



NIAS-IPRI Brief

State of Peace and Conflict in North America in 2021

Dr Shreya Upadhyay

Assistant Professor, Christ (Deemed to be) University, Bangalore

The region of North America in 2021 witnessed a challenge to democracy, racial and economic inequities and major flashpoints between the US and China.

Introduction

The state of peace and conflict across the world continues to be dominated by the consequences of Covid-19 pandemic for the last two years. The human and economic costs of pandemic have surmounted and continue to exacerbate. The pandemic has been responsible to a certain extent for scaling back years of progress on democracy, poverty reduction, inequality, weakened social cohesion as well as global cooperation. Worldwide scenarios of job losses, unemployment, mental health issues, social unrest, political fragmentation, and geopolitical tensions have worsened. Along with that, the issues of climate change, extreme weather, digital inequality and cyber security failure remain major pressing points. The pandemic has also brought across some opportunities largely in the area of innovation and research and development. This paper is an attempt to cover how peace and conflict have played out in the United States in 2021. It will be divided into three parts: Major developments during the year; trends and issues; and forecast for year 2022.

Major Developments During 2021

Democracy:

One of the major impacts of the pandemic on the world, not only for repressive regimes but also for open societies, was challenge to democracy. The handling of Covid-19 varied from country to country in North America. Countries in North America vary significantly in size, population, available natural resources, economy as well as political stability. There are countries like Canada and the United States; smaller countries such as St Vincent and the Grenadines, Antigua and Barbuda, St Kitts and Nevis. Most of the smaller central American and Caribbean nations have suffered catastrophic economic hardships during the pandemic due to limited natural resources, substantial human populations, bad economy, poor governance and high levels of corruption. Also, most of them are heavily dependent on tourism, agriculture and subsistence. The pandemic has cut down the international tourist flow drastically to most of these countries. This has made them socio-economically vulnerable to inflation, unemployment, nepotism and corruption, together with political instability. And yet, the US has been worst impacted in terms of number of people dying from COVID-19 infections. This took place due to negligence, not following of WHO norms, lack of awareness, miscommunication, etc. At the time of writing this article there were more than 848,000 reported deaths caused by the pandemic in the region. In all of this the pandemic transformed several pillars of

democratic governance. The US delayed several state-level presidential primary votes, and candidates curtailed rallies and retail-style campaigning. The pandemic response intensified frictions between Trump and several Democratic state governors critical of his administration's response. The administration has been criticised for creating a fog of misinformation around the pandemic. Trump continued to downplay the seriousness of the virus, attacked social distancing measures, promoted unproven treatments and false health statistics. Senior public health professionals who openly contradicted the president's claims were marginalized. The citizens of the United States have also showed dissatisfaction with the way the democracy was working in the country.

According to research conducted by the Pew research Centre, in February 2021, only 41% of Americans were satisfied with the way democracy was working in their country. Incidents such as supporters of former President Donald Trump storming the US Capitol point in the dismal direction of the US democracy. While the outcome of the US presidential elections somewhat restored faith in democracy. Trump became becoming the first one-term US President since George HW Bush ousting by Bill Clinton. Coming of Joe Biden has led to decrease of uncertainty on several economic and policy issues. The Democrats still have only narrow control in both chambers of Congress, but the new administration should have some leeway through executive orders and lobbying moderate Republicans until the next mid-term elections in 2022.

Human Rights:

In addition to the political reverberations, the pandemic also underscored the racial and economic inequities in not only the United States but the entire North American region. Black and Latino populations have been at a particular disadvantage and so has been the gender inequality. Households in these communities are more likely to have members who continued traveling to their workplaces during local lockdown periods because their jobs could not be done remotely, risking them to greater exposure from the virus. Systemic biases such as housing, health care, employment, and education made the matters worse. The US authorities also used an emergency health directive to expel more than 40,000 people allegedly making unauthorized border crossings raising concerns that the Trump administration was exploiting the pandemic as a pretext to set aside due process obligations and intensify its clampdown on asylum seekers and immigration in general. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan also led to unfolding a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. With financial sanctions paralyzing the economy, 23 million Afghans will be facing food insecurity. The continuing deterioration of the economy threatens to heighten the risk of extremism. The paralysis of the banking sector could push more of the financial system into unregulated informal money exchanges which can facilitate terrorism, trafficking and drug smuggling. Domestically, a report released by the US Department of Defense (DoD) in March 2021 concluded: "DoD is facing a threat from domestic extremists (DE), particularly those who espouse white supremacy or white nationalist ideologies." The report further stated that anarchists, anti-fascists, and other like-minded individuals perpetrated roughly 23 percent of the plots and attacks in 2020, a notable increase from recent years, and Salafi-jihadists were involved in 5 percent of plots and attacks.

In Canada, even as the government has made the issue of human rights a prime concern, serious challenges have come to light especially relating to the rights of indigenous people, including violations of their right to safe drinking water, violence against

Indigenous women and girls, and violations of the right to food in these communities. Canada also grapples with serious human rights issues abroad relating to abuses by Canadian mining companies and the government's failure to suspend arms sales to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen despite calls by the United Nations to refrain from providing arms and military support to the parties to the conflict. Trudeau in order to remain in office has continued to pander Jagmeet Singh's left-leaning New Democratic Party (NDP) deeply invested in Sikh separatism which spells trouble with regard to extremist politics at domestic as well as foreign policy level. close links between leaders of the Khalistani movement and Pakistan has been brought out by a Canada-based think-tank, even as politicians in the country appear to be sympathetic to some of "demands" of the Khalistanis.

Political and Social Activism:

A seemingly positive development in the year 2021 was citizen involvement in political and social action in the United States. Forty per cent of the protests in 2020 in the US were related to Covid-19, either in support or opposition to government-imposed lockdown measures and mask mandates. Covid-19 disproportionate impact on issues of race, gender, and colour also fostered a series of civic dialogue on inequality in healthcare. Individuals engaged in condemning police brutality and supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. Along with that the pandemic also unmasked deeply rooted structural barriers to gender equality, widening persistent gender gaps. Women already saddled with an unequal caregiving burden saw their responsibilities multiply as schools and child care centers closed. These economic setbacks were worsened by increasing rates of intimate partner violence as many women sheltered at home with their abusers. With female-dominated industries, such as hospitality, food service, and retail, being especially vulnerable to the initial coronavirus crisis, nearly 3 million women in the US lost their jobs. However, women used the power of social media and WhatsApp to mobilize civic action. Women have also been mobilising against potential overturning of the historic Roe v Wade that might lead to more than 20 states in the US certainly or likely to ban abortion. In October 2021, tens of thousands of women in the US marched across the country to support abortion rights. Social activism was also seen in the area of climate change. In June this year, heatwave that struck parts of Canada and the United States increased at least 150-fold since the end of the nineteenth century. The record-breaking heatwave lasted from 25 June to 1 July, and affected large cities that rarely experience extreme heat, including Oregon, Washington, Vancouver. More than 500 excess deaths and 180 wildfires were recorded in the western Canadian province of British Columbia. The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) concluded that the frequency of heatwaves in North America has increased. A human contribution to these increases was found with medium confidence in North America. This had an impact with protests and strikes being held both in streets and social media calling on leaders to take urgent actions on climate change and to keep their promises on limiting global warming to below 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit).

The Changing World Order:

The last development that I wish to discuss is the number of flashpoints emerging between the US and China on a wide range of issue areas, involving not only security but also trade and technology. There are flash points located in the western Pacific—Taiwan strait, SCS and ECS. Tensions in these locations have fluctuated considerably and have the potential to escalate into military action involving third parties. There are

also volatile diplomatic, legal, technological and economic issues prone to escalation not only in the US but Canada as well. Trade war is a well-known example in this regard. There is also a new concept of “hostage standoff.” In late 2018 Canada arrested Meng Wanzhou, the CFO of Chinese telecom giant Huawei, at the request of the US government. Shortly thereafter, Beijing detained two Canadian citizens — Michael Spavor, a businessman, and Michael Kovrig, a former diplomat — in China on what appear to be trumped up charges. Officially, these detentions were unrelated but on September 24, 2021 within hours of Canada allowing Meng to board a flight to China following her plea deal with the US Department of Justice, Spavor and Kovrig were allowed to return to Canada. This allows China to incentivize a tactic like this.

Trends and Issues

Inequality and Civil Unrest:

Were two developments that were discussed at length in the last section. The 2008 Great Recession widened socioeconomic inequities among young adults, people of color, and those without a college degree. The COVID-19 pandemic raised renewed concerns about inequality crosscutting gender, race, and nationalities. Temporarily closing the economy sent shock waves through communities, raising the possibility that social inequities, preexisting and current, have weakened economic resiliency and reinforced disadvantage, especially among the already marginalized sections. A PNAS paper pointed out a recent survey in an unidentified American city that two-thirds workers experienced income losses following stay-at-home orders, nearly half had been laid off, and many were unable to receive assistance regarding unemployment insurance, childcare, distance learning for their children, or basic necessities. If the pandemic recovery mirrors past trends, these same communities will also be much slower to rebound, due to a preexisting lack of social and economic capital compounded by an unequal flow of relief funds and recovery programs. Such studies expose patterns of marginality that leave some individuals and families in a state of permanent emergency—continually exposed to hardship, unable to protect themselves in crisis, and less resilient to major setbacks. Similarly, in Mexico, COVID-19 has spread along existing patterns of spatial segregation and inequalities. While the poorest neighbourhoods have been the hardest hit, many of the wealthiest have seen very few cases. In Canada, associations can be drawn between high infection rates and low-income, visible-minority status. Data from Montreal, Toronto, and other ethnically and culturally diverse neighbourhoods, suggests strong correlations linking higher rates of infections with neighbourhoods with higher percentages of racialized residents.

The long standing social and economic inequalities also lead to widespread protests against the governments’ policies. North America deteriorated on all three domains of peace with the rise of violent demonstrations and deterioration in political instability caused by increasing social unrest. Fueled by the pandemic, disquiet over socioeconomic inequality, and protests against racial discrimination the United States has recorded one of the biggest deteriorations on Civil Unrest Index. On the other hand, the pandemic has also seen a rise in nativism and populism. Capitol Hill riots in January 2021 have created the trend for civil unrest and potential violence. Canada witnessed anti-vaccination protests and lockdown measures during Trudeau’s election campaign. Similarly, there were protestors in the US doubting the science behind Covid19 led by white, middle-class voices and promoted by structures of racial inequality. These protests have been fueled by anti-government sentiments, lockdowns, increasing

unemployment rate, immigration ban, etc. The US also finished among the bottom 10 countries for racial equality in 2021. A recent survey conducted by Pew Research, regarding the current state of civil rights in America, revealed that America's overall image improved significantly following the election of President Joe Biden, but many nonetheless express significant doubts about the health of American democracy. A median of just 17 per cent say democracy in the US is a good example for others to follow, while 57 per cent think it used to be a good example but has not been in recent years. Another 23 per cent do not believe it has ever been a good example.

Economics:

Prior to the pandemic the US economy was doing well, and unemployment was on a downtrend. Economies of North America, especially the US and Canada are driven largely by consumer spending. With the pandemic, the consumer spending has gone down. With social distancing measures and new technological innovations, replacing labor is being replaced at a faster rate causing unemployment. The Federal Reserve and the Bank of Canada have cut interest rates and resurrected crisis-era facilities designed to provide liquidity. One of the major aspect threatening north American prosperity is the depreciation of the human capital of recent graduates whose professional lives are put on hold by the crisis. The longer these individuals are forced to wait before applying the skills and knowledge they have learned, the more their human capital is degraded. Unintended consequences of border restrictions on non-essential traffic has further impacted the global supply chains. While it is a fact that Covid-19 has improved the digital landscape, there is still a lacunae with respect to high-speed access or lack of affordability. In terms of education, such deficits are likely to have damaging long-term effects, particularly on Black, Hispanic, and poorer schoolchildren. The pandemic has demonstrated that there are also economic costs to systemic weaknesses in the US health system. In October 2021, the McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) estimated that poor health costs the United States as much as 16 percent of GDP, or \$3.2 trillion, in the form of premature deaths and lost productivity. Health is not only a cost, then, but also an investment. Economy downtrend has also impacted global migration. COVID-19-related layoffs will undoubtedly target migrant workers, many of whom are on temporary visas. And when jobs do become available, the governments will undoubtedly encourage businesses to hire citizens over migrants. Such decisions will have lasting effects on migrant communities furthering global inequality. Rise in inequality will exacerbate the already existing xenophobic tendencies and extremism. Already at risk of COVID-19, the forcibly displaced—refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons—and other forced migrants are also faced with diminished institutional capacity offering them support. In northern Mexico, asylum seekers denied entry into the United States bide time in makeshift, overcrowded camps with poor access to sanitation. This could create opportunities for non-state actors to exploit grievances against governments. It could also force desperate people escaping harm to do so via shadowy irregular pathways using illicit ways.

Shifting World Order and Changing Geo-Economics:

Even before the advent of Covid-19 crisis, tectonic plates of the global politics were shifting, but it worsened thereafter. Due to the current leadership vacuum created by the US, the process of recovery from Covid-19 could be harder and longer. The pandemic strained the US-China relation to the point that they are worse than earlier. China will continue to challenge the US supremacy with high consequence for the

international system. While US President Biden is trying to bring a confluence of democratic institutions, Xi's China Party is ready to call out the failures of democracy and extol the virtues of its own governing system.

The United States and China have been reinvesting their economic gains to varying degrees into research and development for new and emerging technologies. Despite that the deep interdependencies between the economies of two countries remain. In 2020, China was America's largest goods trading partner, third largest export market, and largest source of imports. Exports to China supported an estimated 1.2 million jobs in the United States in 2019. Most U.S. companies operating in China report being committed to the China market for the long term. Plenty of other American tech companies still do big business in China, including Apple, Tesla, Qualcomm and Intel. This is concerning for the US that Chinese agents are siphoning the companies' technology and secrets; China-made products are vulnerable to cybermeddling; and that they are compromising on professed values in playing by Beijing's rules. Yet, the dense web formed by trade, financial, scientific, and academic links between the two countries will make it difficult for one side to inflict harm on the other without hurting itself in the process. This places the relationship in a state of hardening competition that coexists alongside a mutual awareness that both sides will be impacted — for good or ill — by their capacity to address common challenges.

Forecast for 2022

The theme for 2022 will be volatility on all fronts – from dealing with the pandemic, resurgence of economy, supply chain aspects, civic engagement and protests to aspects of extremism, etc

New Variants of Covid-19: Any hopes for normalcy in 2022 will dash with new variants of Covid-19 continue to spike in the US and other countries in the region. Supply chain disruptions will continue in everything from input availability, transportation, labor, etc. New variants will make the matters worse. Vaccine distribution and booster shots could encounter unexpected production and logistical issues. There is still a high percentage of Americans who have refused to take any vaccines. The lingering impact of Covid-19 will continue to lead to supply-chain disruptions, cyclical and structural changes in labor markets, and varying inflation outlooks. These will thus influence domestic policies and elections.

Climate Change action:

Despite pledges for corporate action on climate change, COP26 was judged as an eyewash. The coming year will see that the greenhouse gas emissions are not declining. This will lead to greater food insecurity and increased inequality, further leading to climate change induced migration. The need for radical action will be felt more and should lead to more civic engagement around the topic. Climate change is also poised to becoming a major defense priority. Principal threats for North American countries remain increased climate migration, resource conflicts, food and energy shortages, rising extremism, and expanding opportunities for disease vectors. In the US, it will continue to pressure US military capacity in 2022. More than two-thirds of US military facilities have already been hit by climate-related events such as wildfires, heat waves, hurricanes, and flooding. This includes the critical US national-security assets of Norfolk Naval Station in Virginia (also home to more than 30 other military installations),

Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, and Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida. The Pentagon has also reported a 60% increase in heat-related illnesses among troops over the past decade, adding to heightening national-security concerns.

Religious Extremism:

With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, al Qaeda- and ISIS-linked terrorists are ramping up online activity to try to inspire attacks on the US homeland, according to the Department of Homeland Security report. According to the report, the foreign terrorist groups "will likely continue to maintain a highly visible online presence in an attempt to inspire US-based individuals to engage in violent activity. Not only Salafi jihadism, but extreme "rightwing" and "leftwing" terrorists promoting a range of issues—racism, environmentalism, and anti-government extremism, for example—may revive in North America in 2022.

Increased Polarisation:

While Biden's welfare state reconstruction with \$1 trillion infrastructure plan and the "Build Back Better" bill were the country's best hopes of getting on a path toward more inclusive economic growth. However, the negotiations over the bill have assumed partisan colour and have continued to drag on.

Civil Unrest: The increase in protests is expected to be primarily driven by food insecurity and the erosion of mechanisms that have historically defused tensions, such as freedoms of assembly and the press. 75 countries worldwide are expected to see an uptick in unrest by August 2022. Out of these 10 countries are in North America.

Cyber attacks:

Cybercriminals continue to leverage the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, they will also find new opportunities to attack such as deepfakes, cryptocurrency and mobile wallets. In 2021, cyber criminals adapted their attack strategy to exploit vaccination mandates, elections and the shift to hybrid work, to target organizations' supply chains and networks for them to achieve maximum disruption. These attacks will continue to increase in sophistication. This year the black market for fake vaccine certificates and fake vaccine passports expanded globally. In 2022, cyber groups will continue to leverage these types of fake news campaigns to execute cybercrime through various phishing attacks and scams. However, the most vigilance is required for possible nation-state attacks. The rise in tensions between US and China, US and Russia has the potential to play out in the areas of critical infrastructure through disruptive attacks like Ransomware or distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) events.

Competition:

Between the US and China is going to worsen as the two jockeys vie for influence, compete in technology, and manoeuvre for military advantages on land, space and cyberspace. But they are also major trade and business partners, making their rivalry more complex. The US will continue to deepen multilateral-security approaches in the Indo-Pacific, such as the Quad and AUKUS. China will continue to upgrade its nuclear-weapons arsenal and hypersonic-missile capabilities, and aggressiveness in the region. The two will continue to compete in strategic industries, including semiconductors, space technologies, next-generation communications, robotics, biotech, rare-earth minerals, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing. With geopolitical rivalry

forecasted to grow in importance in 2022, both countries will remain keen to decouple strategic sectors, while also seeking opportunities for limited bilateral cooperation in areas of mutual interest, including trade, climate, and the global pandemic.

Conclusion

In all of this, year 2022 will see American democracy to be eroding even more significantly. The year will see increase in misinformation and social media borne conspiracy theories that will shake the foundation and trust in democracy. The polarization and sectarian tensions are only increasing leading to greater fuel of violence, extremism, inequality and xenophobia. One of the most important forecast, which is positive and not only United States centric is the push by different countries to adopt Artificial Intelligence. Canada was the first country to publish a national AI strategy in 2017. Since then several countries want to be the early movers in the field. AI has uses from military, to healthcare. Its powers lie in the ability to reduce inefficiencies, and accelerate processes. The year will see increased clarity regarding AI research and guidelines for its use. The year will see maturing of the technology and its implementation in various ways.