before assuming the post of Foreign minister of Japan. Actually, he said on 2 December 2021 in his first news conference that Japan would like to maintain dialogue and firm cooperation with China at least on those issues which are of mutual interests. However, it would not be easy for him as the ruling party of Japan LDP is dominated by leaders who prefer uncompromising stand against China. In 2022, Japan and China are going to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the normalisation of their diplomatic relations and It was discussed by Kishida and XI when the talked to each other on phone in October 2021.

South Korea would go through elections for the new President in March 2022 and which means that till then no big policy change or steps would be taken. Moon Jae-in administration would try to have an end-of-war declaration before the end of his term but it would not be easy. Actually North Korea, China and Japan would like to wait for a leadership change in South Korea and decide their course of actions depending on the results of South Korean elections. In the last few years, North Korean economic crisis and international isolation have become more acute but its nuclear and missile capabilities have become more advanced. One is good for North Korea but another is bad. It would be interesting to see how these contrary trends are going to be managed by North Korea in 2022. The health of Kim Jong-un and equations among political-military elites of North Korea would be other important issues which must be watched carefully in the coming years. In 2022, China and North Korea relations are going to improve further because in all probability the US and China contests would become more intense and the sealed borders between the two countries are going to be opened after subsiding of the pandemic.

Lastly, it would be interesting to see if bilateral summit meetings of the East Asian countries happen in 2022. There has not been any bilateral summit meet between the leaders of Japan and China or Japan and South Korea for several years. A trilateral meeting between the leaders of three countries has also not happened after 2019. This is both the cause and effect of the disconnects among the top leaders of the region and even though it could be wished otherwise but the year 2022 would not be very different.