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CHINA AND EAST ASIA THIS YEAR

China in Africa: FOCAC celebrates two decades of mutually beneficial relationship

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What happened?

On 29 and 30 November, the People's Republic of China and the African countries participated in the eighth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Dakar, Senegal. The forum's theme was 'Deepen China-Africa Partnership and Promote Sustainable Development to Build a China-Africa with a Shared Future in a New Era' and was attended by 53 African countries and the African Union. Eswatini, the only African country with diplomatic relations with Taiwan, did not participate in the forum.

Despite being a ministerial meet, the opening ceremony was attended by Chinese President Xi Jinping, who addressed the forum online and delivered a speech highlighting agricultural cooperation, Chinese investments in Africa and greater trade exchanges between China and the African continent. President Xi delivered his speech based on the White Paper published by the State Council Information Office on China's cooperation with Africa in the new era. It emphasized China's intentions of helping the African Union with achieving its goals of vaccinating 60 per cent of the African population by 2022, alleviating poverty, promoting agricultural development, encouraging investments worth USD 10 billion in Africa, providing means to digitization of the economy and green development, and advocating closer cultural ties and people-to-people exchanges

The forum also adopted four resolutions: the Dakar Action Plan (2022-2024), the China-Africa Cooperation Vision 2035, the Sino-African Declaration on Climate Change and the Declaration of the Eighth Ministerial Conference of FOCAC.

What is the background?

First, FOCAC as a framework for China's programmes in Africa. China is instrumental in developing African road and transport infrastructure and building medical and other social facilities in the continent. China's investments in Africa are similar to its actions in Southeast Asia and South Asia. It is trying to build a connecting transport system under the flagship of the Belt and Road Initiative. The FOCAC acts as an institutional framework in the African continent and provides China with a solid base for implementing and initiating its influential infrastructural and financial development plans. The White Paper on China-Africa Cooperation said: "Over the past two decades, FOCAC has become an important platform for collective dialogue between China and Africa and an effective mechanism for pragmatic cooperation."

Second, China's economic interests in Africa. China's cooperation with Africa began soon after establishing China as a republic and gradually grew as African countries gained independence. However, the cooperation between China and the continent grew substantially after the 2000s. China invested over USD 125 billion in Africa between 2000 and 2006 and invested heavily in African infrastructure and other economic and social facilities. Trade between China and Africa has risen drastically from USD 20 billion in 2000 to USD 208 billion in 2019 (pre-pandemic).

Third, China's strategic interests in Africa. In the early 21st century, the Chinese economy had elevated itself from the status of a poor developing country and was now being recognized as the fastest-growing GDP. The economy was in constant need of raw material, mineral resources, fuel and petroleum, readily available in Africa. China is currently focused on securing its supplies of cobalt which is used in the production of batteries for electric vehicles. At the same time, the country pushes forward to becoming a green and zero-carbon economy by 2060.

China also seeks to secure the support of African countries in international organizations and institutions where it has been pushing for multilateralism. A strong south-south

cooperation, which President Xi projected heavily, is already underway. The cooperation between China and Africa showed its strength when more African leaders chose to attend the FOCAC Summit in 2018 than the UN General Assembly meeting, which took place later in the same month. As African countries receive enormous loans, economic benefits and profit from the infrastructural development equipped by China, they do not find themselves in a position to negate China's desires in international settings.

Fourth, African compliance with Chinese plans. There are two primary reasons behind African countries' blind trust in China. First, African countries may prefer to trust China, a country that did not exploit its resources and its people in the centuries-old colonial past. Second, Africa finds it more convenient to take loans from China who does not prod its borrowers to rectify its political-economic-social settings. Unlike the EU, the US, the IMF, and the World Bank, China focuses on acquiring good relations with the African countries to secure its interests and does not bother changing the existing anomalies.

What does it mean?

The cooperation between China and Africa will continue to grow in the coming decade as the country establishes itself as one of the foremost supporters of African development and economic sustainability. Africa's support for the country is bound to grow further in the coming decades as China pushes billions in investment and provides greater assistance than other countries. There is much criticism regarding China's lending to African countries and the status of their independence in the face of China's extreme support that at times leads them into a debt trap. However, African countries such as Rwanda and Guinea have rejected accusations of lack of freedom in their relationship and have deeply appreciated the assistance offered by China

China: Virtual meeting between Biden and Xi calls for greater cooperation

Avishka Ashok, 21 November 2021

What happened?

On 16 November, Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden held a 3.5 hour-long virtual meeting to address the issues of dissension between the two countries.

On 16 November, Xinhua Net reported that President Xi had called for steady relations with the US and said: "China and the United States should respect each other, coexist in peace, pursue win-win cooperation, and manage domestic affairs well while shouldering international responsibilities."

On 15 November, the White House released President Biden's statements which warmly welcomed the meet and said: "it seems to me our responsibility as leaders of China and the United States is to ensure that the competition between our countries does not veer into conflict, whether intended or unintended. Just simple, straightforward competition." During the meeting, President Xi also questioned the ideology of democracy and explained that "democracy is not "mass produced" with a uniform model." The statement made by Xi reprimanded Biden for claiming a patent on democracy.

What is the background?

First, recent tensions between the US and China. The meeting between the two leaders took place in the backdrop of rising tension caused by Taiwan's independence movement. The US lawmakers visited Taiwan last month to discuss a military deal, a move that China strongly condemned. The relations between the US and China have remained bittersweet for decades. The US has maintained its status of being a universally powerful country ever since the end of the second world war. But the People's Republic of China has steadily reached its position of being the second most powerful and financially stable country. After shadowing the US for many long years, it now threatens to overthrow the US and take its place as the world's fastest and strongest GDP in the world.

A report by McKinsey & Company revealed that China had overtaken the US as the wealthiest country with two-thirds of global net worth accumulated in China.

Second, emerging economic competition between the countries. Given the economic rivalry and considering the global economic recovery after the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, another cold war or even a trade war would be detrimental to the recuperation of the economies that get stuck between the two greatest GDPs of the world. Such a development would also be disastrous for the US and China as well. Thus, the meeting aimed to bring an understanding between the two countries and create a strategy to sustain the growth and development of their economy.

Third, the temperament of the leaders. President Biden will soon finish his one year in office. In the past ten months, he has not caused any untoward crises or conflicts with any other nations. The Biden administration strives not to take inconvenient and unfavorable action, even in the case of North Korea. Thus, it is evident that the US under the Biden presidency does not aim to complicate matters with China. Instead, it is complying with conditions that will enable the expansion of its economy along with China. President Xi Jinping also promised to cooperate with the US as long as it did not interfere in its internal affairs.

What does it mean?

The meeting between the two leaders is aimed at greater cooperation to facilitate the two countries' continuous and uninterrupted economic progress. The US and China realize that stalling each other might, in turn, damage their interests and thus are willing to compromise and work individually without bothering each other. However, the US may find itself in a tight spot if it cannot voice its opinions on the territorial aggression of China since it has many stakes in the Indo-Pacific region. The priority for both the leaders is to prevent the world from entering into yet another cold war era.

China: President Xi secures his position in party history with the "historical resolution"

Avishka Ashok, 14 November 2021

What happened?

On 8 November, the 19th Communist Party of China Central Committee initiated the four-day long plenary session in Beijing. On 11 November, the session released a communique during which President Xi Jinping made an important address that affixed his name in the country's history for the years to come.

The congregation focused on revisiting the country's history and its achievements and passing the new resolution on the basis of its findings. President Xi who is also the General Secretary of the CCP presented the work report to the 348 members of the 19th Central Committee. The communique put emphasis on five areas to reach the goal of national rejuvenation: "upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era; strengthening our consciousness of the need to maintain political integrity and keep in alignment with the central Party leadership; enhancing socialism with Chinese characteristics; resolutely upholding Xi leadership to ensure that all Party members act in unison; advancing the Party's and strengthen its capacity to respond to risks and challenges; uniting and leading the citizen Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation."

The third resolution is primarily focused on continuing with the current status of the country and on the path to development that the country has adopted in the last century.

What is the background?

First, the grand resolution. The communique passed a "historical resolution" on the last day of the session. In the 100-year history of the CCP, only two other such resolutions have been passed. The first resolution was passed by Mao Zedong which cemented his authority over the party and as the country's leader in 1945 and the second by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 which established China's economic reforms and reintroduced China on the world map. Although

the latest resolution did not introduce new dimensions in the CCP's politics or the country's economic sectors, it reinforced the major development and its position as a global financial and political powerhouse.

Second, the rise of Xi Jinping. With the passing of the rare resolution, Xi Jinping has entered himself in the league of CCP's most powerful and influential elites. Historically, the resolutions were passed to either remove other competition or to establish a leader's ideology in the party. However, President Xi does not face either of the challenges since he has the privilege of being the President endlessly and possesses the confidence of the party entirely. Thus the latest resolution reiterates his role as the leader of the "new, modernized and developed" China.

Third, Xi's philosophy taking roots. In the previous months, the CCP released a series of reports that showcased China's progress with respect to reducing emissions, achieving common prosperity, ameliorating the people's standard of living, protecting human rights in Xinjiang, amongst many others. The CCP has indirectly adopted Xi's ideology and acknowledged his efforts and policies since 2012 in building China to its current stature. The party and the Chinese ideologue now reflect Xi's ideology.

What does this mean?

The third resolution does not bring about massive changes within the country. However, it re-emphasizes the role of Xi Jinping in Chinese politics and provides him with a legitimate position of being a super leader in the country's history. From this point on, Xi's hold on power in China has tightened much more than it already was, and this will make the upcoming Presidential elections easier. With an assured and rare third term as the President, Xi has established himself and his ideology with practically no resistance.

China: The White Paper on Responding to climate change

Avishka Ashok, 31 October 2021

What happened?

On 27 October, China's State Council Information Office published a white paper highlighting the country's new policies, the national strategy, and the shift in the state's response to the global climate crisis. The paper is titled "Responding to Climate Change: China's Policies and Actions." The 35-page report responds to the impending climate crisis in four parts. It seeks to prepare the Chinese people for drastic changes that the government will undertake.

China introduced five principles in its new plan. The paper explained the efforts undertaken by the government to improve the planning and coordination amongst smaller government bodies to execute its new policies. China has also included carbon peaking and carbon neutrality goals in its five-year plans and the national economic and social development plans. The state will also actively control its greenhouse emissions, promote low-carbon development in infrastructure and transportation and enhance its carbon sink capacity. Lastly, the report showcased China's contributions towards preventing the fast degradation of the global ecology and emphasized Chinese President Xi Jinping's efforts to achieve global consensus to act unitedly on the issue of climate change.

What is the background?

First, the energy crisis. In recent weeks, China also faced an energy crisis caused due to the scarcity of coal in the country. Although China is now working on resolving the supply issue, the incident has been an eyeopener for the Chinese economists and politicians who faced a slowdown in the country's economic growth in the third quarter. In order to reduce its emissions, China will have to drastically suspend its dependence on coal-powered energy plants, which may cause yet another slowdown or an energy crisis in the country. The release of the White Paper comes at a time when the country prepares to deal with these inadequacies and creates targets for the coming decades.

Second, the global push for policy reforms. In the past few years, numerous countries have heightened their cooperation on climate change. Major changes in emission reduction goals were announced after US President Joe Biden returned to the Paris climate accord. In September 2020, China also announced its plans for carbon neutrality by 2060 and reducing emissions by huge margins. The White Paper sheds light on the targets set by the government on achieving carbon neutrality and emissions and the reforms that will be adopted in China to achieve these targets. On 18 December 2020, the UK also published its White Paper title "Powering our net-zero future" to become the first country with a net-zero target. In October 2020, the Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga also projected that the country would be a net-zero economy. In 2017, the Australian government also acknowledged the dangers of climate change and released its document on dealing with the growing pressures on climate policy reforms. More countries are currently recreating their policies in order to fit the current needs and to resolve the critical climate risks.

What does this mean?

The White Paper attempts to explain that climate change cannot be dealt with unilaterally. Although China is eager to take the lead and attempts to showcase its leadership by setting an example through its policy reforms, the paper reiterated that global governance is essential to deal with the challenges of climate change. It repeatedly emphasizes multilateralism and calls for common but differentiated responsibility.

However, according to a China expert, it fails to provide details about the emissions. Lauri Myllyvirta, lead analyst at the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air in Helsinki said: "The document gives no answers on the major open questions about the country's emissions. At what level will emissions peak and how fast should they fall after the peak?"

The paper released by China shows that the country is prepared to take up major challenges to deal with the climate crisis, but it was adamant about following its own patterns and walking a path created by the Chinese people.

China: The hypersonics missile tests

Keerthana Nambiar, 24 October 2021

What happened?

On 17 October, the Financial Times published a report stating, "China tested a nuclear capable hypersonic missile in August that circled the globe before speeding towards its target." The report quoted five unnamed individuals familiar with the test stating, "the Chinese military launched a rocket that carried a hypersonic glide vehicle which flew through low-orbit space before cruising down towards its target."

According to the intelligence brief, three sources confirmed, "the missile missed its target by about two-dozen miles" the other two said, "the test showed that China had made astounding progress on hypersonic weapons and was far more advanced than US officials realized."

On 18 October, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian denied the report claiming it was a "routine test of space vehicle technology of spacecraft's reusability." On 19 October, Global Times reported, the Chinese launch as a missile launch is a "wild guess," and the US is exaggerating it to "accommodate its own domestic political and national strategic needs." "As long as Washington does not incite or create strategic confrontation between major powers, the world will be peaceful," concludes Global Times.

What is the background?

First, recent reports on China's hypersonic portfolio. In recent times, there have been multiple reports on China developing hypersonic missiles and the DF-17 hypersonic weapon programme. Publications from the Jamestown Foundation, The New York Times, and Washington Post referred to the same. These reports hint towards the People's Republic of China (PRC) pursuing to augment its arsenal through various hypersonic delivery systems. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been heavily investing in hypersonic missiles and is now researching hypersonic cruise missiles (HCM) and hypersonic glide vehicles (HGV). From 2018 to 2020, Xinhua, South China Morning Post, and China Daily reported multiple deployments of weapons ranging from

medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM), HGVs, and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) with the capacity of reaching the US mainland.

Second, the investment in hypersonic technology. It started with the US in the 1980s. The hypersonic research waxed and waned over the period with the participation of countries hoping for superpower ambitions. The rush for hypersonic missiles is most visible in the US, Russia, and China possess most advanced hypersonic missile weapons. Australia, India, France, Germany, and Japan are still developing the weapon and plans to test it in the coming years. North Korea claims to have tested the hypersonic missiles in September, joining the small pool of countries with hypersonic missile capabilities. Currently, China aims to develop weapons that can reach distant targets, although their ballistic missiles are as fast as hypersonic systems. The objective is to attain unpredictable maneuverability that can change the course of direction with a speed of five times more than sound resulting in better penetration systems compared to the US Ballistic Missile Defense systems. The hypersonic missiles are the Chinese defensive mechanism from the US' growing aggression in the Indo-Pacific, ensuring stronger nuclear power and keeping the US out of China's internal matters.

Third, the US concerns about China's technological development. The geopolitical tensions between US and China have seemingly accelerated China's nuclear ambitions. The lack of transparency by China unsettles America making it apprehensive of taking any further actions. Washington has constantly been monitoring and tracking PLA's growing power due to the visible patterns. Even though this is not the first time the US has been wary of China's actions, the ongoing cross-Strait situation with Taiwan becomes a friction flashpoint increasing the concern.

What does this mean?

First, China's hypersonic program. The fast development of catastrophic weapons gives Beijing a greater incentive to strike first. This presents potential risks to regional stability and

understanding the Chinese strategic thinking on hypersonic technologies.

Second, the use of hypersonic as a counter system between the US and China. Hypersonic seems to be the latest inventory in which the big powers are trying compete. The hypersonic technology's maneuverability and capacity to cover greater distances shrinking the shooter-to-target timeline, is the crown jewel.

China: Beijing's economic interests in Afghanistan outweighs likely threats from the Taliban

Dincy Adlakha, 22 August 2021

What happened?

On 16 August 2021, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying held a regular press conference and stated: "China has maintained contact and communication with the Afghan Taliban and played a constructive role in promoting the political settlement of the Afghan issue." She demonstrated tacit support for the Taliban by adding: "We hope the Afghan Taliban can form solidarity with all factions and ethnic groups in Afghanistan, and build a broad-based and inclusive political structure suited to the national realities, to lay the foundation for achieving enduring peace in the country." The statement also read: "China respects the Afghan people's right to decide on their own future independently. We are ready to continue to develop good-neighbourliness and friendly cooperation with Afghanistan and play a constructive role in Afghanistan's peace and reconstruction." With this, she confirmed that the Chinese embassy in Afghanistan is operating smoothly with its staff despite many Chinese nationals being brought back to China.

What is the background?

First, China's recent engagements over Afghanistan. Over the years, China has gradually shifted its Afghanistan approach from non-interference to strategic engagement. Stable Afghanistan is crucial for China. Consequently, China has been active in international dialogue, stimulating the dialogue process in Afghanistan. It has maintained an essential position in the extended troika and troika plus in facilitating

intra-Afghan talks. Additionally, China has repeatedly attempted to bring the Taliban to the table with the US, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and itself through the Quadrilateral Cooperation Group. On 15 July, China also put forth a three-part roadmap at Shanghai Cooperation Organization to begin the peace talks in Afghanistan. Regionally, China has held multiple high-level ministerial talks with the Central Asian countries and Pakistan and China, monitoring the Afghanistan situation for a long time.

Second, China's recent engagements with the Taliban. China has not disguised its intentions. On 28 July, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with the Taliban co-founder and deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in a nine-member delegation that visited the Tianjin port. Previously, a similar trip was organized in 2019. In 2015, secret talks with Taliban representatives were held in Urumqi, Xinjiang. These meetings hold great meaning for China.

Third, China's economic interests in Afghanistan, especially the minerals. Earlier, Afghanistan was not a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Yet, it has become a crucial connecting route for China for BRI and also the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). China also has significant interests in Afghanistan's minerals; Mes Aynak is the world's second-largest copper mine. Apart from copper, Afghanistan also has huge amounts of iron ore, gold, and even rare-earth metals, lithium, worth approximately 4.4 billion US dollars. The provinces of Herat, Ghazni, and Nimroz offer substantial economic benefits for China.

Fourth, China's security concerns. China fears a spillover of instability in its territory through Afghanistan. There exist multiple militant groups in the region that lies in geographical proximity with Xinjiang. According to reports, the Taliban has promised not to allow Afghan soil to be used against Chinese interests.

What does it mean?

First, China was apprehensive of the American presence in Afghanistan. However, now the withdrawal, too, causes another apprehension.

The US will not have any liabilities in South Asia and would direct its resources towards China. Second, recognition from China would give legitimacy to the Taliban and open doors for integrated cooperation. There may be some distrust with the Taliban's promises, but Chinese economic interests in Afghanistan speak louder.

South China Sea: New tensions with Navy drills and foreign warships

Sukanya Bali, 8 August 2021

What happened?

On 2 August, German Brandenburg-class frigate Bayern (Bavaria) the warship was deployed to the South China Sea from Wilhelmshaven on a six-month voyage. Germany has sent its warship for the first time in almost two decades; it is expected to cross the South China Sea in mid-December. German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer said: "We want existing law to be respected, sea routes to be freely navigable, open societies to be protected and trade to follow fair rules."

On 6 August, China started a five-day-long naval drill in the South China Sea. On the same day, the Indian navy also deployed a naval task group of four warships for two months. China's foreign ministry spokesperson said: "China hopes that the warships of relevant countries will earnestly abide by international law, respect the sovereignty, rights, and interests of countries along the South China Sea and avoid harming regional peace and stability."

What is the background?

First, the geographical importance of the South China Sea. With a geographical extent of 3.6 million square kilometres, the region is also one of the busiest waterways for trade and merchant shipping. 20 to 30 per cent of global trade is carried through the South China Sea. The region is rich in fossil fuels and fisheries. According to the World Bank, the region has over seven billion barrels and an estimated 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. Twelve per cent of the global fish catch is from the region.

Second, issues and claims in the South China Sea. It has overlapping territorial claims between China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and Taiwan. Beijing has constructed numerous reefs into man-made artificial islands, and resettled fishing communities; it has also fortified islands with surface-to-air missile systems, equipped islands with runways and weapon systems. In 2016, the international tribunal in Hague ruled against China's claim, but China refused to accept the verdict. The US often deploys its navy warships in the region for freedom of navigation exercises aimed at challenging China's claims. These claims and actions have raised tensions in the region.

Third, recent developments in the region. Countries such as Germany, France, the UK, Australia, the US, and India dispatched their navies in the region. In July 2021, the British aircraft carrier strike group and an American surface action group passed through the South China Sea. These joint drills aim to ensure freedom of navigation operation (FONOPs) in the region to counter China expansionist claims.

Fourth, China's response to the navy builds up in the South China Sea. China has been cautious but also assertive in its response. Beijing has emphasized adherence to international law while passing through the South China Sea. Beijing claims to the sea both on the law of sea convention, and the nine-dash line extends for 20,000 kilometres from mainland China. In March, the Chinese Foreign Minister highlighted the South China Sea as a subject of international law, which other governments shouldn't "undermine the sovereignty and security of the littoral countries." State media accused Britain of "relive the glory days of the British empire" by allying with the US. China has, however, said, the movement of British warships through the South China sea is at the behest of the US.

What does it mean?

The South China Sea region has turned into the hotbed of contestation between countries. The presence of foreign naval forces in the region might aggravate tensions between Beijing and the West. As countries have started becoming proactive in the region this might embolden

Southeast Asian countries to take a stance against China in the coming years.

COVID-19: China rejects the WHO investigation proposal

Sukanya Bali, 25 July 2021

What happened?

On 22 July, Chinese officials rejected the WHO's proposal for second phase research of Covid-19 origin. Zeng Yixin, Deputy head of China's National Health Commission said: "I feel disrespect for common sense and the arrogant attitude toward science revealed in this plan...we cannot accept this kind of plan for origin-tracing."

Liang Wannian, head of Chinese experts WHO-China team said: "to protect the privacy of the patient, we did not agree to provide original data, nor did we allow them to copy it." He also said, "international experts also fully understood this."

On 21 July, Zhao Lijian, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson called for an investigation at Fort Detrick, a US military-run laboratory for a biological defense program tracing the origin of Covid-19.

On 16 July, WHO director-general Dr Tedros Adhanom announced a five-part plan for research over the origin story which will look into the integrated studies as "One Health approach," prioritizing the geographic areas of circulation, study on Wuhan market, and animal track-back activities with epidemiologists and last, audit of laboratories and institution in Wuhan. He also called for "China to support this next phase of the scientific process by sharing all relevant data in a spirit of transparency."

What is the background?

First, the politics behind the COVID origin probe, and the global demand. Soon after the outbreak of Covid-19, Australia called for an investigation into the origin. The then US President Donald Trump blamed China for the pandemic and referred to Covid as the "China virus" or the "Wuhan virus." The Trump administration also criticized WHO for being pro-China and pushed for withdrawing from the

health agency. In retaliation, Beijing imposed trade barriers on Australian and US goods. In May 2021, after a media report emerged on an accidental lab leak in China, Joe Biden ordered intelligence agencies to "redouble efforts to collect and analyze information that could bring a definitive conclusion and report in 90 days." Leaders from G7 countries in a summit called for a new study into the origins of Covid-19, including in China, as the joint report by WHO-China lacked a credible conclusion.

Second, China's response. Beijing has been consistently reluctant in permitting investigation on its soil. For months China delayed the international investigating team's visit. When the team was finally allowed, the investigation was strictly supervised by the scientists. China being dismissive about the lab leak theory and pushed for investigation beyond its borders or elsewhere. It alleged that the virus was manufactured in the US military laboratory or reached Wuhan via frozen food. The health authorities remained persistent over the possibility that the virus may have "jumped naturally from animal to human via an intermediate animal host." WIV, Yuan Zhiming also denied a report of the "three employees from the institute being sick" with Covid-19 symptoms before authorities disclosed the outbreak.

Third, the WHO's response. During the early months of the pandemic WHO struck a diplomatic tone with China and appreciated Beijing's efforts in curbing the spread. It refrained from blaming China for the origin of the virus. The US accused WHO of being "China-centric." But after the death of over 4 million, and no conclusion over the origin of the virus, WHO slightly toughened its stance. The joint investigation report was highly criticized by WHO for not being transparent. WHO Director-General also said, "I do not believe that this assessment was extensive enough" and demanded a "more robust conclusion" report. WHO has now laid down a proposal for the investigation in China and called for the "evaluation of the lab leak theory."

What does it mean?

Lack of transparency, inadequate access to raw

data, and the politicized nature of the investigations may delay insights into the Covid-19 origin. Beijing's refusal to give access may raise more speculation about China's role in the pandemic.

China: Didi, a ride-hailing company in regulatory crosshairs

Sukanya Bali, 11 July 2021

What happened?

On 9 July, Beijing authorities ordered the removal of 25 more apps operated by Didi Global Inc, which provides ride-hailing and related online services.

On 7 July, China's antitrust authority-imposed fines on Didi and another tech for failing to report their merger deals in advance. The regulator also stopped Didi from adding new users.

On 6 July, China announced new rules on data security and cross-border data flows for Chinese companies, which seek to trade their shares abroad. On the same day, Didi's share value fell 4.6 per cent for the fifth day, which is 15 per cent below its debut price on the New York Stock Exchange, a week ago.

What is the background?

First, the rise of Didi Global. It is the biggest Chinese ride-hailing company with 20 million rides a day. It is an e-platform, which gathers real-time data of users every day, and is used to analyze traffic patterns. The app collects users' current location and trip route data for safety and data analysis. It also uses the car's camera to monitor road conditions for around 100 billion kilometres per year. The app operates in 16 other countries and has more than 377 million active users in China as of March 2021.

Second, the Government scrutiny over tech operations. Beijing has been revamping its policies towards privacy and data security. In April, the government issued a second version of a draft on Personal Information Protection Law, which imposes stricter measures to ensure safe storage. Last year, in September 2020, the government implemented the Data Security

Law, for which companies were required to process their "critical data", to conduct risk assessments and submit reports to authorities. In May, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) accused 105 apps of collecting excessive amounts of users' personal information and illegally accessing it. Beijing seems to be wanting to keep its data-rich firms under control for security reasons.

Third, differences between the government and China's tech conglomerates. For years, China provided a conducive environment for the growth of tech companies. Alibaba, Tencent, JD.com, with state support, grew in size and emerged as dominant players in the marketplace. However, over the past few months, the scrutiny over these companies has increased. In the past few months, Beijing has fined Alibaba USD 2.8 billion for antimonopoly violation, Alibaba backed Nice Tuan USD 200,000 for unfair competition practices. In November 2020, Ant Group, came under the watchdog scanner a few days before its massive IPO. The move thwarted the company's listing in Shanghai and Hong Kong. Similarly, the CAC announced an investigation into Didi soon after its IPO on 30 June in order to protect "national security and the public interest" citing the Beijing Cybersecurity Law of 2017. CAC said: "After checks and verification, the Didi Chuxing app was found to be in serious violation of regulations in its collection and use of personal information."

What does it mean?

Beijing's action against the homegrown tech companies shows that politics and tech in China are intertwined. It also shows that the government discourages Chinese tech companies from listing in the US.

Second, this shows Beijing's interest in keeping essential data within its borders and help domestic players to grow in an environment without unfair practices. Also, it indicates the government's interest in tech giants to show their loyalty towards the CCP.

Backgrounder: Communist Party of China

Harini Madhusudan, 4 July 2021

Quick Factsheet

Founding Date: 1 July 1921

Headquarters: Zhongnanhai, Xicheng District, Beijing

First National Congress: 23 July 1921

Abbreviations: Official, CPC (Communist Party of China); Common, CCP (Communist China Party)

Founders: Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao... (and others)

General Secretary: Xi Jinping

Membership: 95,148,000

National Affiliation: United Front

International Affiliation: International Meeting of Communist and Workers' Parties.

Slogan: "Serve the People."

Labour Wing: All-China Federation of Trade Unions

Armed Wing: People's Liberation Army, People's Armed Police

Official Website: <http://cpc.people.com.cn>

Introduction

On 1 July 2021, President Xi Jinping delivered a speech at Tiananmen Square, marking the centenary of the ruling Communist Party. The celebrations saw cannon salutes, patriotic songs played, and the fly-pasts of military jets. With an audience of 70,000 people, President Xi delivered his speech that was carefully scripted to send a stern message to his citizens as well as the global audience watching China, but did not explicitly cite any country/region. The centenary celebrations come at a time when China is at loggerheads with the US and the West, criticisms of Human Rights abuses, its security and legal crackdown in Hong Kong, and the increasing tensions with Taiwan. Incidentally, Hong Kong marks its handover anniversary on the same day.

China Communist Party's Centenary celebrations were about projecting the strength and communicating the narrative of the successes of the party in the country's history. According to the state media, there were 95.148 million members of the party, of which 13 per

cent were aged 30 or younger. Dr Yu Jie, in an article with Chatham House, describes the irony of the location of the house in Shanghai where the party was born, which is now said to be surrounded by designer boutiques, and chic wine bars in the town. President Xi, on taking office in 2012, outlined two centennial goals to define the future of the party. The first was to double China's 2010 per capita GDP to dollar 10,000 by the centenary celebration of the party's formation in 2021. The second is to have China grow as a "fully developed, rich, and powerful" nation. (Evelyn Chen, "Xi at Communist Party anniversary: China won't accept 'sanctimonious preaching' from others," 1 July 2021, CNBC) (Dr Yu Jie, "China's Communist Century: An ongoing balancing act," 4 June 2021, Chatham House) (Communist Party Centenary: key points from Xi Jinping's Tiananmen address, SCMP, 1 July 2021)

Major Milestones

1921: Establishment of the Communist Party of China (CPC)

With the objective demand to develop a modern Chinese society and take forward the revolution, the Communist Party of China (CPC) was founded with a combination of the Marxist theory and the workers' movement in China. By adopting a revolutionary program against Imperialism and Feudalism, it took up the method of relying on broad masses and pointed out the target struggle for the Chinese people. By August 1921, the CPC had set up the Secretariat of the Chinese Labour Organisation in Shanghai, through which the Party led its worker movements. (Eleanor Albert, Lindsay Maizland, Beina Xu, "Backgrounder: the Chinese Communist Party," CFR)

1925: The Great Revolution

Owing to the leadership of the CPC and the Kuomintang-Communist (KMT), in 1925, the 30 May movement, also known as the great revolution, marked the beginning of a nationwide revolution and laid the foundation for the war against the northern warlords. Though the movement rapidly grew and shook the imperialist and feudal forces, a big bourgeoisie group of people betrayed the movement at a crucial point of the struggle,

leading to its failure. Following the failure in 1927, the new KMT warlords began their rule in China.

The CPC then held the banner of revolution independently and adopting agrarian revolution with armed struggle. During this time, the communists moved their focus of the Party's work from the city to the countryside, represented by Mao Zedong, establishing base areas and mobilizing masses of peasants. People in these base areas overthrew landlords and established revolutionary armed forces and established workers' and peasants' governments, making these base areas scenes of vigorous revolutionary activity.

1931: Armed Resistance against Japanese invasion

The CPC held armed resistance against Japan in 1931 when the latter attempted to turn China into its colony. The party called upon the whole country to fight the Japanese, and as the revolution was gaining momentum, Wang Ming pursued 'left' dogmatism, bringing another serious loss to the party, forcing the red army to undertake the Long March. By 1934, the KMT under Chiang Kai-shek had taken control over large parts of China but was still clashing with the guerrilla forces of the CPC, after which the outmatched Party forces were forced to retreat from the southern base to northern China. Along the way, the old leadership of the CPC was ousted.

The Long March is pivotal in the history of the CPC because it created the grounds for Mao to grow into the undisputed leader of the Party. Mao guided the remaining troops across vast regions while they were constantly under attack by the Nationalist Army. During the march, they convened a meeting in Zunyi at which major corrections to the party's 'left' ideology was made and established the Marxist position represented by Mao as the leading vision. By the end of the Long March, 7,000 people reached safely in the city of Yan 'an, out of 100,000 soldiers and non-combatants. The party rebuilt itself from Yan' an. Meantime, the Party adopted the policy of establishing a united national front against Japan, which played an important role in paving the way for the nationwide War of

Resistance Against Japan, with the cooperation of the KMT. An eight-year War of Resistance Against Japan followed with the CPC at the fore of the struggle for national liberation. Shortly before the victory of this war, the party convened its Seventh National Congress with a vision to defeat aggressors and build a new China.

1937: Sino-Japanese War

In 1937, the forces of Mao and Chiang had put their clashes on hold to fight the Sino-Japanese War, but the invasion weakened the KMT's plans against the Communists, and with Tokyo's defeat in 1945, new challenges emerged. Mao's Communist forces drew advantage from the corruption and military incompetence of the Nationalist Government and steadily overcame the opposition to gain popular support with their promise of the land to the large peasant class in China. A civil war followed where Chiang and his remaining forces fled to Taiwan, with the CPC claiming the island of Taiwan as their territory.

1949: The creation of the People's Republic of China

On 1 October 1949, Mao is said to have stood on top of Tiananmen, "the Gate of Heavenly Peace" in Beijing and announced the creation of the People's Republic of China.

This collided with the post-World War II boom, which many countries faced during the years. Similarly, Mao prioritized economic growth with a plan to jump-start China from an agrarian economy into an industrial powerhouse. The execution of this plan involved making farmers leave their fields and engage in making steel while also forcing others into unproductive land communes which were aligned with the Communist ideology. This plan proved to be disastrous and caused the food production to plunge, following which a great famine swept the country leading to the deaths of an estimated 30 million people. The official history blames the failure of the "Great Leap Forward" on natural calamities. However, the failure weakened Mao's grip on power.

To reclaim control, Mao launched a campaign to ensure total loyalty within the party. He claimed that there were groups who opposed the

communist ideology that had infiltrated the party and needed to be cleansed. Mao called for a removal of the "counterrevolutionaries" and "rightists." This call quickly spiralled out of control, and mobs of students called the red guards began to attack anyone they believed to be harbouring bourgeois ideals or imperialist habits. The situation saw students across the country turn against their teachers while accusing them of being capitalists or traitors. Popularly called the Cultural Revolution, saw the mobs attack anyone who fell foul of them and were forced to publicly confess while the others were locked in makeshift camps, the situation escalated to a point where the different groups of Red Guards began to fight each other using weapons. The Cultural Revolution ended with the death of Mao in 1976, a catastrophe that led to the death of a lot of people. In 1981, the CPC passed a resolution saying the revolution was a severe setback since the founding of the nation.

1979: Policy of Reform and Opening Up

The policy of Reform and Opening-up in 1979 set the course for China's economic growth. It stands as one of the milestones that carved China's path to the second-largest economy. Hua Guofeng, Mao's second-in-command, took power as the Chairman and was then outranked by Deng Xiaoping. Deng initiated the Reform and Opening-up policy, as an experimental approach that maintains the one-party political system but loosens the government controls on the personal freedoms and certain aspects of the economy, moving China from a strictly planned economy closer to capitalism.

1989: Tiananmen Square

Economic freedom worsened the corruption within the party and small groups within the country began to demand greater freedoms. The liberalization made China richer, but had the CPC controlling elements of public life restricting international travel or free speech. In 1989, nationwide pro-democracy protests emerged following the death of a popular liberal Chinese Politician. The largest protests were held at Tiananmen Square and during the protests, the party is said to have had an internal debate on the response to protesters. The

meeting ended on 20 May 1989, when the leadership declared martial law and two weeks later, on 4 June, the military is said to have turned its guns on the citizens. The crackdown is a massive blip in the trajectory of the CCP, which led to global condemnation, and sanctions.

The incident from 1989 successfully silenced all calls for civil liberties and democracy, while retaining the pace of rapid economic growth. Its economic potential was restrained by the fact that it was not a member of the WTO. In the 1990s, despite its new policies, China was not seen as a market economy. In December 2001, China officially joined WTO with an agreement to further liberalize its economy. The GDP rate in 2000 was 8 per cent, and the rate almost doubled to 15 per cent by 2007, showing signs of economic boom.

2012: Xi Jinping becomes the General Secretary of the CPC

In 2012, Xi Jinping became the general secretary of the CPC, his rise to power was seen with much optimism by the world. Xi is known to hold more titles than anyone since Mao and has become one of China's most powerful leaders, taking the party leadership back to being personality-driven. With Xi, the CPC has gained more economic power and geopolitical clout; however, the party still controls major aspects of the citizens' lives, in private businesses, politics, the military, and the new-age technology. Xi Jinping is driven by his new centennial goals for 2021 and 2049, and the priority would be to ensure the strength of the party could sustain for several decades. ("Milestones in the History of US-China Relations," US Office of the Historian) (Ben Westcott, "100 years of the Chinese Communist Party," 1 July 2021, CNN) (Chun Han Wong, Keith Zhai, "China repackages its history in support of Xi's National Vision," The Wall Street Journal, 15 June 2021) (Brief History of the Communist Party of China, China Daily)

The party and its Leaders

The leader of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party is seen as the highest-ranking official and the head of the CPC. Initially, the position was titled Secretary of the

Central Bureau. Further, the position of the Chairman of the party was established at the eighth National Congress in 1945 and abolished by the twelfth National Congress in 1982 and was replaced by the role of General Secretary. In the 1980s, the CPC leadership desired to prevent a single leader from rising above the party like Mao had, hence the post of the Chairman was abolished, and the functions of this role were transferred to the revived post of General Secretary. In August 2020, it was reported that the CPC was setting the stage for Xi Jinping to become party chairman and hold power beyond his second term. Starting with Chen Duxiu, there have been eleven leaders to lead the CPC. Chen Duxiu was followed by Xiang Zhongfa, Bo Gu, Zhang Wentian, as the Secretary of the Central Bureau. The Chairmen between 1945 and 1982, were, Mao Zedong, Hua Guofeng, and Hu Yaobang. Following this, Zhao Ziyang, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping have served as General Secretary.

Chen Duxiu was known as a revolutionary socialist, author, philosopher, and educator. He is one of the co-founders of the CPC and served as the party's first Secretary between 1921 and 1927. He was the leading force that overthrew the Qing dynasty in the Xinhai Revolution, and the May Fourth Movement. He is said to have had an ideological clash with Mao in 1925 regarding the focus of the revolution. While Chen believed that the struggle should focus on the workers, Mao advocated for the primacy of the peasants. When the collaboration with the KMT fell apart, the Party blamed Chen, removed him from all positions, and expelled him from the party.

Xiang Zhongfa was elected as a member of the Central Committee when the CPC headquarters moved to Wuhan, for his contributions in mobilizing workers for strikes. His popularity grew within the party and became known for his outspoken nature and his oratory skills. He was part of a delegation that was sent to the Soviet Union for the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution, where he gave talks on Soviet radio. His experience in understanding the workers' movements in China and played a prominent role in handling the

party affairs in Eastern China. In the Sixth National Congress of the CPC, he was appointed the Chairman. At the Congress, he is said to have attacked the leftism of Qu Qiubai and the rightism of Zhang Guotao and claimed himself to be the only orthodox representative of the Chinese Revolution. Xiang moved to have an extravagant life and eventually became known to be the only General Secretary to defect from the CPC and be executed by the KMT.

Bo Gu was a senior leader in the CPC and a member of the 28 Bolsheviks. He joined the party after having been a part of the May 30th Movement. Bo Gu was promoted to the General Secretary of the party when one of the members had to leave for a medical emergency. Bo Gu was part of the military command team that launched a strategic diversion when the Red Army was suffering from Chiang's suppression against them during the Long March. After his role as the military team was replaced with a new one, his role as the Secretary was replaced and he remained a member of the Politburo. He is said to have supported a newspaper in an attempt to make it the mouthpiece of the party, and could not win favors with Mao and suffered great humiliation and criticism for leniency towards the paper.

Zhang Wentian was a high-ranking leader of the party and was also a member of the 28 Bolsheviks. He was a participant of the Long March and the First Vice Minister of the Foreign Affairs of the PRC. He also served as an ambassador to the Soviet Union. During the Cultural Revolution, he was attacked and was rehabilitated by Deng Xiaoping after Mao's death. Zhang too was against the idea of organizing all peasants into mutual aid teams. He is also known to have extensively studied international affairs and written academic articles as a researcher on socialist economic development theories.

Mao Zedong was the founding member of the People's Republic of China and he ruled the Party from the establishment of the state until his death. He drove the ideology behind the party both politically and militarily, and his Marxist-Leninist theories came to be known as

Maoism. He has played a major role in the milestone events of Chinese history and is a controversial yet popular figure of world history. His rule is seen as an autocratic and totalitarian regime and he was directly responsible for mass repression, destruction of religious and cultural sites and artifacts. He is credited with transforming China from a semi-colony to a sovereign state while increasing life expectancy and literacy.

Hua Guofeng was the designated successor of Mao and held the top offices and the military after the deaths of Mao and Zhou Enlai. He was however gradually forced out of power by a coalition of party leaders and subsequently retreated from the political limelight. He is known for reversing some of the Cultural Revolution-era policies, like the constant ideological campaigns but was devoted to a centrally planned economy and the continuation of the Maoist line. After his removal, he continued to promote the correctness of Maoist principles.

Hu Yaobang was a high-ranking official of the CPC, he was purged during the Cultural Revolution, recalled, and purged again by Mao. Hu was promoted to a series of high political powers with the rise of Deng. He pursued a series of economic and political reforms in the 1980s under the direction of Deng Xiaoping. His reforms made him the enemy of powerful party elders who was opposing the free-market reforms or the making of the Chinese government more transparent. When the student protests emerged in 1987, these leaders used the opportunity to blame Hu for his bourgeois liberalization and laxness. He was forced to resign as the General Secretary the same year and was allowed to retain a seat in the Politburo.

Zhao Ziyang was the third premier of the PRC and was in charge of the political reforms in China. He lost his power in connection with the reformative neo authoritarianism and his support of the Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989. He was critical of Maoist policies and has played an important role in implementing free-market reforms. He received support from Deng

Xiaoping after the Cultural Revolution and is an advocate of the privatization of state-owned enterprises and the separation of the party and the state. He also sought measures to streamline bureaucracy and fight corruption in his later years in the party. His support for the 1989 movement led to his political purge and was placed under house arrest for the rest of his life.

Jiang Zemin is a retired politician who served as General Secretary to the party and eventually went on to fill many roles. He came to power as an unexpected compromise candidate after the Tiananmen incident. This was around the time the involvement of the “Eight Elders” in politics had steadily declined, Jiang became the ‘paramount leader’ by consolidating his hold on the position. Under his leadership, China experienced substantial economic growth and market reforms. It saw the return of Hong Kong from the UK and Macau from Portugal and also saw China improve relations with the outside world. He is however noted for his contributions to the party doctrine known as “three represents,” and faced criticism over human rights abuses within the country.

Hu Jintao was the ‘paramount leader’ between 2004 and 2012, after having participated in the party for the most part of his career. During his term, he reintroduced state control in the sectors of the economy that were relaxed previously and was known to be conservative with political reforms. Hu has presided over a decade of China’s consistent economic growth, with an aim to improve socio-economic equality domestically. However, his leadership is also known for its crackdown on social disturbances, ethnic minority protests, and dissent figures, which led to the unrest in Tibet, the passing of the Anti-Secession law. Internationally, he advocated for a corporate approach to diplomacy, pursuing soft power in international relations and the ‘peaceful development of China.’ He won praise for his consensus-based leadership and also for voluntary retirement.

Xi Jinping currently heads the four most important political and state offices, as the general secretary of the Communist Party, general secretary of the Central Committee,

Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and President of the PRC. Xi is the son of a former CPC member who had been purged during the Cultural Revolution. He rose into the ranks within the party after having studied chemical engineering. He is known for his campaign against anti-corruption that led to the downfall of many prominent party officials. Xi has enacted or promoted a more assertive foreign policy and has sought to expand the economic and industrial influence through the grand BRI. Xi’s term has seen an increase in mass surveillance, increase in censorship, and return of personality politics. Many academic observers see his leadership as authoritarian, specifically after the removal of term limits for leadership under his tenure. He is the fifth generation of leadership in the PRC and has significantly centralized institutional power by holding control over security, economy military, as well as the internet.

China: CPC celebrates 100th founding anniversary

Mallika Devi, 4 July 2021

What happened?

On 1 July, the Communist Party of China (CPC) celebrated its hundredth founding anniversary. President Xi Jinping delivered a speech at Beijing's Tiananmen Square and highlighted China's first centenary goal of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects was achieved. China is now marching towards its second centenary goal of building the country into a modern socialist state in all respects. Under the CPC leadership, the second centenary goal will be achieved, and the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation will be realized.

In order to continue on the path of development, Xi announced that the leadership of the party must be respected and enhanced. The party must be trusted uninhibitedly, and the people must be aligned with the party's leadership. He opined that, under the leadership of the Party, the Chinese nation had stood up from the humiliation and became prosperous and is now on the path of becoming stronger.

President Xi also announced that China is seeking a new type of international relations wherein China wants to share its developmental achievements with other countries through the Belt and Road Initiative. As a strong nation, the Chinese citizens must have a great sense of pride and confidence in their identity. He issued a warning against foreign states and cautioned them against bullying, oppressing, or subjugating China.

What is the background?

First, the founding of the CPC. On 23 July 1921, 13 delegates, including Mao Tse Tung were scheduled to meet in a small room in Shanghai where the first session of the CPC National Congress was to be held. Fearing a police raid, the venue was later moved to a boat on Lake Nanhu in Jiaxing County, Zhejiang Province. It was in this meeting that CPC was formulated. In 1941, Chairman Mao was in Yan'an when the CPC marked twenty years of the party. Chairman Mao could only remember that it took place in July, and thus 1 July has since been celebrated as the foundation date of the party.

Second, the evolution of the CPC. According to the speech delivered by Xi Jinping, socialism with Chinese characteristics is the path to achieving national rejuvenation. The 180-year-old modern history of China, 100-year history of the CPC and 70 years of modern China indicates that the party is the lifeline of the Chinese nation. Xi reiterated that it was solely through the efforts of the CPC that the Chinese nation was able to achieve its independence and liberation for its people by overcoming imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat-capitalism. China's achievements in the past 100 years are attributed to the Chinese communists and is the basis for the CPC's reforms that helped transform China into the world's second-largest economy.

Third, the CPC's future plans. President Xi Jinping further declared in the speech that China would not bow down to others who believed that they have the right to patronize the communist state. While referring to the military, Xi expressed that a strong country needs a strong military that will preserve its national dignity and maintain peace in the region. The aim is to

create an army that will attain world-class standards and enhance its capacity. These acquired qualities would act as a guarantee in safeguarding Chinese sovereignty, security and back development in the country.

Fourth, celebrations amidst hostility. The majestic celebrations took place amid growing global hostility towards China over the origin of the Covid-19 pandemic, China's assertive behaviour at the border with India in the Himalayas, allegations of human rights violations in Xinjiang, and the closing of Hong Kong's leading pro-democracy newspaper-Apple Daily.

What does it mean?

The Communist Party of China remains strong as ever and is here to stay. The CPC will continue its authoritarianism with no near possibility of adopting a liberal stance. Authoritarian capitalism would remain the chosen path for the Chinese economy.

Preserving its virtues and values, China will continue to disregard its criticism from the international community. These actions are justified in China's eyes and are deemed to be a necessary phase in becoming a stronger and greater economic power in the global arena.

China: Stern response to G7 and NATO summits

Dincy Adlakha, 20 June 2021

What happened?

On 15 June, in a statement on the NATO summit, a spokesperson from the Chinese Mission to the EU said: "By claiming that China presents so called "systemic challenges", NATO is slandering China's peaceful development and misjudging the international situation and its own role. It represents a continuation of the Cold War mentality and bloc politics." The statement also read: "China urges NATO to view China's development in a rational manner, stop hyping up in any form the so-called "China threat", and stop taking China's legitimate interests and rights as an excuse to manipulate bloc politics,

create confrontation and fuel geopolitical cooperation".

On 14 June, a spokesperson from the Chinese embassy in the UK responded to the G7 summit by saying: "This wanton smearing of China and blatant interference in its internal affairs flagrantly violates the basic norms of international relations and further exposes the ulterior motive of a handful of countries, including the United States. We are gravely concerned and firmly opposed to this." The spokesperson continued: "We urge the United States and other G7 members to respect facts, see the actual situation in perspective, stop slandering China, cease interfering in our internal affairs, stop infringing upon our interests and do more to promote international cooperation instead of creating confrontation and friction."

What is the background?

First, China's rise. China has grown from an Asian giant to a global superpower. It has a massive economy of USD 14 trillion and is expected to overtake the US to become the largest economy of the world. China's GDP expanded by 2.3 per cent last year, making it speedily recover from the COVID-19 slump. China is also posing a technological challenge to the West by repeatedly harnessing its technological prowess through 5G communications, artificial intelligence, hypersonic weapons, and quantum computing. China's military expenditure is almost 70 per cent of the US' defence budget and it has showcased its military might in the South China sea. The country has used all these strengths to influence the ideological leadership debate as well. Chinese national authoritarianism is competing with the western liberal democracy.

Second, China's rise seen as a challenge by the US and Europe. The US has led the march against Chinese influence in both organizations. It is one of the issues on which President Joe Biden and ex-President Donald Trump have shown agreeability. Trump had even suggested the expansion of the G7 group to counter Chinese dominance. Biden has led the G7 closer in the pursuit against China in his maiden summit. NATO is used to deliberations on

Russia but is facing trouble due to the new opponent, China.

Third, China's response to G7 and NATO. China has maintained an aggressive opposition to the two groups. It has consistently criticized G7 and opposed NATO due to the Cold War mentality and alliance politics. China has actively focused on the rest of the world as a playground for its economic and political strategies, giving less importance to the global panels. Following a realpolitik approach, China has stayed true to its belief that small groups do not rule the world.

What does it mean?

First, although China does not pose a direct military threat to the NATO signatories, it has remained a major military force in East Asia. Hence, it becomes difficult to position the alliance against China. However, now that China is extensively discussed in NATO, it will have to reassess its own military standing in the western hemisphere.

Second, China has greatly invested in European countries, and G7 does not possess enough resources to replace Chinese investments. Therefore, any country has to be careful of the long-term implications of terming China as a "threat".

China: New legislation arms the government against sanctions

Dincy Adlakha, 13 June 2021

What happened?

On 10 June, the Standing Committee of the 13th National People's Congress passed strong self-defence legislation. President Xi Jinping signed a presidential order, promulgating the Anti-Foreign Sanctions law and brought it into immediate effect. Li Zhanshu, the chairman of the committee, said: "No one should expect China to accept any action that damages its own interests. The Chinese government and people resolutely oppose any sanctions and interference."

What is the background?

First, the rationale behind the new legislation. Earlier, China did not have a legal provision for

imposing sanctions or a unilateral sanctions program; rather, it adopted the United Nations sanctions-related resolutions. But, since the early 2010s, China's use of unilateral sanctions has increased. The growing economy and influence have also increased the ambitions of China. Over the past few years, the Chinese government has hinted at developing legal frameworks to provide long-arm jurisdictions. In May 2019, the "Unreliable Entry List" was announced by the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) which bore similar effects as that of sanctions. In January 2021, MOFCOM also issued Order No. 1 on the Chinese Blocking Statute. This allowed the Chinese government to term foreign sanctions as 'unjustified extraterritorial applications' and prohibited persons and entities to comply with these foreign sanctions. Chinese legal experts claimed that a legal provision for imposing sanctions is just as necessary. The significance of retaliation loomed large with the US-China trade war. Discussion over being offensive against those who threaten national security was the loudest in the past few years.

Second, the main features of the new legislation. It authorizes relevant departments of the State Council to impose sanctions on individuals or organizations that violate Chinese interests, attempt to suppress or restrict Chinese citizens or organizations or interfere in China's internal matters. The Chinese authorities can deny entry and visa issuance, freeze assets, and even deport the person out of the country in response.

Third, the intense sanctions by the West. The US has imposed multiple sanctions on China, beginning with the ban on Chinese technology giant Huawei and ZTE equipment, on cotton from Xinjiang, and investment in Chinese companies. Sanctions have been imposed due to the crackdown in Hong Kong, and the UK has even passed a resolution to term China's actions in Xinjiang as 'genocide'. China has retaliated with hefty sanctions on individuals, firms, and organizations from European countries. With this new hastily passed legislation, China will be able to have a stronger hold on foreign actions.

Fourth, the new legislation and China's opponents. China has, on multiple occasions,

countered those who oppose it. It has not allowed dissenters and opponents to reap benefits from Chinese sources. Big domestic firms such as Alibaba have faced the wrath of going against China, and external companies, as valuable as Apple Inc., are also following Chinese demands to survive. It has maintained a severe crackdown on the public dissent in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and other controversial parts of its territory. Many scholars and experts in China firmly believe that previously, China did not have the economic power or political will to use legal methods to retaliate against the US but now, it has both.

What does it mean?

The legislation will have significant consequences for all foreign entities connected with China. It gives clear signals that China is not afraid of a trade war. The law demands respect of and adherence to the Chinese standards. It is yet to be seen how the foreign firms and investors will respond to such hard scrutiny of their actions. But, for all practical purposes, China has placed itself at the center of geopolitical affairs.

China: Following the census, a new three-child policy

Dincy Adlakha, 6 June 2021

What happened?

On 1 June, President Xi Jinping chaired a meeting with the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee. The meeting resulted in a major policy shift, marking an end to the two-child policy and raising the limit to three children per couple.

On 2 June, Xinhua, the official state-run media agency, conducted an online survey asking "#AreYouReady?" to which more than 90 per cent of the respondents replied they were "not ready to consider" having three children.

What is the background?

First, the latest census report. On 11 May, The National Bureau of Statistics in China released the Seventh National Population Census. It confirmed with numbers what many experts had

been warning for years. In 2020, China recorded the least population growth in more than six decades; and the lowest number of births since 1961. The fertility rate dropped to 1.3 children per woman, which is lower than the required 2.1 replacement rate. Low retirement ages have reduced the working population of China, and with the increased percentage of the elderly population, China is now a greying society. The census brought out the complications of an ageing population and a shrinking labour force.

Second, the impact of the earlier one-child policy. The one-child policy of 1979 has left deep marks on the Chinese demography. Stringent laws, sterilization, and abortions have led to highly coerced family planning. The one-child policy created a generation of overburdened individuals who have to support elderly parents, spend on education and child care for their offspring(s), and pay instalments of their costly housing mortgage debts. The two-child policy of 2016 did not improve the declining birth rate. In the few families with two children, parents are forced to leave one of their children in villages with their old grandparents due to the high cost of living in cities and harsh working hours. It is now a norm to have only one child.

Third, the socio-economic factors. When China witnessed its highest growth rate, it was an agrarian economy with low life expectancy and high infant mortality rate. The highest population growth was recorded between 1949 and 1957 when China was recovering from World War II and excessive poverty. More children in a family meant more hands to work in the field/factories. Over time, the medical facilities have improved which helps people to live longer and children to stay healthier. The average age when women get married has shifted from less than 20 during the 1950s to around 29 in 2020. An older average age of getting married means fewer children. A typical citizen is now more aware of their capabilities to raise. Parents now choose to provide a good life to one child rather than an average one to two children.

Fourth, the response to the policy. The three-child policy is facing severe apprehension from

young couples who do not wish to expand their family; they demand supporting mechanisms to lighten their burdens and uplift their living standards. Families that earlier paid fines for having two/three children are now agitated over the timing of this new policy. Amnesty International calls it a violation of sexual and reproductive rights, saying: "Governments have no business regulating how many children people have". Many experts have shown their distrust in the policy, calling it 'hollow'.

What does it mean?

This decision is two decades too late. The desired growth rate of the population seems a distant reality. But the policy may lead to a rural-urban divide in terms of birth rate, employment pressures, and poverty. The failure of the two-child policy makes the success of this new policy suspicious. However, the immediate question is, how far will the state go to make the policy appealing to young couples?

China: What does the Census 2020 say?

Mallika Devi, 16 May 2021

What happened?

On 11 May, the Seventh National Population Census of the People's Republic of China (Chinese: 第七次全国人口普查 pinyin: Di Qi Ci Quanguo Renkou Pucha), better known as 2020 Chinese census was released. The census work began on 1 November 2020 and continued till 10 December 2020. The census covers all Chinese citizens living in mainland China, as well as those living abroad on temporary visas. Foreigners living in China for more than six months are also included. This release was originally planned for April but was delayed by a month.

The census data shows the population of mainland China as 1.41 billion. The data shows a fertility rate of 1.3 children per women for 2020 alone, which is at par with ageing societies like Japan. The data shows that the population in mainland China in the 2010-20 decade grew by 5.38 per cent to 1.41 billion. This increase in the population is the least since modern census-taking began in 1953.

In the earlier decade 2000-10 the rate of population growth was 5.70 per cent. China's working-age population (16-59) in the current census declined by 40 million when compared with the last census of 2010. In 2019 China had recorded 14.65 million births; in 2020, it recorded 12 million births, a decrease by 18 per cent, making 2020 births the lowest since 1961. In 2016 China had recorded 18 million births.

The elderly population, those above 65 years, comprises 13.5 per cent of the population, whereas in the last census in 2010, this segment of the population was 8.9 per cent. Census data also reveals an increase in the population movement to urban centres, with a decrease in the average household size to 2.62 persons. The UN had predicted the number of people living in the mainland would peak in 2030 before declining.

What is the background?

First, data collection accuracy. The census was conducted, for the first time, amidst a pandemic. The effect of the pandemic on data collection is not clearly known.

Second, the falling birth rate. It is firmly established that the birth rate is falling despite the one-child policy being replaced by the two-child policy in 2016. The policy did increase the number of births for 2016 and 2017, but the impact was short-lived, and birth rates fell from 2018. This trend is directly attributed to China's economic and social development wherein there is a rise in delayed marriages, postponement of childbearing and a rise in costs of childraising combined with low public child care funding. The cost of raising a child, according to a 2005 report by a state think-tank, is 4,90,000 Yuan for an ordinary family in China. By 2020 the local media reported that the cost had risen to as high as 1.99 million Yuan, four times the 2005 figure. The two-child policy did not provide sufficient incentives to couples and particularly would-be mothers to have more children. Childbearing puts higher costs on the bodies, careers and personal lives of women as compared to men. Thus, incentivizing would-be mothers is of prime importance.

Third, strained working population. The other fact which is categorically established is the decline in China's working-age population and simultaneous increase in the elderly population. In the same vein- at the two sessions meeting of China's essential government apparatus in March- premier Le Keqiang confirmed that China would raise the retirement age, which has remained the same for four decades at 60 for men and 55 for women.

What does it mean?

While it would be too early to say that China is in the midst of demographic crises, but surely it is beginning to lose its demographic dividend. The trend indicates that population growth will continue to slow in the future. An increase in the elderly population means increased demand for workers to support the elderly, plus increased demand for health and social care. The data may also indicate that China might be faced with an irreversible population decline.

China: Canceling the Strategic Economic Dialogue with Australia

Dincy Adlakha, 9 May 2021

What happened?

On 6 May, the National Development and Reform Commission, state economic planner of China, announced that it is indefinitely suspending the Strategic Economic Dialogue with Australia, which was launched in 2014 to strengthen the bilateral economic and investment ties.

The statement on the NDRC website has accused Australia of disrupting "the normal exchanges and cooperation between China and Australia out of Cold War mindset and ideological discrimination." Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Wang Wenbin called it a "necessary and legitimate" response to Australia. He mentioned that Australia is "abusing" national security concept to pressure cooperation from China.

What is the background?

First, the Sino-Australian differences in recent

years. Sino-Australian relations are at their multi-decade low. Tensions began since Australia becoming the first country to ban telecom giant Huawei in 2018. In April 2020, when Australia demanded an international inquiry into the origins of the COVID-19 virus, China retaliated with a series of accusations of racism and human rights abuses. In July 2020, travel restrictions from Australia after the passing of Hong Kong National Security Law invited further trouble as China imposed sanctions and high tariffs on commodities from China. Although the housing industry and iron ore imports constituting majority of the trade between the two remained unaffected, wine was imposed with more than 200 per cent tariffs and other commodities like coal, barley, beef, and cotton were also highly affected. The scraping of the Victorian BRI project, in April 2021, by the federal government in Australia came as the final blow.

Second, the regional and international environment. Although the relationship between China and Australia has always faced challenges due to Australia's intimacy with the USA, the latest currents in the Sino-US trade war have made it difficult for allies like Australia to reconcile with China. Australia considers itself as an emerging power in the Indian Ocean, and is a partner in the Quad as well as the Supply Chains Resilience Initiative. However, China sees it as the weakest link in the chain of US allies. The attempts made by Australia to diversify its trade partners were not well received by the rising superpower of China. While China is pushing for a bigger goal of sending a message to its opponents in the West by giving Australia one of the hardest economic punishments, Australia is also stubborn to stand up to the bully.

Third, the domestic aspirations. President Xi's aggressive foreign policies have brought back the Chinese nationalism narrative to the front. A key function of his presidency is built exclusively on this nationalism cultured by the Communist Party. President Xi has hit back on any western power that recommends China a democratic system. In his 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,' he has built strong anti-

American and anti-foreign sentiments. Moreover, in this tussle of domestic aspirations, Australia is a soft target for China. Prime Minister Morrison has also shown his wariness towards foreign interference in his country and has been scrutinizing every foreign deal under the backdrop of Australian national interests. By not visiting China even once, he has signalled that he is ready for the diplomatic war without fear.

What does it mean?

First, the impact on economy. The co-dependence between China and Australia in numerous sectors will keep the effect on their economies within check but, Australia will lose more since China remains its largest trading partner despite tensions.

Second, Australia's alternative partners of economic cooperation are also dependent on China which leaves it with little scope to squirm its way out from the sanctioned existence.

The US and China: Biden's first dialogue with Beijing

Sukanya Bali, 21 March 2021

What happened?

On 18 and 19 March, the US and China held their first in-person engagement in Anchorage, Alaska. Antony Blinken (Secretary of State) and Jake Sullivan (National Security Advisor) met Yang Jiechi (China's top diplomat) and Wang Yi (State Councilor and Foreign minister).

Following the discussion, Jake Sullivan said, "We do not seek conflict, but we welcome stiff competition, and we will always stand up for our principles, for our people, and for our friends." Yang Jiechi said, "China opposes US interference in its internal affairs. We express our staunch opposition to such interference...The United States uses its military force and financial hegemony to carry out long-arm jurisdiction and suppress other countries."

What is the background?

First, the resumption of the US-China dialogue. It was the first high-level, in-person talk since the Biden administration took over. A sharp

contrasting tone was seen between the two counterparts in their opening remarks. The talks concluded with a 'tough and direct' sense of disagreement and led to no diplomatic breakthrough. During Trump's presidency, the dialogue between the two nations primarily focused on unfair trade practices, technology, and intellectual theft. Trump's allegation of 'genocide' of Uighurs in Xinjiang and calling of the coronavirus a "Chinese virus" exacerbated the relation.

Second, a non-zero-sum meet. China showed a defensive posture to the US concerns over China's human rights abuses in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong, aggression on its neighbours, and increasing cyber-attack. In response, China accused the US of making baseless allegations, pointed at US internal racial divisions and its military and financial supremacy to suppress countries. Nevertheless, the relation indicated a potential for cooperation in areas like Iran, North Korea, Afghanistan, climate change, and coronavirus pandemic.

Third, China and Biden's restructuring of its relationship with the Indo-Pacific. On 12 March, the Quad allies agreed for a free, open, inclusive, healthy Indo-Pacific, anchored with democratic values and unconstrained coercion. The core agenda highlighted a defensive posture of the grouping towards China's expansionist and belligerent approach. The US envoy also made its first visit to Japan and South Korea before the meet. The US reassured its support to defend and counter the "coercion and aggression" of China.

What does it mean?

The US and China differences remain on key issues; however, there are also areas that they are likely to cooperate. The Alaska dialogue should be a starting point between China and the Biden administration.

The US, under Biden, seems to be pursuing a larger approach towards East Asia, which is different from Trump. The US officials' recent visits at the highest level to East Asia showcase the Biden administration's foreign policy pitch. Whether the latter is linked with the former remains to be seen.

China's Two Sessions: Emphasis on Science, Technology and Innovation

D Suba Chandran, 14 March 2021

What happened?

On 11 March 2021, the "Two Sessions" of China - the annual meetings of two important institutions - the National People's Congress (NPC), and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) came to an end.

The two sessions of many things, endorsed a five-year blueprint for China's economic recovery, besides approving administrative changes to Hong Kong.

What is the background?

First, the political importance of the two sessions. Though these two annual meetings of the NPC and the CPPCC take place together in March every year, these are two separate events. The NPC acts as China's legislature, meets once a year, and is considered as the "highest organ of State power." The members of the NPC were elected for five years, and the present NPC (the 13th) was elected in March 2018. The NPC is perceived as an "endorsing" institution by the rest of the world. On the other hand, the CPPCC is an advisory body, comprising members of the Communist Party of China and others; according to an official source, the current National Committee of the CPPCC has 2158 members, with 859 from the Communist Party of China. The two sessions are considered as the most important development, as it highlights the government's thinking on contemporary issues, and also provide a roadmap for China's economic, political and international outlook.

Second, the focus of the 2021 session on the economy. With COVID-19's fallouts on the economy, there has been an extra focus on China's roadmap. Premier Li Keqiang, presented a five-year plan, aimed at a six per cent growth rate, with a focus on research and innovation. According to an analysis, science and technology "appeared about 86 times in the draft of the latest five-year plan, compared with 29 in the previous iteration." There has been a focus

on artificial intelligence, quantum computing and blockchain technology.

Third, the focus on Hong Kong. While the two sessions looked at multiple issues, there was an extra focus at the global level, on what did these two sessions discuss and decide on Hong Kong. In the two sessions, it was agreed to make structural changes to Hong Kong administration, that China considers would provide greater control to Beijing. On the other hand, the critics of Beijing in Hong Kong and elsewhere consider that the new changes would bring an end to the “one country, two systems” setup, and affect the democratic institutions in letter and spirit.

What does it mean?

First, China is likely to look inwards to take its economy forward. It is likely to invest more in Science, Technology and Innovation as a strategy to achieve economic self-reliance. Given the recent emphasis at the global level on technology, innovation and the politics over it, especially between the US and China, Beijing sees this as an essential component to drive its growth engine.

Second, the proposed five-year plan is not about economic recovery alone; it is about closing the technological divide as soon as possible and increase the divide between China and the rest of the world.

Third, despite international criticisms, Beijing is likely to go ahead with its plan to increase its effective control over Hong Kong. This is a foregone conclusion; the rest of the world should give more focus on the first two implications, than narrowly focusing only on the third.

The WHO mission in China: COVID-19 virus did not emerge from the Wuhan lab

Sukanya Bali, 14 February 2021

What happened?

On 9 February, the WHO experts presented their preliminary finding stating that “the origin of COVID-19 is yet to identify, and it is unlikely to have leaked from a Chinese lab.” Peter Ben Embarek, head of WHO mission said, “Our initial findings suggest that the introduction

through an intermediary host species is the most likely a pathway, and require more studies, specific and targeted research.” The team also pointed at a further investigation into cold chain products, “referring to transport and trade of frozen products.”

On 12 February, a WHO independent investigator said, “Chinese scientists refused to share raw data that might bring the world closer to understanding the origins of the coronavirus pandemic.” Chinese scientists also disclosed 92 people being hospitalized with a symptom of fever and cough in Wuhan in October 2019.

What is the background?

First, the call for an independent investigation into the origin of COVID-19. The first cluster surfaced in Wuhan, in December 2019; it was linked to the Chinese seafood and poultry markets. The then US President Trump called it a Chinese virus. Among other countries, Australia also called for a WHO investigation into the origins of the virus. The US accused the WHO of being pro-China and pushed for withdrawing from the health agency. In response, Zhao Lijian, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson accused the US military of bringing coronavirus to China. China imposed trade barriers on Australian goods after Australia pushed for an investigation into the origins of the virus. In November, the New York Times reported that the Chinese ambassador lobbied WHO against the declaration of an international emergency in the early days of the pandemic. Second, the WHO mission to China. For several months China delayed the visit of WHO experts to Wuhan, where the first clusters were reported. Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of WHO said, he was “very disappointed” by the delays. In July, a small team of WHO experts entered China but was forced to carry out an investigation from a distance. They were also discouraged from questioning China’s response to the outbreak.

In October, as more countries started blaming China for the pandemic and called on China for transparency, the team of researchers from WHO and Chinese started over the discussions on the origin of coronavirus and how it is

transmitted to the human body. After months of negotiations, the Chinese government allowed a team of 15 scientists to visit. Among them, two scientists weren't allowed to China after they tested positive for coronavirus antibodies. The team faced hurdles like visa delays, quarantine restrictions, and political stonewalling in the country.

Third, the finding. In the joint press meeting on 09 February, the Chinese experts, and the WHO team, disclosed their key findings. First, no COVID-19 spread in Wuhan before 19 December 2020. Second, coronavirus most likely emerged in bats and spread to humans through another animal which is yet to be identified. Third, the Huanan seafood market may not be the first place of the outbreak. Fourth, it is extremely unlikely that the virus leaked from a lab in Wuhan. Fifth, it may be possible that the virus spread to humans through frozen food. Lastly, the virus may not be passed from the animal-to-human transmission.

What does it mean?

First, the mission is yet to identify the origins of the virus, transmission and spread. China used the WHO visit as a public relation exercise. The investigation remains politicized, and the blame game continues.

Second, the primary accusation on the leak of the virus on China's Virology lab stands dismissed after the WHO visit rendering allegations baseless.

China: New Redlines on Xinjiang, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, as US-China relations starts under Biden

Teshu Singh, 7 February 2021

What happened?

On 1 February 2021, in a conversation with Jacob J. Lew, the Politburo Member and the Director of the office of the Central Committee for Foreign Affairs of the Politburo of the 19th CPC Central Committee, Yang Jiechi expounded on the state of US-China relations and prospects for the future of the bilateral

relations. In his address, he cautioned the US not to cross the "red lines".

What is the background?

First, the new redline as Beijing's signal to the larger US-China relations. China is anxious about its relations with the US under Joe Biden. The leadership of China believes that the US-China relations have reached "new crossroads" and "a new window of hope" is opening with the coming of Joe Biden. Thus, as an attempt to put forth the Chinese perspective on the evolving bilateral relation Yang Jiechi articulated his response.

Second, China would like to continue with what it has agreed with the Trump administration. There is an agreement reached in January 2020. As per the agreement, China agreed to purchase more of certain US goods and services worth USD 200 billion in 2020 and 2021 with the base year as 2017. On 13 January 2021, the US declassified "the US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific". It is rare to declassify a document before its scheduled date. The objective of declassifying the document was to put forth the official US stance in the public domain is to ensure that the administration does not retract. Perhaps, China also wants to push the same argument with force and new redlines.

Third, China's "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy" - a euphemism for its new approach. The Chinese diplomats have been more aggressive in defending their country's interests. Yang Yechi redline statement is perhaps a part of this aggressive strategy.

What does it mean?

Will the Biden administration go back on the Trump policies? The new administration has already reaffirmed Taiwan's enduring commitment and advised China "to cease its military, diplomatic and economic pressure." US Secretary of State Antony Blinken also said he agreed that China's actions in its western Xinjiang region should be designated as "genocide". He has also offered support to people fleeing Hong Kong, "the US should give haven to people fleeing political repression in Hong Kong. Consequently, Yang Yechi alluded to draw a "red line" on the core issues and

reiterated that the US should fulfil its commitment to abide by the One-China principle.

Yang Jiechi speech was the most high-profile appeal by China to the US ever since Joe Biden took office. Through this speech, he has put the onus on the US to mend the damage caused by the "misguided policies" under the Trump administration. Furthermore, after the speech, China Daily published an article titled, "US govt urged to focus on cooperation". The article highlighted that both China and the US task to take their relationship back to "a predictable and constructive track". It stated, the two largest economies should build a model of interaction that "focuses on peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation".

To conclude, redline speech is an indication that US-China relations are not expected to be smooth.

Hong Kong: China now targets media freedom

Sukanya Bali, 25 April 2021

What happened?

On 22 April, Bao Choy Yuk-ling, a freelance journalist with Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), was convicted of making false statements using license plate information from publicly accessible databases. She was fined USD 775 for violating the road traffic ordinance. Ivy Chui, West Kowloon Magistrate, said: "The regulations are not intended to allow the public to obtain vehicle particular without limitations." She highlighted that the public could obtain vehicle ownership records only for three stated purposes: legal matters, vehicle purchase or other transport or traffic-related matters. According to Reuters, Chris Yeung, Chief of Hong Kong Journalists Association, said: "it was a day of shame for the city." He also said: the criminalizing normal journalism is "recklessly destroying" press freedom

What is the background?

First, Hong Kong as a bastion of free media.

Under constitutional guarantees of free speech, Hong Kong had engaged in independent journalism. From the Tiananmen massacre in 1989 to the Umbrella Movement in 2014, the press had far more freedom than the mainland in reporting the protests and regional politics. Social media has also played a prominent role in mobilizing support in the pro-democracy protest of 2019 in Hong Kong. Consequently, pro-Beijing officials blamed the negative coverage of China by the press as a reason for the rising anti-china sentiments in the territory. Second, Beijing's strategy to target the independent media in Hong Kong. After the imposition of the national security law, freedom of expression has deteriorated in the territory, marking a clear shift from the media-friendly environment of Hong Kong. On 16 April, Jimmy Lai, founder of Apple Daily, who has been arrested on several occasions, was sentenced to 14 months in prison. In February, RTHK, a government-funded network, replaced its head with a bureaucrat and called for stringent supervision. Many international newspapers like New York Times have also relocated their offices to Seoul after facing pressure from the government. Journalists have shown concerns over raids, search warrants, and arrests. According to New York Times, Reporters without Borders said: The National Security law used by the government is a "full-blown intimidation" of journalists. In September 2020, Hong Kong police announced that the designation of 'media representative' will be restricted to government-licensed organizations, effectively curbing reporting by freelance journalists.

What does it mean?

Boa's conviction indicates the growing pressure on media in Hong Kong. The use of national security law against media freedom has narrowed the space for dissent.

China seems to be moving towards a "one country, one media" environment by replicating mainland media's features in Hong Kong, thereby effectively eroding the territory's civil liberties.

Hong Kong: Police arrests dozens of pro-democracy protestors

Sukanya Bali, 9 January 2021

What happened?

On 6 January 2021, 53 Hong Kong opposition politicians and activists were arrested in a police raid, on suspicion of violating the national security law. Those arrested include 13 former legislative councilors, academicians, district councilors, student activists, and organizers of last year's mass marches. Li Kwai-wah, a senior police superintendent, also said that they had frozen more than USD 200,000 in funds related to the effort.

On the same day, Hua Chunying, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, said that the arrest only impeded the "freedom of some external forces and individuals" in Hong Kong "to collude with each other to attempt to undermine China's stability and security". The Hong Kong democracy activists have called for the release of "political prisoners".

What is the background?

First, China's imposition of National Security Law in June 2020. The law punishes secession, sedition, and collusion crimes with foreign forces with terms up to life imprisonment. Since then, the Hong Kong authorities have detained dozens of pro-democracy leaders, raided media offices, and ousted opposition lawmakers. China has been using the law to curtail freedom by systematically targeting protestors. Young protestors like Joshua Wong, Ivan Lam, and Agnes Chow Ting were convicted. Political leaders, lawmakers and media institutions have also been targeted. Soon after the law was passed, seven pro-democratic politicians were arrested on charges of "contempt" and "interfering" with the city's Legislative Council.

In November, China's National People's Congress Standing Committee passed a resolution disqualifying four pro-democracy lawmakers. Jimmy Lai, the founder of an independent media institution Apple Daily, was accused of colluding with foreign powers and was arrested under the new security law.

Second, the pro-democracy protests have largely died down in Hong Kong after Beijing began implementing the law. In June 2019, over a million people took to the streets, clashed with the police, and shut the airports against the law allowing extradition to China. Today, the protests and mass gatherings in public places have ceased.

Third, the international response. The arrest has drawn criticism from the international community. Countries have responded with sanctions and imposed a travel ban on Chinese officials. The US Congress approved a bill in July 2020, penalizing banks doing business with Chinese officials soon after Beijing enacted law in Hong Kong. In July 2020, the UK had offered citizenship to three million Hong Kongers. Citizens with British National (Overseas) or BNO status, will be able to apply from January 2021. In August 2020, the New York Times had announced moving parts of its Hong Kong office to the South Korean capital Seoul.

What does it mean?

First, more than a year after protests started in Hong Kong, it is clear that the protestors have lost out. With these recent arrests, will there be another round of resistance by the young protestors is a question.

The recent arrest will weaken the opposition within the city's political institutions because many leaders could be in prison, or their arrests would officially lead to their disqualification.

Taiwan: President Tsai's address tries to resist increasing pressures from China

Dincy Adlakha, 17 October 2021

What happened?

On 10 October, the Taiwanese President, Tsai Ing-wen delivered an address marking the National Day of Taiwan. While stressing on the Taiwanese sovereignty, she said: "I want to reiterate the words' peace, parity, democracy, and dialogue'. We will not accept the Beijing authorities' use of 'one country, two systems' to downgrade Taiwan and undermine the cross-strait status quo. We stand fast by this principle."

On the next day, in response to the presidential address, China's Taiwan Affairs Office asserted that China will "not leave any space for Taiwan independence separatist activities."

What is the background?

First, China's growing pressure signals reunification. Lately, China has been extremely vocal about its intentions to reunify Taiwan with the mainland. Militarily, the largest ever incursions of military jets from the People's Liberation Army were observed in Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone on 2 October. The planes continued to breach Taiwanese territory for four days. Furthermore, reports are also surfacing regarding the construction of air bases near China that are close to the island. Politically, President Xi Jinping, and other dignitaries from the Communist Party of China, have made statements assuring the common public of reunification with Taiwan. In fact, while addressing a gathering of political elites in the Great Hall of the People, Xi called the Taiwanese attempt at secessionism the biggest obstacle to national rejuvenation. Chinese media, especially Global Times, have been publishing editorial articles warning Taiwan against separatism.

Second, the Taiwanese response. Taiwan has been opposing reunification with China for a long time. Especially after witnessing the 2019 crackdown in Hong Kong, Taiwan has made sure to project itself as an independent country. It has applied multiple times for separate representation in WHO and the recent application for membership in Trans-Pacific Partnership is reflective of Taiwan's identity, separate from China. More recently, the remarks made by the Taiwanese President and Defence Minister are clear from one perspective. Taiwan will not bow to Chinese pressure despite its asymmetrical military capabilities.

Third, the international involvement, especially the US. Taiwan is constantly attempting to balance its power against China. The biggest role in this endeavour is the US President Joe Biden has shown support for Taiwanese independence. The US even warned China of the disrupted "regional peace and stability" due to China's "provocative military activity". Taiwan

is more than just a symbol of independence and democracy for the US. It is an economic haven that might slide under the captivating hands of China if reunified. Taiwan has become a major issue of contention between China and the US. Additionally, connections with many western allies are also crucial for Taiwan. From Japan referring to Taiwan as an independent country to the former Australian Prime Minister visiting Taiwan as a show of support, the international community has largely fallen in line with the US weight.

What does it mean?

Many analysts see the judgment day as close. As tensions increase at the Taiwan strait, it may not be far when China attempts to overtake the Democratic Progressive Party. However, such a scenario will be disastrous for the little progress that the US and China have made in terms of trade relations. Although the Chinese actions in Taiwan are fairly important to the US, are they worth fighting a war with the dragon is something that the US has to reconsider. The upcoming few weeks are extremely crucial for all the parties involved.

Japan: LDP secures a comfortable win in the 2021 elections

Keerthana Nambiar, 7 November 2021

What happened?

On 31 October, Japan conducted its 49th general election. The new Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's coalition secured a safe and comfortable majority in the Parliament. Kishida's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) claimed 261 seats in the 465-member lower house. The LDP's junior coalition partner Komeito won 32 seats, together with sharing 291 seats in the lower house. The center-left Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), the biggest opposition group saw its fall by 13 seats to 96.

On 1 November, Fumio Kishida said, "It was a very tough election, but the people's will — that they want us to create this country's future under the stable LDP- Komeito government and the Kishida administration — was shown." He

further added "We received a precious 261 seats for the LDP. As a responsible party ... we will meet the public mandate."

What is the background?

First, the LDP continues to hold the reins of Japanese politics. Since the 1950s, the LDP has governed Japan without interruption and only lost a lower house election in 2009. The general expectations of the 2021 elections were that the LDP would lose a considerable number of seats. Earlier, during the Shinzo Abe regime, the ruling coalition of LDP and Komeito party had a two-thirds of a supermajority in the lower house, creating a strong foundation. Despite two changes of prime minister and the widespread dissatisfaction over how the LDP-led government handled the COVID-19 pandemic, they barely affected the election results. This proves LDP's staunch voter base.

Second, the slipping of power from the LDP. Among the Japanese political faces, Shinzo Abe is the premier. The recent growing aversion from Abe's policies due to the many scandals in 2020 brought in Fumio Kishida as the new party leader and Prime Minister. This generational shift within the LDP has altered the internal dynamics within the factions. The rise of young leaders across all the parties has drastically changed the political diet of Japan.

Third, the lack of stronger opposition. The Japanese voters have always been clear advocates of stability in the face of a worsening regional security environment and ongoing economic hurdles. Even though the public often signaled their dissatisfaction with the Abe government, the lack of a better alternative pulls them back to LDP. On the other hand, the opposition faces challenges in terms of organizing itself, gathering funds, and most importantly winning the elections.

What does it mean?

First, Kishida's first public test. This is the first test for Kishida who took over as the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party in October and became the party leader and prime minister. The new government will face the task of steering the world's third-largest economy battered by the coronavirus, tackling a very fast-aging and

slumping population and major security challenges from China and North Korea.

Second, the question of stability or the return to a revolving door. A weakened LDP majority in the elections could possibly mean further losses in the upcoming upper house elections. While the LDP has been in power almost continuously, only five politicians in the course of eight decades have hung on to the prime minister's post for more than five years or longer. A poor showing of the LDP power in the electorate could encourage and embolden Fumio Kishida's rivals within the party. Thus, threatening Japan to once again return to an era of short-lived government administrations.

Japan: Fumio Kishida wins the leadership race to become the next Japanese PM

Keerthana Nambiar, 3 October 2021

What happened?

On 29 September, former Japanese foreign minister Fumio Kishida was voted to become the next prime minister of Japan in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. Kishida narrowly beat his main rival Taro Kono, the vaccine minister, by 256-255 in the first round of voting by party members. The second round of voting dominated by LDP's members in Diet (Japan's parliament) concreted Kishida's position and secured his win.

After the vote, Kishida told LDP lawmakers: "We remain under a national crisis. We must strive and continue our coronavirus response and forge an economic package in the size of dozens of trillions of yen by the end of the year." He called for unity among party members as he leads the LDP for the general election slated for November and next year's election of the House of Councillors, the upper chamber of parliament.

What is the background?

First, the post-Abe political compass in Japan. Shinzo Abe's unexpected resignation, citing health reasons, set off a frenzy among the LDP leaders, replacing him with Abe's right hand Yoshihide Suga. 'Abenomics' for managing the Japanese economy was the highlight of his

regime. The transition was a significant turning point in Japanese politics and foreign affairs. Abe's legacy is the most critical variable for a positive alliance with the United States and assertive foreign policies. His reorientation in Tokyo's stand towards rising China, with the Quad grouping and lead in Trans-pacific Partnership, diversified Japanese foreign policies.

Second, a quick analysis of Suga's performance. The challenges for the Suga government included a wide spectrum of geopolitical tensions and regional security regarding Taiwan and East and the South China Sea. With the slow vaccination rollout and unpopular opinion of going ahead with the Tokyo Olympics, public support for Suga declined.

Third, the divide within the LDP. Factional politics is an essential element in the Japanese political system. According to reports, LDP has seven factions; five are significant, and two are considered minor. The LDP leadership election outcome is dependent on the political footings and equations within the inner factions. In the case of Tokyo Olympics 2020, the power struggle inside LDP has been visible between leaders who support and the ones against the Olympics. The factional divide became evident with the leadership elections between Fumio Kishida and Taro Kono wherein Kishida won by a small margin.

Fourth, the rise of Kishida. Fumio Kishida will be Japan's 100th prime minister. Assuming that the LDP retains the power in the upcoming elections, Kishida will have to face challenges of navigating Japan's pandemic response and jump-starting its stagnant economic recovery. His stand on major issues, starting from bridging the economic inequities and orienting foreign policies to climate change and gender equality, will determine his support.

What does this mean?

First, the changing dynamics. With robust leadership and a capable team, Kishida may focus on strategically maintaining a stable equilibrium without compromising Japanese interests. Second, the choice. The leadership election is for debate whether LDP moved out of

Abe's shadow. Kishida as a choice could work against Japan's 'revolving-door' leadership.

Japan: Remembering Hiroshima bombing, "Little Boy" and 80,000 people, 76 years later

Avishka Ashok, 8 August 2021

What happened?

On 6 August, Japan marked 76 years of the first atomic bombing on Hiroshima. On this occasion, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga attended the memorial conference and pledged to support states towards the aim of nuclear disarmament. The annual ceremony was also attended by the Mayor of Hiroshima who pushed for the ratification of the UN treaty which seeks to ban nuclear weapons. He said: "Nuclear weapons are the ultimate human violence. If civil society decides to live without them, the door to a nuclear-weapon-free world will open wide."

What is the background?

First, the devastation caused by the "Little Boy." In an instant, the bomb immediately killed 80,000 people in Hiroshima and another 40,000 in Nagasaki. By the end of the year, over 1,40,000 lost their lives due to radiation-related complications. More than 30 per cent of Japan's population vanished due to the atomic bombings. Other than the massive human loss, the infrastructural loss devastated the city. Hiroshima was reduced to a flat plain with no hospitals to treat the living, no fire services to help with fires or administrative structures to rebuild the city. The long term effects of the bombing started showing within a decade when hospitals started recording a steep increase in tumors and different cancers in the living population. The Little Boy and the Fat Man completely altered the demography of Japan, creating a sick populace in the two cities and forever slowing the population growth of the country.

Second, the continuous expansion of the nuclear arsenal, despite their devastating efforts. In spite of witnessing the destruction caused by the atomic bombs in 1945, the world has continued

the race to build and store more powerful weapons of mass destruction. Countries take pride in announcing advanced missiles that are capable of travelling long distances with no pilot, launching from the seas or land and claiming multiple lives in one hit. Instead of reprimanding the use of nuclear weapons by the only capable country in 1945, we now have nine countries with nuclear capacities.

Third, the failing disarmament narrative. During the cold war, the world witnessed a steep rise in the production of nuclear weapons. As of today, this figure has been brought down exponentially due to the arms control treaty between the US and Russia. However, the aim of "Global Zero" which aims to completely abolish the production and storage of nuclear weapons, is far from being achieved. At the moment, there are approximately 15,000 nuclear weapons globally. This accounts for an 80 per cent drop in the total number of nuclear warheads; from 70,000 weapons in 1986 to 15,000 in 2021. However, in the 76 years since the use of the first atomic bomb, the world is nowhere close to complete disarmament. There is an incessant struggle amongst states like North Korea and Iran who expand their nuclear programmes while states like the US and Russia express no plans of complete eradication of these weapons. In recent years, the focus of the international community has also shifted from nuclear deterrence to currently pressing issues such as the pandemic and climate change.

Fourth, the "realist" narrative supporting nuclear greed. Today, the states compete and fight for the right to produce nuclear weapons to securitize their national interests. States are constantly under the impression that they may be attacked by a rival state. These weapons are used as a security against foreign interventions and attacks. Hence, countries are willing to spend millions on nuclear programmes even when these funds can be used for more pressing issues that require immediate attention.

What does it mean?

The increasingly destructive capacities of the defence arms and ammunition prove that the human race is completely immune to the suffering endured by humankind 76 years ago.

The rise in the number of nuclear states in the past seven decades showcases the seriousness of the world towards the aim of nuclear disarmament.

Japan: The Olympics continue in Tokyo, amidst controversies

Keerthana Nambiar, 1 August 2021

What happened?

On 1 August, it will be the tenth day of the Tokyo Olympics 2020. The games were inaugurated by Japan's Emperor Naruhito with the theme of "Moving forward" to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach quoted "We can only go faster, we can only aim higher, we can only become stronger if we stand together – in solidarity. This is why, the IOC has adopted the Olympic motto to our times: faster, higher, stronger – together. This feeling of togetherness – this is the light at the end of the dark tunnel."

What is the background?

First, a brief background to the Olympic games in Tokyo. This would be the 120th Olympic games. It is the fourth time Japan is hosting the Olympics. With 11,000 athletes from 206 nations across the world where 49 per cent are women, the IOC hereby marks the first "gender-balanced" games in its history. The 2020 games view the introduction of new disciplines like 3x3 basketball, freestyle BMX, surfing, skateboarding, mixed-gender events in existing sports, and many more.

Second, the intense political determination. The Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's vision was to contain the virus outbreak, host a successful Games and call a general election. That has been subdued after the recent surge in Tokyo turning the games into a damaging scandal. This determination is the underlying political agenda for Suga to survive as party leader as the general elections are coming up in October. Furthermore, Japan's vaccine rollout has substantially lagged considering other developed nations. This has led to a greater public dissatisfaction pressurizing Suga ahead of the elections.

Third, the divided opinions and the controversies. There has been strong public opposition against the games because of the spike it may cause in the Covid-19 cases. In a survey released in May, 83 per cent of the people did not want Japan to conduct the Olympics. The Japanese doctors union were highly against conducting the games and backed out from offering medical support. Therefore, the IOC stepped up to offer medical help for the Olympics. It also downplayed the opposition in Japan and went ahead with the international support it could garner. Covid-19 being the giant elephant in the room, anti-Olympic protests are widely increasing as new coronavirus cases broke the country's records. The protesters gathered near the stadium holding banners reading "Cancel the Olympics! Save lives!" and "No Olympics". This Olympics has been shadowed by controversies starting with the logo plagiarism to athletes testing positive with Covid-19, the first-ever transgender weightlifter from New Zealand, the long spectre of doping tests, and the unprecedented heatwave in Tokyo.

Fourth, the economic riddle. In March 2021, the organizers decided to ban foreign spectators, thus diminishing any revenue from the Olympics as overseas visitors tend to spend more than domestic spectators. The economic losses from cancelling the Games are estimated to be less than the losses from a single state emergency. Japan has by far had four emergency situations during the pandemic. On the other hand, the IOC has seemingly cornered Japan and will accordingly make a full income from its broadcast rights and direct sponsors.

What does it mean?

Every Olympic Games has produced a festive story. Even though the Tokyo Olympic games have been mired in controversy, it is meant to revitalize the public spirit during the pandemic. It allows talents across the world to a single platform. Also, the Games are exceptional occasions for diplomacy, wherein Japan will weather the controversies and deliver a 'safe and secure' Olympics amidst the pandemic.

Japan: The US fortifies alliance in the Indo-Pacific

Avishka Ashok, 18 April 2021

What happened?

On 16 April, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and American President Joe Biden met for the first time in Washington, where the two leaders discussed their bilateral issues and matters of mutual interest. China topped the meeting agenda as the two leaders explored policy options and a suitable course of action to handle the challenges created by China's aggressiveness in the Indo-Pacific region. Human rights abuse in Hong Kong and Xinjiang and aggression in the South China Sea, East China Sea and Taiwan were the main focus of the meeting. President Biden said: "We committed to working together to take on the challenges from China and on issues like the East China Sea, the South China Sea, as well as North Korea, to ensure a future of a free and open Indo Pacific."

What is the background?

First, the Taiwan issue. The meeting between Suga and Biden comes soon after 25 Chinese aircrafts, including fighter jets and nuclear-capable bombers, trespassed into Taiwan's air defence identification zone (AIDZ) on 12 April. This incursion is the largest in 2021 and occurred a day after US Secretary of State expressed concerns regarding China's aggression towards Taiwan. In 2021, China entered Taiwan's seas and air space multiple times, pushing the country and other foreign powers to condemn its actions strongly. China has also been intermittently patrolling the water around the Senkaku islands, which Japan, China and Taiwan claim. China's increased interference in Taiwan is also partly due to Taipei's fast approach towards a formal declaration of independence from China.

Second, counter-balancing China. In the past decade, Japan has witnessed an increasing presence of China in the Indo-Pacific region. Other than its claim of the nine-dash-line, China has invested heavily in the countries in the region. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) also played an essential role in establishing China as

a dependable superpower in the region. Thus, in the past few years, Japan's foreign policy has focused on countering China's unprecedented rise. Japan has conducted multiple meetings with European and Western countries such as Germany, France, UK, and the US, aiming to strengthen its relationship with its allies to present a fortified defence against China and ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Third, the significance of the Indo-Pacific in the US foreign policy. The meeting also took place a month after Biden convened a meeting with the Quad members where the main agenda was countering China's unparalleled rise. The first cabinet-level foreign visit of the US also took place in Japan and South Korea. In the 100 days after taking office, there is a visible shift in the US foreign policy from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific.

What does this mean?

China does not welcome a heightened interest of the US in the Indo-Pacific. However, the US has a duty towards Japan in protecting it from foreign aggression. It is also in US interests to slow down China's progress in the global economy to ensure America's status as a superpower. However, the interference of the US may instigate China to further antagonize its neighbours by showcasing its military prowess. The probability of China fastening its hold over Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Taiwan remains high in the coming years.

Japan and South Korea: The US returns to East Asia

Avishka Ashok, 21 March 2021

What happened?

On 16 March, the US Defence Secretary (Lloyd Austin), and US Secretary of State (Antony Blinken), joined their Japanese counterparts for the two-plus-two security conference in Tokyo. They discussed China's aggression and the challenges to human rights in the region. The joint statement released after the meeting revealed the two countries concern over "unlawful maritime claims and activities in the

South China Sea and unilateral action that seeks to change the status quo" of the Senkaku islands.

On 18 March, the US delegation made an official visit to South Korea where they reconfirmed the US' allegiance to defend Seoul against North Korean and Chinese threats. Lloyd Austin stated, "Given the unprecedented challenges posed by both the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and China, the US-ROK alliance has never been more important." The two countries also agreed to cooperate on the denuclearization of the peninsula.

What is the background?

First, the change in the US approach towards East Asia. The latest visit to Japan is the first-ever cabinet-level foreign visit made by the Biden Administration after the change in leadership in America. Antony Blinken also reiterated the importance of expanding relations with Japan by stating, "it is no accident that we chose Japan for the first Cabinet-level overseas travel." The US did not make an official visit to South Korea since 2016, after which there a lack of political activity during the Trump period. The visit to East Asia reveals the new administration's interest in the Indo-Pacific.

Second, a greater push to contain China. During the meeting, the US made numerous statements that expressed the US sentiment towards China. Blinken said, "We will push back if necessary, when China uses coercion or aggression to get its way." He also expressed discontent and concern regarding China's policies in Xinjiang, illegal actions in the South China Sea and emphasized the importance of peace and stability.

Third, addressing the North Korean threat. During the one-day visit to South Korea, the US stressed the necessity of denuclearization to maintain peace in the region. The US diplomats said that the US and its allies would "strategize together on how to confront shared threats such as North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs." The statements were made soon after Kim Yo-jong, North Korean Leader's sister, threatened the US to refrain from hostile behaviour towards North Korea to ensure a peaceful tenure.

What does it mean?

The visits to Japan and South Korea signify the importance of the Indo-Pacific in American foreign policy. The Biden administration seems to be pursuing a more cautious approach towards North Korea while taking a harsh stance on China. The US involvement in dealing with denuclearization and China's rising aggression and influence will continue during the Biden era.

Ten years after Fukushima: A disaster that changed the nuclear trajectory

Lokendra Sharma, 14 March 2021

What happened?

On 11 March 2021, Japan observed the 10th anniversary of the earthquake (and tsunami) and the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Silent prayers were held across the country to mourn the victims. Japanese Emperor Naruhito and PM Suga took part in a commemorative ceremony in Tokyo where they held a moment of silence at 1446 hrs (JST), the exact time at which the earthquake struck 10 years ago.

On the same day, anti-nuclear protestors held a rally in front of the Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco), the operator of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

What is the background?

First, the disaster. On 11 March 2011, a massive earthquake off the east coast of Japan, generating a tsunami killed 18000 people. It slammed into the Fukushima nuclear power plant making it the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl in 1986.

Second, the multi-faceted fallouts in Japan. The accident struck a blow to Japan's large nuclear power industry, which supplied one-third of electricity. Post-disaster, most of the reactors were shut down; today electricity contribution of nuclear is less than ten per cent. The post-disaster cleaning up of the nuclear power plant has been a challenge. Even after a decade, the cleaning operations are not over and estimates range from 30 years to a century. The costs, meanwhile, have spiralled up; one estimate puts

it around USD 200 billion. The human and environmental fallout has been significant. Over the years, a huge amount of radiation has been released into the atmosphere and to the ocean. Although no death has been associated with the Fukushima disaster so far, close to 40000 people are still displaced after a decade.

Third, global fallouts. Not just in Japan, but the nuclear industry faced a downturn globally. Many countries in Europe like Germany, Belgium, Italy, Spain and Switzerland, abandoned their nuclear energy plans. According to IAEA, between 2011 and 2020, 65 reactors were either shut down or their operational life was not extended, making it a loss of 48 GWe of nuclear capacity globally.

Fourth, nuclear energy in the climate change debate. Nuclear energy fares better than renewable energy sources like solar and wind because the latter suffer from the problem of intermittency, grid integration, large area requirement and low plant load factor. Nuclear energy is, therefore, best suited to replace coal as a baseload energy supplier. However, in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster, and with improving renewable technology, the global consensus has shifted towards renewable sources, which continue to get cheaper and efficient. While nuclear is clean energy, renewables are both clean and safe energy sources.

What does it mean?

Even though nuclear power generating countries and the IAEA worked together to augment the safety of nuclear power plants post-Fukushima, the nuclear risk perception globally remains at an all-time high. And, with rapid innovations happening in the renewable sector (including higher efficiency of solar cells and wind turbines, better battery storage technology), the world will likely rely increasingly on renewable sources as it phases out coal-based power plants to meet climate change obligations (including net-zero emissions by 2050).

The future of nuclear energy looks bleak, barring a few countries like India and China, which continue to have ambitious nuclear power programmes. And it is unlikely that Japan,

where it all started, will be able to revive its nuclear programme despite the government's willingness as the domestic public opinion remains strongly anti-nuclear.

North Korea: New missile tests to challenge the US, Japan and South Korea

Keerthana Nambiar, 19 September 2021

What happened?

On 12 September, North Korea successfully fired a new long-range cruise missile described as "a strategic weapon of great significance". According to the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), the missile hit targets 932 miles away, flying along with different patterns, before falling into the North Korean territorial waters.

On 15 September, North Korea launched two ballistic missiles from a train to test the new weapons. The missiles flew 497 miles (800km) before striking a target in the sea off North Korea's east coast. Pak Jong Chon, a North Korean marshal and a member of the Presidium of the Politburo of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea, who oversaw the test said: "The railway-borne missile system serves as an efficient counter-strike means capable of dealing a harsh multi-concurrent blow to the threat-posing forces."

What is the background?

First, North Korea's missile programmes. Though the latest tests would be the first known testing since March 2021, North Korea has been orienting towards qualitatively refining and quantitatively expanding its missile and nuclear capabilities. The missile programs over the past five years have transformed subsequently. During 2016-17, North Korea tested a series of missile nuclear weapons and missiles which led the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to place new sanctions. While during this period, most missile tests were short-range, medium-range, intermediate-range, it also started testing intercontinental ballistic missiles in 2017. After a break in 2018, it resumed missile testing in 2019 - short-range ballistic missiles, intermediate-range ballistic missiles, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. The latest

ones, tested in September 2021 are reported to be long-range cruise missiles.

Second, the arms race in the Korean peninsula. The tit-for-tat missile tests on the Korean peninsula have scaled up tensions in the region. South Korea tested a new submarine-launched ballistic missile the same day North Korea launched two short-range ballistic missiles, making it one of only seven countries with this technology. The arms race has accelerated under the leadership of Moon Jae-in, including his push for more foreign policy autonomy. Therefore, South Korea plans to develop all other capabilities to deter North Korea and show who the strongest Korea is.

Third, the regional responses. Japanese PM Yoshihide Suga condemned the missile launch as "simply outrageous" and said it was a "threat to the peace and security" of the region. He declared that the testing was a violation of the UN Security Council resolution, expressing his strong protest and condemnation and further added that the Japanese government will continue to monitor the area. In contrast, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Seoul said: "By choosing cruise missiles, North Korea is trying not to provoke the US and China too much."

Fourth, the extra-regional responses. The United States condemned North Korea's launch, pointing it violated UN Security Council resolutions and posed a threat to Pyongyang's neighbours. The United States claims to remain open to diplomacy and dialogue with North Korea but, on the other hand, holds a tight reign on the sanctions. France's ambassador to the UN, Nicolas de Riviere specified the need for a 'political dialogue, a political solution, but the precondition is compliance' is a requirement with North Korea alongside the UN Security Council resolutions.

What does this mean?

First, the recent activities highlight the continuing instability in the Korean peninsula. North Korea's push towards nuclear and missile tests threatens its neighbours and the international community. Second, the tests underline North Korea's strategy in using

missiles and nuclear weapons as a tool and a leverage at the regional and global levels, however, without much success.

North Korea: Pyongyang considers Biden's new approach as hostile

Avishka Ashok, 9 May 2021

What happened?

On 2 May, the Korea Central News Agency, mouthpiece of the North Korean government, released three statements in response to Biden's new policy on North Korea, which was disclosed after months of review. The statements called the policy "a big blunder" and "intolerable."

On 3 May, the US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan explained that the policy aims to reduce tensions between the two countries and completely denuclearize the Korean peninsula. Sullivan said: "Our policy towards North Korea is not aimed at hostility. It's aimed at solutions. It's aimed at ultimately achieving the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

On 5 May, the G7 members appealed to North Korea to restart negotiations on ending its policy on nuclear arms and resuming the inter-Korean dialogue. The group also extended their support for the US policy on denuclearizing the peninsula.

What is the background?

First, Biden's approach towards North Korea. The US President Joe Biden firmly believes that the US policy towards North Korea was due for a comprehensive review as the previous administrations were unable to yield any positive outcomes in the issue of nuclear diplomacy. Even though former President Donald Trump succeeded in conducting multiple summits with Kim Jong-un, the meetings did not result in any significant developments. The previous attempts to engage with North Korea have made it certain for Biden that sanctions and coercion will not produce any positive results.

Second, North Korea's resilience towards sustenance and protecting its interests. North Korea has managed to withstand sanctions and

trade embargoes from the West and continues to pour huge amounts of money into its nuclear programs. The capital to support the nuclear ambitions of Kim Jong-un may have illegal sources, but the fact remains that the country has sustained itself and its nuclear goals even during the pandemic. However, the cost was paid heavily by the common man. The continuity of the nuclear goals over the decades is evidence that the previous policies of the West have failed to contain North Korea. Denuclearization will not be on the agenda for Kim Jong-un.

Third, the quest for a suitable approach towards North Korea. The issue of North Korean threat due to its nuclear capabilities is not a recently evolved crisis. The US Presidents from George W Bush to Joe Biden have been compelled to deal with Kim's nuclear ambitions during their presidency. However, Joe Biden faces a pressing challenge as he needs to formulate a policy that would ultimately appease South Koreans, Japanese, and North Koreans. The challenge primarily lies in pushing North Korea towards a future without nuclear ammunition. Joe Biden's new policy tries to learn from his predecessors' mistakes and attempts to combine sanctions with diplomatic negotiations.

What does it mean?

The new policy, announced on 30 April, seems to be a combination of the Trump and Obama approach; wherein the US will attempt to engage with North Korea, primarily through diplomacy but will rationally resort to sanctions if it fails to produce the expected results. Despite convincing efforts to resolve the issue of denuclearization, it is unlikely that the new approach of Joe Biden will lead to much success. A moderate approach, combining sanctions and negotiations may still not be enough to solve the problem of denuclearization in the coming decade.

Three years after inter-Korean talks

Avishka Ashok, 2 May 2021

What happened?

On 27 April, South Korea and North Korea marked three years of the inter-Korean summit between Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un. For the

first time in three years, the South Korean government did not hold an official event to celebrate the anniversary of the first summit. The Unification Ministry cited COVID-19 as the reason for not allowing an official ceremony.

On 29 April, the Unification Minister emphasized the significance of the South Korea-US summit to revive talks with North Korea on the stalled peace process.

What is the background?

First, failed promises of the 2018 summit. The Panmunjom Declaration was the first document signed by the two leaders and the first meeting held in 11 years. Both countries pledged to the efforts of complete denuclearization, work towards reunification and officially bringing an end to the Korean war of 1950-53. However, it has been three years since the first meeting, and the delegations have met thrice, but the objectives of the summit are far from being achieved.

Second, reasons for the failure of talks. The obstacles in achieving the goals of the Panmunjom Declaration is directly related to the deadlock in nuclear diplomacy. Even though North Korea agreed to denuclearization three years ago, the country continued developing and maintaining its nuclear facilities after the failure of talks with the US in Hanoi in 2019. Kim Jong-un revealed in the 8th Party Congress that denuclearization would not be an agenda for discussion in any talks with the US or any other country.

Another issue is the differential idea of denuclearization. When the US pushes for complete denuclearization, it refers to a complete dismantling of nuclear facilities, regular inspections of nuclear sites and re-entering the Non-Proliferation Treaty. While this was being considered initially, the term for North Korea meant that the US would remove all nuclear warheads and protection from South Korea and Japan. This continues to be an area of contention as the US cannot withdraw its policy of protection from the Korean Peninsula.

Third, the threat posed by North Korea. North Korea's nuclear plans pose a threat to countries like South Korea, Japan and the US. The

atmosphere of mistrust is created partly due to North Korea's incessant missile tests that land miles away from these territories and the country's lack of flexibility in matters of diplomacy. Despite multiple civil society initiatives undertaken by the South Korean government and the people, the relationship between the two countries has become substantially colder. The Moon Jae-in government adopted a softer approach towards North Korea and even introduced an Anti-Pyongyang leaflet ban. Nevertheless, North Korea's stance on inter-Korean relations remains unchanged.

What does this mean?

The major issue that keeps the countries from cooperating with each other is trust. Yet, when the problem involves nuclear missiles, one cannot help but be suspicious of all players in the game.

The Korean war has failed to come to an end due to the lack of a ceasefire which means that the two countries are essentially at war. The goals of reunification seem unrealistic as neither country portrays actions that speak of such a goal. Moreover, the only kind of reunification that is feasible in the country is the peaceful co-existence of the two Koreas, separate from each other's values and cultures which have drifted apart in the past decades.

North Korea: New missile tests make a statement to the US

Avishka Ashok, 28 March 2021

What happened?

On 26 March, North Korea announced that it test-fired two ballistic missiles on 25 March after almost a year of passivity. The Korean Central News Agency of North Korea said: "The newly developed new-type tactical guided projectile is a weapon system whose warhead weight has been improved to be 2.5 tons with the use of the core technology of tactical guided projectile that was already developed."

On 26 March, South Korean President Moon Jae-in expressed concerns and disappointment

with North Korea testing the missiles despite their continuous efforts for restarting dialogues with North Korea. He said: "Now is the time for South and North Korea and the US to ramp up efforts to continue talks. Any action that hampers the efforts is undesirable."

On the same day, US President Joe Biden said the US would respond appropriately if North Korea continues to escalate tensions, but it would still push for diplomacy. He said: "We are consulting with our allies and partners, and there will be responses if they choose to escalate." The Vice-chairman of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party in North Korea criticized Biden's comments, calling it an exercise of self-defence while warning the US of unpleasant reactions if such remarks continued.

What is the background?

First, the timing of the tests, amidst a US re-entry in East Asia. North Korea's missile tests come soon after the US officials visit Japan and South Korea. The Defense Secretary and Secretary of State of the United States chose Japan as their first cabinet-level foreign visit and visited South Korea for the first time since 2016. The Defense Secretary also visited India, who is a member of the QUAD. On 12 March, the US President reinforced the idea of free and open Indo-Pacific and denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. These actions signify a definite return of the US in East Asia, which is substantially affected by North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

Second, Kim Jong-un's relations with the US Democrats. When Kim Jong-un became the Supreme Leader of North Korea in 2011, Democrats were in power in the United States under Barack Obama, who chose an aggressive North Korea approach. The Obama administration, unsuccessfully, tried to bring Kim to the negotiation table by imposing sanctions. When Donald Trump came to power, he succeeded in appeasing the North Korean regime; however, the talks could not continue. North Korea never had good relations with the Democrats. Now with the recent tests, the relation may worsen.

Third, North Korea's missile technology trajectory. North Korea has tested over 147

ballistic missile and six nuclear missiles since 1984. The last ICBM test took place in 2019. The missile technology has gradually improved to include nuclear payloads and short-range solid-fuel warheads. These tests pose a direct threat to South Korea, Japan and the US.

What does it mean?

How would North Korea respond to the Biden administration has been a critical question. Should the missile tests be seen as Pyongyang making a statement? North Korea's actions signify that denuclearization, which the US has been pushing for, is non-negotiable.

North Korea will continue to develop nuclear and missile technology despite UN and US sanctions. The tests will also determine US' approach towards North Korea under the Biden administration.

North Korea's Party Congress: Kim Jong-un's next steps amidst economic crisis and change of leadership in the US

Avishka Ashok, 16 January 2021

What happened?

On 12 January 2021, North Korea ended its week-long 8th Party Congress. At the political gathering, Kim Jong-un addressed members of the Workers' Party and spoke about the current economic conditions of the country, future economic development goals, Inter-Korean relations, North Korean perception of the US and nuclear and defence policies. Kim called for greater nuclear war deterrence and maximum military power. His closing address, as cited by the country's official news agency KCNA states: "While strengthening our nuclear war deterrent, we need to do everything in order to build the most powerful military".

On 9 January, Kim commented on relations with the US and said: "Our external political activities must focus on our arch-enemy and the fundamental obstacle to our revolutionary development, the United States". On the Inter-Korean relations, he said: "the relations have now returned to the pre-Panmunjom Declaration

(2018) state, and the dream of unification is now even further away".

What is the background?

First, the Party Congress. It is a rare political event that takes place every five years and is attended by over 7000 party members. The last Party Congress took place in May 2016, after 35 years and continued for four days. The Party Congress is considered one of North Korea's most important political events; domestic policies, foreign affairs and defence strategy for the next five years are determined during this gathering.

Second, North Korea's Eighth Party Congress held last week has another significance as it is the first political gathering after the pandemic. The country claims to have zero cases of the coronavirus; members who attended the Congress did not take any precautions such as wearing masks or maintaining social distance. The timing is notable considering the change in American politics and the return of the Democrats. This is also the first meeting after the Hanoi Summit failed in 2019 when President Trump and Kim Jong-un broke off all engagements and future denuclearization plans.

Third, the Party Congress emphasized on the US, inter-Korea relations and nuclear deterrence. While proclaiming the US as its biggest enemy, Kim has stated that any progress with it will be possible only when Washington decides to withdraw its hostile North Korea policy. Until such change, North Korea will adopt an "eye for an eye" strategy against the US. Also, there is less urgency on the Inter-Korean relations, as Kim asserted during the Conference that South Korea relations have returned to square one. He accused Seoul of overlooking the warnings against bringing powerful military equipment and stopping the military exercises with the US. He also called for stronger nuclear deterrence and increasing the military prowess, besides giving a detailed portfolio of nuclear weapons to acquire in the coming years. He said North Korea is willing to hold talks with the US but will not negotiate denuclearization. In the closing remarks, Kim has specified that they will

strengthen their nuclear deterrence and build the strongest military at the same time.

Fourth, the unanimous election of Kim to the post of General Secretary of the Workers' Party. The only individuals to hold this title before him were Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung. Kim's appointment as the General Secretary has solidified his power and authority. In the 2016 Party Congress, Kim was awarded the title of Party Chairman, elevating him from the post of First Secretary. There were also expectations about Kim's sister, who has also been steadily rising to power, but she was not promoted during the Congress.

Fifth, Kim's acceptance of domestic failures. During the Party Congress's opening address, Kim acknowledged that the previous economic development plans were unsuccessful and have underachieved in almost all sectors. At the seventh Party Congress, he identified three sectors that would be key to the country's development and aimed to make the country self-sufficient in food, energy and consumer goods.

What does it mean?

Kim's acceptance of the regime's economic failures can be seen as an attempt to prepare North Korea for the tough and trying times ahead. The country may face another severe famine due to crop failures after the 2020 floods. North Korea may have to depend immensely on international organizations to feed its population.

Following Kim's statements, the South Korean government has reaffirmed that they are ready to hold talks with North Korea anytime, anywhere and are even prepared to hold virtual meets. The establishment of peace and reunification of the Korean Peninsula is a complicated issue as it involves the two Koreas and the confrontation between the US and North Korea.

The future of the Korean Peninsula depends heavily on the next steps of the incoming Biden Administration. The US will have to deal with challenges on restarting dialogue with North Korea and promoting peace in the region.

Australia: New Media law on Social Media and its global implications

Avishka Ashok, 28 February 2021

What happened?

On 26 February, Facebook resumed its services in Australia, after an eight-day black-out that disabled its users from sharing and viewing content created by Australian media companies. Australian users can now return to using the platform as they did previously.

On 25 February, after rounds of negotiations with Facebook, the Australian government agreed to amend parts of the proposed law and passed the 'News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code.' The law will force tech firms like Google and Facebook to pay for the news content created indigenously. The treasurer and communications minister made a joint statement referring to the law and said, "The code will ensure news media businesses are fairly remunerated for the content they generate, helping to sustain public interest journalism."

What is the background?

First, the global call for regulation of search engines and social media platforms. Australia may be the first country to legally bind Google and Facebook to a deal that compensates digital media but the fight against these firms had begun a few years ago. In 2018, the European Union reformed its copyright laws, enabling them to request a fee whenever its content was displayed on their websites. Countries like the UK, Canada, United States, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Thailand and New Zealand, to name a few, have all proposed similar bills in their parliament. The issue remains to be a grey area with governments unable to decide what parts need to be regulated.

Second, the need for the law. In the 21st century, where the information is available at record speed and bare minimum costs, media companies have to depend extensively on ad-revenues and subscriptions which fluctuate according to behavioural algorithms. Australia's News Media Bargaining Code dictates big tech firms compensate Australian news agencies for

using their content on popular social media platforms. The code seeks to address the imbalance of revenue suffered by media companies due to the upsurge in usage of digital platforms in recent decades. The new law will ensure appropriate compensation to media firms that will help them sustain in a world where news and information are freely and easily available.

Third, the privacy issue. National governments, while ensuring copyrights and neighbouring rights of media firms, will also be able to keep control of the content that reaches the internet. This would essentially change the existence of the free press, which Google and Facebook have been opposing. Both companies threatened to stop all services in the country. However, on 15 February, Seven West Media Ltd announced the signing of a \$ 30 million deal with Google. On 18 February, Facebook unfriended the country over the government's insistence on the bargaining code; it emphasized the difference in functioning from Google which is innately entangled with media agencies for sharing content. Facebook, however, is used by the same agencies to share their content voluntarily, to increase their subscription and ad revenue.

What does it mean?

First, a precedent for the rest of the world. Countries that have been looking forward to introducing similar laws in their country will now have an example to learn from. Other tech firms, along with Facebook and Google, have already started securing their interests in other countries. The new code will change the nature of all internet service providers.

Second, along with a regulated income for media firms, the content on the internet will also be regulated as only the paid articles can be made available on these websites. The issue will now extend to how much freedom media firms will be given to publishing news in its purest and unadulterated form.

SOUTHEAST ASIA THIS YEAR

The US and Southeast Asia: Vice President Kamala Harris visits Singapore and Vietnam

Vibha Venugopal, 29 August 2021

What happened?

On 23 August, Kamala Harris, during her visit to Southeast Asia said: "In our meeting, I underlined the United States' commitment to working with our allies and partners across the Indo-Pacific to preserve the rules-based international order and freedom of navigation, including in the South China Sea."

On the same day, the Singaporean Ministry of Foreign Affairs said: "Prime Minister Lee and Vice President Harris reaffirmed Singapore's and the United States' long-standing and multifaceted partnership. As they commemorate the 55th anniversary of Singapore-US ties, they also welcomed the announcement of new areas of cooperation."

What is the background?

First, a brief background to Kamala Harris' visit to Southeast Asia. Her visit to Singapore and Vietnam is aimed at improving ties and increasing economic cooperation with the US' two most important Indo-Pacific allies. The meeting with leaders from both countries discussed matters of shared concern, such as regional security, the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and cooperative efforts to establish a rules-based international order. Harris also confirmed and celebrated the US and these countries' strong cultural and people-to-people links.

Second, the growing US concerns in Southeast Asia. The region claims to have a long history of critical security and economic relations with the US and is strategically important. Despite this, the United States has been oblivious to the region's needs and economic potential for nearly two decades. President Biden and Vice President Harris have made it a priority to strengthen their global connections and keep the country safe. This trip will help them deepen their engagement in Southeast Asia.

Third, the China factor. Vice President Harris accused Beijing of undermining the rules-based order and spoke out against its claims to control a significant part of the South China Sea, a statement she repeated in Vietnam.

Fourth, the US efforts to strengthen its ties with the ASEAN. As a regional economic bloc, ASEAN plays a vital role in the Indo-Pacific plans of the US. Kamala Harris reaffirmed that the US believes that ASEAN should lead efforts to resolve the crisis in the country. ASEAN's diplomacy on Myanmar has moved at a glacial pace thus far. This acceptance of ASEAN's central role is vital to governments in the region, which are concerned about the intensifying rivalry between the US and China, as well as the dominance of the so-called 'Quad,' the new strategic partnership between the United States, Australia, Japan, and India, in the US diplomacy.

What does it mean?

The high profile visit underlines the importance of Southeast Asia as a region, and ASEAN as an economic bloc, to American interests. While the region has always played an important role in the US calculations, the new Indo-Pacific push makes it even more significant. As could be derived from the statements of Kamala Harris, China assumes large for the US in the region.

Southeast Asia: Finally, ASEAN appoints a Special Envoy to Myanmar

Vibha Venugopal, 8 August 2021

What happened?

On 4 August, the 28th ASEAN Regional Forum ministers appointed Brunei's Second Minister of Foreign Affairs, Erywan Yusof, as the Special Envoy to Myanmar. Reuters, on 7 August, referred to a statement by the envoy saying: "The planned travel to Myanmar is in the works, and we need to make sure we're fully prepared, unlike the visit I had in June. He even stated that during his next ASEAN visit to Myanmar, he will seek a more substantial dialogue, while emphasizing the importance of allowing him full access to all sides." Earlier, on 1 August, Myanmar's military ruler Min Aung Hlaing

expressed his "willingness to engage with ASEAN."

On 6 August, the US State Department released a statement by Secretary of the State expressing grave concern about the military coup in Myanmar and calling on the ASEAN "to unite in urging the military to cease the violence, release all those who have been wrongfully jailed, and resume Myanmar's democratic path."

What is the background?

First, the ASEAN response to Myanmar. Given its shared border with Myanmar, Thailand has the greatest stakes. Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have been the most active and vocal in criticizing the Tatmadaw's control. The Philippines government's reactions have been chaotic. On the other hand, Brunei, the current chair of ASEAN, has been quiet as it seeks to convene discussions amongst other ASEAN members. Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos have registered muted responses. As a regional organization, the reactions of the ASEAN to the coup reflect the region's diverse national systems and outlook. It ranged from attempts to mediate an internal deal in Myanmar to near-total silence.

Second, ASEAN's five-point consensus on Myanmar. The five-point consensus arrived in April 2021 aimed at addressing Myanmar's deteriorating socio-political crisis and find a peaceful solution. It called for the cessation of violence, facilitation of constructive dialogue with the National Unity Government and other parties, the deployment of an ASEAN Special Envoy, the facilitation of humanitarian aid, and a visit by an ASEAN Special Envoy. Despite the repeated failed attempts for a consensus, it is hailed as a step towards a political solution to the situation at the time.

Third, the ineffectiveness of ASEAN in dealing with Myanmar. While many perceive ASEAN as the obvious political entity to lead efforts to find a political solution to the problem, it has a long history of refusing to do so. Especially in terms of international relations, the General seizing power leaves ASEAN with a reduced role as well as the ability to contain an increasingly

assertive China, which seems to leave them hanging over the bridge.

Fourth, Myanmar's response. As part of the five-point consensus that the military government has agreed to, the Tatmadaw has helped in narrowing down the final ASEAN communique through negotiations. They have even requested the ASEAN members to provide them with the freedom to deliver aid to the humanitarian workers. Whereas the Myanmar civil society organizations express great displeasure with ASEAN for their lack of inclusive decision-making and passivity in the face of some of the region's most heinous atrocities.

What does it mean?

First, the crisis in Myanmar is too hot for the ASEAN to handle, causing reputational costs. Second, ASEAN is no stronger than its weakest link since members stay aloof, not allowing them to act decisively. Third, Myanmar's military administration will approach the five-point consensus and the ASEAN-led diplomatic process a la carte, delaying and complying with the envoy as needed to buy time and consolidate power.

Myanmar: Six months of the military rule

Vibha Venugopal, 1 August 2021

What happened?

On 1 August, Myanmar will complete six months of military rule and deposition of the NLD led government. Reuters, on 1 August, referred to Myanmar's military ruler Min Aung Hlaing promising new multi-party elections. It also quoted him announcing: "Myanmar is ready to work on ASEAN cooperation within the ASEAN framework, including the dialogue with the ASEAN special envoy in Myanmar."

On 30 July, the UN News referred to a statement issued by UN's top aid official in Myanmar, Acting Humanitarian and Resident Coordinator Ramanathan Balakrishnan saying: "The situation to be characterized by instability and a deteriorating socio-economic and security situation...The UN will continue to call out human rights violations and is committed to stay

and deliver lifesaving humanitarian assistance to the people of Myanmar."

On 31 July, a report released by the Human Rights Watch quoted Brad Adams, its Asia Director saying: "Myanmar's junta has responded to massive popular opposition to the coup with killings, torture, and arbitrary detention of people who merely want last year's election results to be respected and a government that reflects the popular will...These attacks on the population amount to crimes against humanity for which those responsible should be brought to account."

What is the background?

First, the consolidation of military rule during the last six months. The coup began on 1 February, when the military junta led by Gen Min Aung Hlaing nullified the November 2020 elections. Ever since, the regime started detaining hundreds of lawmakers, activists, and civil officials. It also started blocking access to various social media, intensifying surveillance, and imposing night blackouts. The regime refused to heed to international requests and warnings.

Second, the political trial. The detention of Suu Kyi and her top allies brings to a closure the experiment with democracy in Myanmar, which followed a half-century military rule earlier. After the four months of detention, Aung Sang Suu Kyi is under trial by a junta court. She faces a mix of charges that include the following: illegally possessing walkie talkies, flouting of the COVID-19 restrictions during the elections in 2020, causing fear and alarm, unspecified breaches of the 'Official Secrets Act' and accepting USD 600,000 cash and 11 kilograms of gold from a former political ally.

Third, internal protests and regime repression. Since the coup began, resistance by people began in many forms. Thousands started protesting over the weeks in the cities and villages around Myanmar. This includes blockade and intense confrontations by the journalists, students and the pro-democracy medical staff and public on strike, avoiding the hospitals run by the junta. The regime came down heavily, which led to the casualties being

over 900 protestors and several thousand being arbitrarily arrested and detained.

Fourth, the regional response, or the lack of it. In April 2021, the ASEAN, as a part of their Leaders Meeting in Jakarta, announced an ambitious five-point consensus calling for the following: an immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar; a constructive dialogue among all parties concerned; a special envoy to facilitate mediation; provide humanitarian assistance; and a special envoy and delegation to meet with all parties concerned. Three months later this meeting, ASEAN's role remains limited. In July, Singapore's foreign minister, in his response to a Parliamentary question, stated: "We recognise that implementation of the Five-Point Consensus has been slow and a little disappointing." The ASEAN is yet to appoint a special envoy.

Fifth, the international responses. The US has led the international effort to persuade the military administration to reverse course, desist from additional violence, restore the country's democratic route, release all those who have been wrongfully jailed, and hold those responsible for the coup and brutality against the people accountable. But the impact of international response and sanctions remain limited. The UNSC remains divided, with Russia and China backing the military regime in Myanmar.

What does it mean?

First, the regime response so far does not provide a level playing field to those who demand the restoration of democracy. Second, the international response remains ineffective, with limited impact over the sanctions, and also due to the support provided by Russia and China to the regime. Internal developments within Myanmar and the divided and ineffective external responses means the military regime will continue to consolidate its rule.

Myanmar: 100 days of military rule is marked by instability, with use of force and public protests

Aparupa Bhattacharjee, 16 May 2021

What happened?

On 11 May, several protests, strikes, and rallies were organized across Myanmar to condemn the 100 days of military rule. Following an organized coup to establish the military government, on 1 February 2021, public protests and civil disobedience movement are common.

On 8 May, the government denounced the newly formed National Unity Government (NUG), a parallel government, as a 'terrorist' group. On 7 May, the government transferred the control of the General Administrative Department (GAD) back to the Home Affairs ministry to revive the neighbourhood surveillance networks. On 5 May, NUG declared to have formed peoples' defense force which comprises of common citizens who are given defense training by some of the ethnic armed groups.

This week witnessed several bomb attacks targeting the security forces and military-owned institutions and infrastructures. The skirmishes between Tatmadaw and the ethnic armed groups, especially KIA, KNU, and KNLA escalated, forcing citizens to escape to the neighbouring countries.

What is the background?

First, 100 days of consolidation by the military. The military took over, stating fraud in the 2020 election and to 'uphold democracy.' None of the claims by the military regarding the fraudulent nature of the last election had any proof. The detention of Aung San Suu Kyi, former President, with several members of the National League of Democracy has not helped the government gain the required legitimacy. Further, this government has concentrated on repressing anti-government voices through atrocities, violence, detentions, and suppressing media rather than development. The government has no clarity about the COVID-19 impact on the country or the dissemination of vaccines (received 5,00,000 vaccines on 4 May from the People's Liberation Army). As per a UNDP

report, by 2022, nearly half of the population in Myanmar will be in poverty due to the ongoing conflict and pandemic.

Second, 100 days of popular resistance. Immediately after the coup, several public servants and health facilitators have called for a civil disobedience movement. Within a week, full-fledged protests erupted across the country, demanding the release of detained leaders and restoring the elected government. Although the protest was primarily youth-led, it received support from all walks of life. The response from the security forces seemed cautious in the beginning but they quickly resorted to vehement repressions. More than 700 have been killed and 4,000 have been detained to date. In response to the growing atrocities, several groups of protestors have used homemade bombs, guns made of cycle tyres, and Molotov cocktails since mid-March. These groups are actively supported by several ethnic armed groups. Most of the ethnic armed groups, including those who had signed the National Ceasefire Agreement, have not recognized this government.

Third, 100 days of international apathy and weak regional response. Australia, the US, New Zealand, the UK, and several other countries have criticized the coup, de-recognized, and levied sanctions on the military government. But the sanctions are ineffective, as stated by a government spokesperson to CNN because they are habituated to dealing with severe sanctions in the past. The UNSC has failed to officially condemn the government owing to the support of Tatmadaw's two allies, China and Russia. In the region, the efforts from ASEAN have also proved lousy and without impact.

What does it mean?

First, although the government has assured an election by 2022 it is evident it will be a sham and will be a repeat of history from 2010. Second, the conflict within the country is likely to escalate and may also head towards a civil war. This will derail the little hopes of development that the country had during the previous partial-democratic government.

SOUTH ASIA THIS YEAR

Afghanistan: The G20's "Extraordinary Summit"

Joeana Cera Matthews, 17 October 2021

What happened?

On 12 October, the G20 leaders met via video conference in a special meeting scheduled to discuss the Afghanistan crisis. The meeting was presided by the current G20 chair and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi. He commented: "(we) must acknowledge that they'll be judged for their actions and not their words."

Outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel said: "... to look on as 40 million people descend into chaos because there's no electricity supply or financial system – that cannot and must not be the goal of the international community," while the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated: "... the Afghan people should not pay the price of the Taliban's actions." UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in a statement appealed to the Taliban to "keep their promises to women and girls and fulfil their obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law."

On 11 October, the Taliban's acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi said: "We want positive relationships with the whole world... such a balanced relationship can save Afghanistan from instability."

What is the background?

First, the Afghanistan crisis. The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has severely hit the country's already weak economic system; primarily because the group was unable to seize the previous government's funds. This led them to plead poverty and thus, deepen the humanitarian crisis with broken banks, unpaid officials, inability to obtain food, and skyrocketing inflation. The deteriorating situation of women in the country, and their increasing repression, has also raised global concerns.

Second, the virtual G20 meeting. This is the first time the G20 members gathered to discuss the aftermath of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Their primary goal was to provide aid to prevent Afghanistan from an impending 'economic catastrophe'. The EU stepped up its previous EUR 300 million aid by another 700 million, accounting for a total of EUR one billion. This would be given both to Afghanistan and those countries harboring Afghan refugees. Germany, separately, pledged EUR 600 million. The IMF and World Bank, present at the meeting, agreed in principle to support the aid. The UN and its agencies are expected to distribute the aid; however, they do not have a choice but to involve the Taliban. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also proposed to establish a G20 special working group to address Afghanistan-related issues. Despite inviting countries like Qatar, which has been accepting Afghan refugees since the crisis began; the Taliban was not invited to the meeting.

Third, the refusal to recognize the Taliban. The virtual conference took place while the Taliban held its first face-to-face talks in Qatar with the US-EU emissaries. Despite the inevitable involvement of the Taliban in the aid distribution, the G20 leaders firmly refused to politically recognize the militant group's government. It has been nearly 45 days since the Taliban takeover and the government is yet to be recognized by a country. Methods to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven for militant groups like al-Qaeda and the IS group were also discussed.

Fourth, the absentees. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping skipped the meeting; instead, their respective foreign ministers attended. Prior to the meeting, China had called for the removal of economic sanctions imposed on Afghanistan along with the unfreezing of their overseas international assets. Reflecting diplomatic tensions, Russia scheduled a rival conference on Afghanistan for 20 October. The invitees for this meeting include the Taliban, Pakistan, India, and Iran. Commenting on their absence, Draghi said that there "weren't specific reasons for absence," and

that they were wholly involved in the process ahead of the meeting. The UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson was also absent since he is on holiday.

What does this mean?

There is quite an effort being put to aid Afghanistan despite the world's differences with the Taliban. As previous development aids remain frozen overseas, the global leaders are in a fix on how to aid the people of Afghanistan without recognizing the Taliban government. The ability to realize this aid and make it reach those in need, in time, will determine the economic and humanitarian future of Afghanistan.

The New Afghanistan, with an Old Taliban

D Suba Chandran, 5 September 2021

What happened?

On 4 September, Kabul airport became functional, and news reports mention the first domestic flight taking off.

On 4 September, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar told Al Jazeera, "I assure the people that we strive to improve their living conditions and that the government will be responsible to everyone and will provide security because it is necessary for economic development, not just in Afghanistan but in the whole world... If we are able to provide security, we will overcome other problems, and from here the wheel of progress and advancement will begin."

On 4 September, Amrullah Saleh, former Vice-President, released a video informing that he is staying in the Panjshir valley and organizing a resistance against the Taliban. There have been contradicting reports from the Taliban and the National Resistance Front, about the capture of the Panjshir Valley by the former.

On 4 September, a group of women marched in Kabul. According to an Al Jazeera report, "dozens of women took to the streets of the capital on Saturday to demand their right to

work, a role in any future government, and a seat at the table in discussions with the Taliban."

On 31 August, President Biden made a lengthy statement after completing what he considered as the "biggest airlifts in history, with more than 120,000 people evacuated to safety." And he said: "This is a new world. The terror threat has metastasized across the world, well beyond Afghanistan. We face threats from al-Shabaab in Somalia; al Qaeda affiliates in Syria and the Arabian Peninsula; and ISIS attempting to create a caliphate in Syria and Iraq, and establishing affiliates across Africa and Asia. The fundamental obligation of a President, in my opinion, is to defend and protect America — not against threats of 2001, but against the threats of 2021 and tomorrow. That is the guiding principle behind my decisions about Afghanistan. I simply do not believe that the safety and security of America is enhanced by continuing to deploy thousands of American troops and spending billions of dollars a year in Afghanistan."

On 30 August, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution on Afghanistan. According to the press release from the UNSC, the resolution was "adopted by a vote of 13 in favour with two abstentions (Russian Federation and China), the 15-member organ demanded that Afghan territory not be used to threaten or attack any country and reiterated the importance of combating terrorism in Afghanistan."

What is the background?

First the new normal in Afghanistan. While the Taliban is trying to form a government, the people are getting ready to live with the new government. With the frantic evacuation by the international community over by 31 August and the windows of escaping the Taliban over, people are getting ready to face their future with the Taliban. The primary emphasis for them is the daily economy; with the banks closed and no work, how to manage their lives and provide for the family has become an important question than the form of the Afghan government. The rest of the world is also getting ready to face the new reality in Afghanistan.

Second, the delay in the Taliban announcing the formation of a new government and the reasons behind it. The Taliban occupied Kabul and took over the Presidential Palace on 16 August. Three weeks later, it is yet to announce the government. While it is easier for the Taliban to wage guerrilla warfare and run down provinces and cities until 15 August, governing Afghanistan would be a more significant challenge. The delay in announcing the government underlines the background discussion within the Taliban and with other leaders like Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah. Who would lead the Taliban government, and who all will become its public face, seem to be the focus of an internal debate. The Taliban would need to showcase a façade of an inclusive government to attract international aid. While their supporters outside the borders would have supported the Taliban war machine, helping them to run Afghanistan would need larger global assistance.

Third, the global confusion on what to do with the Taliban Afghanistan. While for the first two weeks after 16 August, the international community was busy witnessing the evacuation and the return of the Taliban, now the question is – should they recognize the new government or not. How to respond to humanitarian aid to the Afghan people and how to channel it without supporting the Taliban are two primary questions.

Fourth, the resistance against the Taliban. Though there were a few oppositions in the eastern provinces, including a group of women in Kabul marching with a set of demands, the Taliban is yet to witness a serious resistance against it. The only exception is whether the National Resistance Front in the Panjshir Valley. While the Taliban is trying to recapture the valley and crush the NRF, the latter is trying to find space and keep floating. Their first priority would be survival before any counterattack. For any meaningful resistance against the Taliban, it is a long road to Kabul.

What does it mean?

The Taliban is back in Afghanistan. Though they are yet to announce the new government,

the people are adjusting to the new normal in Afghanistan. Until 31 August, those countries that were engaged in Afghanistan, including the US, were preoccupied with the evacuation. Now the exit is complete, the international community is assessing their likely interests in Afghanistan, and exploring options to deal with the Taliban.

The UN Security Council stands divided, with Russia and China backing the Taliban; will the rest of the UNSC members leave the fate of Afghanistan to these two countries, along with Iran and Pakistan, or will they continue to invest?

Biden's recent statement is vital in the above context: "I respectfully suggest you ask yourself this question: If we had been attacked on 11 September 2001, from Yemen instead of Afghanistan, would we have ever gone to war in Afghanistan — even though the Taliban controlled Afghanistan in 2001? I believe the honest answer is "no." That's because we had no vital national interest in Afghanistan other than to prevent an attack on America's homeland and their our friends. And that's true today." Emphasis added.

Afghanistan: With the Taliban back, Pakistan feels victorious in Kabul

Harsimran Singh Sondhi, 22 August 2021

What happened?

On 17 August, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan declared that the Afghans had "broken the shackles of slavery" in a war-torn country. He believes that the withdrawal was a "logical solution." Roofi Hasan, who is the Prime Minister's special assistant, took to Twitter to state that Ashraf Ghani's "corrupt" government rule was a "virtually smooth shift" to the Taliban. Many retired and serving generals are thrilled that Pakistan will finally have "friends" in the driving seat in Kabul, and have expressed admiration openly for the Taliban.

On 20 August, Pakistan's army and the Taliban held a "meet and greet" at the border areas. One of the Pakistani soldiers was also seen taking a

selfie with one of the Taliban. The friendly act came after Islamabad released terrorist Mullah Mohammad Rasool, the leader of a splinter faction of the Taliban. He spent around five years in Pakistan prison and was freed days after the collapse of the Ashraf Ghani administration. On the same day, Imran Khan urged his ministers to refrain from commenting on the Taliban takeover as it is a "sensitive matter."

On 21 August, reports suggested, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi is likely to visit Kabul on 22 August 2021. Pakistan is determined to play a "positive role" and their envoy in Afghanistan said in a statement, that he is also in touch with different Afghan personalities.

What is the background?

First, Pakistan's Taliban history. The Taliban emerged as an armed group in Pakistan. Many of its members had studied in the religious schools in Pakistan. Islamabad was also one of the three capitals, alongside Saudi Arabia and the UAE to formally recognize the Taliban in the 1990s. During the last two decades, successive American military leadership fighting the war in Afghanistan complained about Pakistan playing a double role with the latter continuing to support the Taliban.

Second, Pakistan's recent engagements. Pakistan was a part of the Doha dialogue, the 'extended Troika for Afghan peace' to discuss the Taliban takeover and its implications, and the Afghan Quadrilateral dialogue, along with China, Russia and the US. The US was dependent on Pakistan to get the Taliban on board, and its Afghan envoy Zalmay Khalilzad made multiple visits to Islamabad. Pakistan used its Taliban linkages, to present itself as a vital cog in the Doha dialogue process. Islamabad has been providing the Taliban shelter and a resource base in its territory even as the world expected it to put pressure on the Taliban to arrive at a negotiated political power-sharing deal with Ghani's government.

Third, Pakistan's friction and lukewarm relations with Ashraf Ghani's government. Ever since the fall of the Taliban government in 2001,

administrations in Afghanistan have publicly chastised Pakistan for backing the Taliban. In the present context, the Taliban government in Kabul will undoubtedly act in Pakistan's interest; Pakistan could return the favour by utilizing its soft power to invoke international acceptance of a Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Fourth, Pakistan's economic interests in Afghanistan. Pakistan hosts millions of Afghan refugees on its soil at a huge economic cost. In recent years, Islamabad has also developed new economic and energy interests in Afghanistan with the construction work on the Central Asia - South Asia Regional Trade and Transmission Project (CASA-1000). The CASA-1000 project is a 1,270km power transmission line that is expected to export excess hydropower generated in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Pakistan through Afghanistan.

What does it mean?

The return of the Taliban can have both good and bad implications on Pakistan. Pakistan may feel better with the exit of the US and the likely decline in the Indian presence in Afghanistan. Pakistan may also feel better with a friendly regime in Kabul, which has been one of its primary interests in Afghanistan. However, there are dangers as well for Pakistan. What lessons will the Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) and other extremist groups in Pakistan learn from the success of the Taliban?

Afghanistan: The international failure fastens the downfall

Harsimran Singh Sondhi, 15 August 2021

What happened?

On 11 August, the 'extended' Troika Plus meeting on discussions of Afghan settlement between Russia, China, the United States and Pakistan was held in Doha, Qatar. According to the Qatari Foreign Ministry, the meeting took place behind closed doors. The meeting's agenda was to examine the present situation in Kabul and curb rampant Taliban offences.

On 14 August, the Taliban took control of the strategic Mazar-e-Sharif in the north. On 13 August, Herat and Ghazni fell. On 12 August, Herat fell; so did Kandahar. On 14 August, President Ashraf Ghani spoke for the first time and said that the remobilization of the Afghan forces was of top priority. Also, on 14 August, President Biden announced that he would send 5000 American troops to evacuate the US and allied personnel. According to a Wall Street Journal report, these new steps by Biden "don't represent a major course correction in his decision to withdraw American forces from Afghanistan and largely consist of adjustments to moves already underway as he seeks to disengage from America's longest war."

On 13 August, NATO allies met in the North Atlantic Council to discuss the present situation in Afghanistan. The alliance condemned the Taliban's growing attacks "on Afghan civilians" and said: "We continue to assess the developments on the ground, and we are in constant contact with the Afghan authorities and the rest of the international community." NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg said: "Our aim remains to support the Afghan government and security forces. We maintain our diplomatic presence in Kabul and the security of our personnel is paramount."

What is the background?

First, the finality of the US withdrawal. The US has set 31 August 2021 as the deadline to withdraw from Afghanistan completely and has decided to end their longest ongoing war. President Biden said earlier: "The Afghans must decide their own future, and it is an unwinnable war." Despite media pressure and statements by senior military leaders who have fought in Afghanistan, Biden's decision to withdraw seems to be final. This means Afghanistan would have to handle the fighting on its own. While the American troops have slowly reduced their role in the fighting, they have been providing crucial air, cyber and intelligence support to the Afghan forces.

Second, the weakness of the Afghan Security Forces. The pace at which the provinces and the capitals have fallen over the last two weeks

highlight the capabilities and willingness to fight the Taliban. From the available reports, it appears, it was more of a walkover for the Taliban than a takeover following a tough fight.

Third, the international response to the Taliban offensive. Despite the Troika meeting, statements from the UN, and a NATO meeting in Brussels, there has been no action taken so far. The statement by the UN Secretary-General that Afghanistan is "spinning out of control" is not backed by any action at the UN Security Council.

What does it mean?

Afghanistan is on the verge of being taken over by the Taliban. Though there is a discussion on "power-sharing", the Taliban would want otherwise. Rather, they would press for complete control. Why would they want to share power, if they can take control?

Afghanistan: The US and NATO decides to withdraw; Ghani accepts it

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 18 April 2021

What happened?

On 14 April, President Joe Biden announced: "It is time to end the forever war." He also added that he would withdraw the remaining US troops from Afghanistan by 11 September 2021, as it has accomplished its primary mission of denying terrorists a haven in Afghanistan. He said: "So, in keeping with that agreement and with our national interests, the United States will begin final withdrawal – begin it on 1 May of this year." He stated that the withdrawal would be made responsibly and in full coordination with the US allies, assuring that their diplomatic and humanitarian work continues. In response, President Ashraf Ghani, after holding a telephone call with Biden, said he respects the US decision to withdraw forces from Afghanistan.

On 15 April, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with the Afghan leaders in Kabul to discuss the troop withdrawal. He said: "We never intended to have a permanent military presence here. Threat from Al Qaeda in

Afghanistan is significantly degraded." He added: "The United States will honor its commitments to the government and people of Afghanistan." In response, Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation Abdullah Abdullah said: "Thank you...you have been with us-in the past 20 years especially-you have made tremendous contributions and sacrifices alongside our own people and we are grateful and thank you for your support of peace."

After Biden's announcement, North Atlantic Treaty Organization Chief Jens Stoltenberg stated, the alliance has agreed to withdraw its nearly 7,000 troops from Afghanistan to match the US president's decision of withdrawal.

What is the background?

First, the US debate over withdrawal. Over the past few years, successive administrations have contemplated and worked towards withdrawing the forces from Afghanistan. Finally, the US-Taliban Agreement in 2020 set conditions aimed at withdrawing troops by 1 May 2021. Within the US, the decision to withdraw is divided; some favour the decision. Others argue it would create further instability as the withdrawal plan rejects the "conditions-based" approach that previous administrations had taken.

Second, a complete withdrawal of all foreign troops. It is not just the US that will withdraw its troops; NATO had also announced its withdrawal. They went into Afghanistan together and will now leave also together.

Third, the defeat of al-Qaeda. An assessment that the Biden administration considered pivotal while deciding to pull out forces is their belief that al Qaeda or other terrorist groups do not pose an immediate threat to strike the US from Afghanistan.

Fourth, the upcoming Turkey conference. To revive the negotiations, the Biden administration has pushed for a new round of talks in Turkey. It is tentatively scheduled for 24 April. However, the Taliban has maintained that they would not take part in any summit until the foreign forces leave Afghanistan.

What does it mean?

First, the withdrawal is too early. With the negotiations being in the nascent stage, there is much at stake; the complete withdrawal of all troops will only create a big vacuum. Although the threat from international terrorist groups operating from Afghanistan has reduced, it may not stay the same. With an already weak Afghan government facing pressure from the Taliban, al Qaeda to resurface.

Second, the impact of the withdrawal on the negotiations. The only positive side of the withdrawal might be the Taliban's change of mind in participating proactively in the negotiations.

Afghanistan: The Moscow Summit

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 21 March 2021

What happened?

On 18 March, Russia hosted the first of the three international conferences to revive the stalled Afghanistan negotiations. The Moscow conference endorsed the 2020 UNSC resolution 2513 that opposed the restoration of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The conference was attended by representatives of the Afghan government (Abdullah Abdullah), Taliban (Mullah Baradar), Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (Zalmay Khalilzad), and several other countries, including China, Pakistan, Iran, India.

At the opening of the conference, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, "We hope that today's conversation will help create conditions for achieving progressive inter-Afghan negotiations." Four countries - Russia, China, the US and Pakistan issued a joint statement. It stated that they would not support the return of the Islamic emirate system in Afghanistan, recognized the will of the Afghan people for peace, called for a reduction in violence from all sides and the Taliban to not launch a Spring offensive.

What is the background?

First, the inability of the Doha negotiations to achieve a substantial outcome. Since the start of the negotiations in Doha in 2020, the sense of urgency to find common ground, reduce violence and move forward to substantive issues has not been possible. Instead, the negotiating parties continued to remain divided, both on procedural issues and on the validity of the US–Taliban agreement.

Second, the entry of other regional players. Before the Moscow Conference, regional players did not have a direct role in the Afghan negotiations. A meeting in Turkey of regional players next month will follow the Moscow Conference.

Third, the United Nation's entry into the negotiations. Over recent months, the UN has expressed its readiness to assist in the Afghan talks. The spokesperson for the UN secretary-general said, "We stand ready to assist the parties as requested. Our role must and will always be in support of the Afghan people and must be agreeable to the parties in the conflict."

Fourth, renewed efforts by the US in reviving the stalled negotiations. The Moscow conference comes amid new developments in efforts to reach a political settlement in Afghanistan, including the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's letter to President Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah and the US-proposed draft for Afghan peace.

What does it mean?

The Moscow conference is seen as a critical first step in restarting the negotiations. However, the conference is merely an exit strategy constructed by the US-based on unrealistic timelines and agendas that do not solely bring a solution for Afghanistan.

With the UN entering the negotiation, it will move from the side-lines to a more central role. However, the UN has to go beyond the rhetoric and implement practical confidence-building measures between the two groups. Peace in Afghanistan needs to be 'Afghan-led' and 'Afghan-owned,' which is still missing. However, regional and external assistance is

crucial for Afghanistan; left on their own would have repercussions. Thus, the negotiations would have to find a balance between the two.

Afghanistan: Talks in Doha resume after weeks of delay

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 28 February 2021

What happened?

On 22 February, Taliban spokesman Mohammad Naeem via Twitter stated "This evening, a meeting was held in a cordial atmosphere between the leaders and some members of the two delegations for the inter-Afghan talks. The meeting emphasized the need to continue negotiations. And assigned groups to set the agenda, to continue their meetings on the subject." The resumption of talks comes after weeks of delays, escalating violence and a change in US diplomatic leadership as the Biden administration took office. On 25 February, the Afghan Republic and the Taliban negotiators held their third meeting with the main focus of the talks being on the agenda of the negotiations.

On 21 February, Abdullah Abdullah, head of the High Council for National Reconciliation stated that the Taliban violence remains high and that the Afghan people are bearing the sacrifice, calling on the Taliban to return to the negotiating table.

What is the background?

First, the stalled negotiations. The first round of the intra-Afghan negotiations ended on 14 December 2020 after three months of talks. During that round, the teams barely managed to agree on the rules of procedure for the talks themselves and exchange preliminary lists of issues they wanted on the agenda. The second round of intra-Afghan negotiations was scheduled to begin on 5 January 2021, in Doha. However, the negotiations in Doha were stalled as both sides did not meet to discuss the agenda mainly because of the Taliban's missing presence in Doha. Since the resumption of talks, the Taliban has been on a diplomatic spree with multiple visits to Iran and Russia, Turkmenistan and Turkey seeking support for the US-Taliban

Agreement. As a result, the Afghan government's negotiating team warned that if the Taliban failed to resume the talks, the government would recall its team from Doha.

Second, the shift in the US administration and one year of the US-Taliban deal. The reason for a lack of urgency in the continuing talks has been attributed to the change in the US administration led by President Joe Biden and their policy on Afghanistan. As the Biden administration is reviewing the US-Taliban agreement signed in February 2020, the Taliban sent an open letter calling on the US to adhere to its part of the agreement by fully withdrawing its troops.

Third, the continuing surge in violence amid the stalled talks. According to reports released by the UNAMA in 2020, violence has surged across Afghanistan, with ground fighting causing the most casualties followed by suicide and roadside bomb attacks, targeted killings by the Taliban and air raids by Afghan troops. The reports cited that nearly 6,000 Afghan civilians were killed or wounded in the first nine months of the year as heavy fighting between government forces and Taliban fighters rages on, despite efforts to find peace.

What does it mean?

Although both the Taliban and government leaders have said that these talks are a "unique, historic opportunity" for Afghans to solve their differences. The sense of urgency from either side to find common ground, reduce violence and move forward seems to be missing in the current round of negotiations. Rather, the resumption of talks seems to be personally motivated from each side. With intra-Afghan negotiations having barely scraped the surface of substantial talks, any significant breakthrough remains highly unlikely.

As the United States reviews its Afghanistan policy which has so far yielded few concrete results, the agreement still has its leverage to help stop attacks and encourage a ceasefire. However, what the reviewed agreement will look like and if the Taliban accepts it, remains in question.

India and China: The 13th round of bilateral military dialogue

Teshu Singh, 17 October 2021

What happened?

On 10 October, the 13th round of the India-China Corps Commander Level Meeting was held at the Chushul-Moldo point. The delegation from the Indian side was led by 14 corp commander Lt-General PGK Menon and South Xinjiang Military District chief of staff Major General Zhao Zhidan. During the meeting, the discussion focused on resolving the friction points relating to Depsang Bulge and Charding Nullah Junction.

On 11 October, the Ministry of External Affairs said that the Indian side making "constructive suggestions" for settling the remaining areas. The statement said: the Chinese side "was not agreeable and also could not provide any forward-looking proposals. The meeting thus did not result in resolution of the remaining areas." Further, the Indian side pointed out that the situation along the LAC had been caused by "unilateral attempts of Chinese side to alter the status quo and in violation of the bilateral agreements. Hence it is necessary that "the Chinese side take appropriate steps in the remaining areas so as to restore peace and tranquility along the LAC in the Western Sector."

What is the background?

First, the lack of consensus. Contrary to the 12th round of Corps commander-level talks held in August 2021, there was no joint press release after the conclusion of the 13th round of meeting. After the 13th round of meeting, China was the first to release a statement about the meeting. China accused India of "persisting unreasonable and unrealistic demands which added difficulties to the negotiations." In addition, the spokesperson for the Western Theater Command of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) said "instead of misjudging the situation, the Indian side should cherish the hard-won situation in China-India border areas". In an editorial in the Global Times, titled "India's unreasonable demands in 13th military

talks' risk new conflict", the authors blame India for the deadlock in the talks. The Indian side released the statement only on 11 October 2021.

Second, the factors for the disagreement. The deadlock in the talks can also be attributed to the two recent face-offs; one near Yangtse in the Tawang sector of Arunachal Pradesh and the second, on 30 August 2021, around 100 Chinese troops transgressed the LAC in the Barahoti sector in Uttarakhand.

Third, aggravating bilateral relations post-meeting. China has objected to the recent visit of the Indian Vice-President to Arunachal Pradesh, the spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said: "so-called Arunachal Pradesh established unilaterally and illegally by the Indian side and is firmly opposed to the Indian leader's visit to the area concerned".

What does this mean?

The response from China indicates that they are unwilling to go beyond the disengagement achieved in the Pangong Tso-Kailash region in February and at PP-17A near the Gogra post in early August. However, this does not mean that there is a deadlock. The two sides have agreed to maintain communications as well as stability along the LAC.

The recent developments at the border have given an indication that the progress at the border level talks is not positive. It also means that the Indian soldiers will have to be stationed in those disputed places in adverse conditions for the second successive year due to the stalemate. Thus, unlike the previous round of talks, the difference of opinion vis-à-vis the resolution of LAC has become perceptible.

India: The second wave drives an unprepared country into a humanitarian disaster

Lokendra Sharma, 25 April 2021

What happened?

On 22 April, India recorded over 3.14 lakh COVID-19 infections, the highest daily infection

recorded anywhere in the world. On 23 April, even this grim milestone was surpassed as the country reported over 3.22 lakh infections and 2,247 deaths, taking the total reported cases to 1,62,57,337 cases and deaths to 1,86,919.

On 23 April, New Delhi's Sir Ganga Ram Hospital said that 25 patients had died due to a shortage of oxygen. In another incident, 20 patients died at Delhi's Jaipur Golden Hospital due to oxygen shortage.

On 23 April, PM Modi chaired a review meeting with chief ministers of 11 high burden states. Chief ministers flagged issues of oxygen supply and vaccine pricing. PM Modi asked states to ensure uninterrupted movement of medical oxygen and assured that the Railways and the Indian Air Force had been pressed into service.

On 22 April, the Supreme Court (SC) took cognizance of the rising cases. But, on 23 April, the SC adjourned the case till 27 April. Earlier, on 19 April, the central government announced that everyone above the age of 18 would be eligible for vaccine shots from May 2021.

What is the background?

First, an extremely overstretched healthcare system. With demand for beds, oxygen and drugs outstripping supply by a huge margin, Indian cities (Delhi, Mumbai, Lucknow, Ahmedabad and Bengaluru) have witnessed people dying in search of beds/oxygen and round-the-clock working crematoriums with waiting lists. The situation is so grim that the healthcare workers themselves cannot get beds in their own or other hospitals.

Second, the failure of the political class. Many political leaders, cutting across Indian geography and party lines, have either held political rallies or organized religious congregations. PM Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah held massive rallies in West Bengal even as the cases spiralled this month, flouting all safety protocols. Some leaders even downplayed the pandemic.

Third, the carelessness and culpability of people. After seeing a trend of declining cases for four

months (November 2020 - February 2021), people assumed that the pandemic had waned away. With a false sense of security, they violated safety protocols like social distancing and wearing masking. A narrative about the innate immunity of Indian people also surfaced and was readily bought by them; this happened even when the epidemiologists have been continuously warning about the imminent second wave.

Fourth, failure of the three pillars of democracy. The SC and mainstream TV media and Election Commission of India (ECI) could have also played a better role. Taking a very delayed cognizance of the matter, and only after various High Courts passed very critical orders and observations, the SC adjourned the matter to 27 April, despite the urgency of the oxygen crisis. The ECI failed to rein in political parties and leaders as they campaigned in the polling states. Mainstream TV media also failed to highlight people's sufferings and, like the SC and the ECI, failed to hold the central and state governments accountable.

What does it mean?

The ongoing second wave has exposed the lack of administrative preparation at both federal and state levels. It has also highlighted the inadequacies of healthcare infrastructure to cope with any major crisis. Despite the experience of the first wave, and despite more than a year to build healthcare capacity, India did little on this front. And, that some states are even disrupting the movement of oxygen tankers highlights the failure of cooperative federalism in this moment of crisis. Finally, people would have to strictly adhere to safety protocols to beat the second wave as vaccination will take many months, if not years, to reach a significant proportion of the population.

The only positive story so far, notwithstanding the delayed approval to the Sputnik V vaccine, is India's vaccination programme. According to the Health Ministry, India became the fastest nation to administer 13 crore doses in 95 days. Rolling out vaccines for all aged above 18 is a welcome development.

India: Acute shortage of vaccines amidst a raging second wave

Akriti Sharma, 18 April 2021

What happened?

On 17 April, Coronavirus Resource Center, John Hopkins University, reported 14,291,917 confirmed COVID-19 cases in India. It has successfully administered 117,223,509 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. As of 17 April, India had fully vaccinated 14,847,254 people.

On 16 April, according to the data from an independent data aggregator of daily COVID-19 figures, India recorded 2,33,728 cases and 1,338 deaths marking the highest single-day spike so far.

What is the background?

First, rise in cases in India. The country ranks second after the US, which accounts for most of the confirmed cases globally. As of 17 April, Brazil reported 13,832,455 confirmed cases, becoming the third country with the most COVID-19 caseload, followed by France and Russia. India being a densely populated country, has performed relatively better than most of the developed countries.

Second, the inoculation drive. In terms of vaccination, India remains at the top. According to the Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, India is administering 40,556,055 doses on an average per day. However, due to the huge population, the percentage of people fully vaccinated remains low. India is slowly ramping up the production of the vaccines by allowing the production of other vaccines such as the Sputnik V. On 15 April, the Indian government allowed Haffkine Bio-Pharmaceutical Corporation Limited to produce COVAX on a technology transfer basis for one year.

Third, the internal and external crisis due to the second wave. The states and Union Territories have reported a sudden spike in the cases. Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Delhi account for

most of the total cases. This has resulted in high demands for COVID-19 vaccines and health equipment such as oxygen cylinders, ventilators, hospital beds, and scarcity of burial space. The domestic crisis has resulted in a larger global impact. The increase in the COVID-19 cases domestically has adversely affected India's vaccine diplomacy. The country has drastically reduced the export of COVAX and Covishield as it is internally grappled with the second wave of COVID-19.

Fourth, the uncertainty around the double mutant Indian variant of the virus. On 25 March, The Indian SARS-CoV-2 Consortium on Genomics discovered an Indian variant with two mutations in the same virus. However, it is uncertain that the Indian variant is responsible for a sudden spike in the cases.

What does it mean?

First, the unpreparedness for the second wave. Although India performs relatively better than most developed countries, it was not entirely prepared for a virulent second wave. The ongoing domestic and external health crisis reflects India's inability to foresee the emergence of the second wave.

Second, the urgent need to ramp up vaccine production. Keeping in mind the huge population, the Indian government needs to involve more pharmaceutical companies to produce COVID-19 vaccines on a technology transfer basis. The country also needs to import vaccines to curb the shortage, if required. India needs to increase the number of doses administered per day. This will help in curbing the shortage domestically and internationally.

Third, increased healthcare investment. Taking lessons from the pandemic, India must increase the investment in the healthcare sector. It needs to rethink its inadequate investment in the healthcare sector.

India-Bangladesh: Modi visits Dhaka, to reboot 50 years of bilateral relations

Sourina Bej, 28 March 2021

What happened?

On 26 March, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his first bilateral visit since the pandemic, met his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina in Dhaka. The visit was to mark the 50th anniversary of the bilateral relationship between the two countries, which coincides with the 100th year birthday celebration of 'Bangabandhu' Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Five MoU's were signed in connectivity, energy, trade, health, and developmental cooperation. As a humanitarian gesture, Modi gave Hasina a representational key of 109 ambulances and a representational box of India's 1.2 million COVID vaccine doses to Bangladesh. In return, Hasina presented to Modi a gold and a silver coin released on the occasion of the birth centenary of her father. She also presented a silver coin released on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence. Modi also visited Bangabandhu's grave and became the only leader to do so.

What is the background?

First, India's neighbourhood first policy with Bangladesh as its 'pillar.' In the past 50 years, the relationship with Bangladesh has been a steady core for India's neighbourhood first policy. In 2020, India had sought to reset its neighbourhood policy through vaccine diplomacy, and Bangladesh became the largest recipient of India's coronavirus vaccine (about 9 million vials). Connectivity serves the second area of cooperation between the two, including the inauguration of the Tripura-Chittagong Maitri Setu over river Feni this month and the restoration of the five pre-1965 war rail lines such as the trans-boundary line from Haldibari to Chilahati. The building of ports on Mongla to an intra-riverine network channelizing the Bengal Sunderban delta is also futuristic progress in the bilateral relationship.

Second, India's relation with the Awami league as continuity in partnership. Bangladesh is the biggest trading partner with over three lines of

credit totalling 8 billion dollars from India. The relationship has been cemented through several high-level visits, such as in the past year where both the Indian foreign secretary and foreign minister visited Dhaka. In her every visit, Hasina had paid personal trips to late Pranab Mukherjee with Padma hilsa and Rajshahi silk saree for late Indian foreign minister Sushma Swaraj.

Third, deep irritants irrespective of the bonhomie. In Bangladesh, anti-Modi protests have gained ground over India's passing of citizenship law that could deregister millions who lived in India post-1971 on religious grounds. Provocative comments from Indian ministers and the stranding of the Bangladeshis of Tablighi Jamaat sect during the pandemic in India have cost the trust where many Bangladeshi ministers, including the foreign minister, have ostensibly cancelled visits to India. 2020 also had high border killings, including the lynching of infiltrators or cattle smugglers. India has consistently raised the issue of attacks on the Hindu minorities with Bangladesh. And currently, Modi's prayers at the Jeshoreshwari temple, amid anti-Hindu violence in Sylhet, have added to the constraints giving the relation a religious fervour. Lastly, the failure to sign the Teesta water agreement remains another area of mistrust.

What does it mean?

The 50 years provide the scope for both countries to observe past precedents and set a futuristic tone in the relation. However, the relation has challenges to be wary of. First, treading the intersection of domestic politics in bilateral relation. Modi's current visit to the birthplace of the Hindu Dalit mystic figure of the Matua community could be construed as an unnecessary politicization of a domestic electoral emotive issue while undertaking a diplomatic visit. Setting a dangerous precedent of adding a religious narrative to foreign policy could beget backlash where people-to-people ethno-religious ties run deep. Second, a spillover in border tension and future deals such as on water, which has been a long-standing dispute between India and Bangladesh.

India and Pakistan: Both countries agree to revive the 2003 ceasefire

D Suba Chandran, 28 February 2021

What happened?

On 25 February 2021, a joint statement published by respective ministries/departments in India and Pakistan mentioned the discussions between the Director Generals of Military Operations of the two countries. Through the hotline, after reviewing the situation "along the Line of Control and all other sectors in a free, frank and cordial atmosphere" both sides agreed to revive the ceasefire.

According to the statement, "In the interest of achieving mutually beneficial and sustainable peace along the borders, the two DGsMO agreed to address each other's core issues and concerns which have propensity to disturb peace and lead to violence. Both sides agreed for strict observance of all agreements, understandings and cease firing along the Line of Control and all other sectors with effect from midnight 24/25 Feb 2021." The statement also reiterated to make use of existing mechanisms of hotline contact and border flag meetings "to resolve any unforeseen situation or misunderstanding."

What is the background?

First, the comprehensive ceasefire agreement signed between India and Pakistan in November 2003. Signed after the 2001-02 military standoff between the two countries, the agreement was comprehensive in its focus and also in its adherence. It included three areas: the International Border (IB), the Line of Control (LoC) and the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) in Jammu and Kashmir. Thus it covers the region from Siachen in the north to the creeks of Gujarat-Sindh between India and Pakistan. Signed between President Musharraf and PM Vajpayee, the agreement held for the next ten years. The ceasefire period saw the easing of LoC, as both started bus and truck services between two parts of J&K. The easing brought normalcy to regular life along the LoC, and also reduced violence inside J&K.

Second, the violation of ceasefire during the recent years, undermining the decade long achievements across the LoC. During recent years, there have been a series of ceasefire violations as the LoC became violent, with cross-firing from both sides. India and Pakistan have provided a long list of ceasefire violations holding the other side responsible. The ceasefire violations affected the normal life along the LoC, slowed down the bus and truck services, and also witnessed increased violence within J&K. One could see a direct correlation between the instability in LoC and the achievements during the first decade of the ceasefire agreement.

Third, the cause and effect relationship between the increasing political divide between India and Pakistan, and the ceasefire violations along the LoC. Whether the ceasefire violations resulted in the political divide between the two countries, or the lack of political dialogue that made the LoC violent would depend on whom one is talking to. There is a linkage between the two.

What does it mean?

First, a word of caution. Between India and Pakistan, following a season of instability, there has always been a ceasefire, as a starting point. One does not have to look into whether the India-China border understanding or the Biden administration has affected the change. On J&K, no external factors can make India and Pakistan to toe a particular line; the internal politics and institutional interests are too strong to listen to outside actors. The return to the ceasefire is bound to happen; two nuclear neighbours cannot be in a perineal military standoff. The militaries cannot afford to stand against the other on a long standoff without a political endgame.

Second, since both countries have agreed to return to the 2003 ceasefire, they should ensure it is observed in letter and spirit. Whatever may be the actual reasons for the two militaries to agree to make use of the hotline and return to the ceasefire, they should ensure that the institutions of the DGMOs are made better use of at the local level.

Third, both countries should now build on – across the LoC and across Wagah. They may, or they may not. But, they should.

India and China: Disengagement confirmed along the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh sector

D Suba Chandran, 14 February 2021

What happened?

On 10 February, the Hindu referred to a China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin making the following statement: "According to the consensus reached at the Chinese and Indian Foreign Ministers' meeting in Moscow and the ninth round of commander-level talks between the two sides, the front-line troops of the Chinese and Indian militaries began to conduct simultaneous and planned disengagement in the Pangong Lake area on February 10. We hope the Indian side will work with China to meet each other halfway, strictly implement the consensus reached between the two sides and ensure the smooth implementation of the disengagement process." The Global Times on the same day referring to a spokesperson at China's Ministry of National Defense reported: "Frontline troops of the Chinese and Indian armies stationed at the southern and northern banks of the Pangong Tso began simultaneous, scheduled disengagement on Wednesday, in accordance to a consensus reached during the ninth round of corps commander-level meeting."

On 11 February, the Indian defence minister made a statement in the Parliament; according to him, "The Chinese side will keep its troop presence in the North Bank area to east of Finger 8. Reciprocally, the Indian troops will be based at their permanent base at Dhan Singh Thapa Post near Finger 3. A similar action would be taken in the South Bank area by both sides... These are mutual and reciprocal steps and any structures that had been built by both sides since April 2020 in both North and South Bank areas will be removed and the landforms restored." The defence minister also stated in the Parliament: "I want to assure this House that in these talks we have not conceded anything... It

is, therefore, our expectation that the Chinese side will work with us in full sincerity to resolve these remaining issues.”

On 13 February, the Global Times referring to sources wrote again: “China and India are about to implement a disengagement plan under reciprocal principle with the premise that India should firstly withdraw staff who illegally crossed lines on the southern side of the Pangong Tso Lake.”

What is the background?

First, the long military standoff along the Line of Actual Control between India and China. The recent standoff started in May 2020 in Pangong Tso and expanded to other areas of the region in Ladakh. In June 2020, in one of the worst clashes in recent decades, 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers died in the Galwan valley. There were a few more “provocative military movements to change the status quo” by China in August 2020 in the Pangong Tso region, and “Indian troops pre-empted this PLA activity on the southern bank of Pangong Tso,” according to an Indian military statement. This was one of the longest military standoffs in recent years.

Second, the tough military and political negotiations since May 2020. There were nine rounds of meetings at the military levels, and two political meetings at the highest level (at the defence and foreign ministers level) before reaching the agreement. The present agreement on disengagement seems to have been finally reached at the ninth round held in January 2021.

Third the complex disengagement process and its verification. The negotiations between the two sides had to work hard in agreeing on disengagement to return to pre-standoff period. Who would disengage first, return to where and to which position—seemed to be the crucial questions.

What does it mean?

First carrying out the disengagement, verifying the process, and trust the other side. Given the nine rounds, and the limited information available on the disengagement process, the

process would be phased and drawn to the minute level in terms of time and place.

Second, implementing the plan on the ground, of what is finalised in the meeting would be another challenge. Given the technology available, verification is possible. But the challenge would be to build trust. Both sides will have to work at the political and military levels; what happens along the border affects the political relations. Beijing and New Delhi should avoid this from repeating.

India: New Delhi's re-engagement with neighbours through vaccine diplomacy

Akriti Sharma, 23 January 2021

What happened?

On 19 January, the Ministry of External Affairs announced that India would begin delivering the Indian-manufactured vaccine to six nations — Bhutan, Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal, in response to neighbouring countries' requests Myanmar, and Seychelles. On the same day, Bhutan received its first batch of 1.5 lakh doses of Covishield developed by the Serum Institute of India (SII) followed by the Maldives which received one lakh doses.

On 21 January, Nepal received one million doses, and Bangladesh received two million doses of Covishield. Nepali PM KP Sharma Oli tweeted: "I thank Prime Minister Shri @narendramodi ji as well as the Government and people of India for the generous grant of one million doses of Covid vaccine to Nepal at this critical time when India is rolling out vaccination for it's own people".

On 22 January, Myanmar received 1.5 million doses of Covishield. Mauritius and Seychelles also received vaccines.

What is the background?

First, India fulfilling its commitment to supply vaccines. Last year, the Indian Foreign Secretary and Minister of External Affairs visited Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Maldives to review the bilateral relations. These visits aimed to assist the countries facing pandemic induced

challenges. India had also promised to provide the COVID-19 vaccines once they were developed and approved in the country.

Second, neighbourhood pandemic challenges and India's helping hand. As of 22 January 2021, according to the data by the Johns Hopkins University, Nepal had 2,69,000 COVID-19 cases; Bangladesh had 5,30,000 cases; Myanmar had 1,36,000 cases. Inadequate healthcare facilities further worsened the situation. Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Seychelles, the Maldives, Bhutan, and Nepal faced an economic crisis because of their heavy dependence on the tourism sector suffered due to lockdowns and closing of international borders. New Delhi used this as an opportunity to demonstrate itself as a responsible regional player when the relations with neighbours were going through testing times. India utilized it to mend ties with the neighbourhood.

Third, the key role of the SII in manufacturing the jabs. World's largest vaccine manufacturer by volume, it played an important role in mass production of the vaccine based on Astrazeneca-Oxford candidate to meet domestic and international requirements. This enabled India to start the rollout and shipping of vaccines to the neighbourhood simultaneously.

What does it mean?

First, India has yet again proved to be the pharmaceutical powerhouse of the region. It has increased the reliability of India's healthcare sector on which its neighbours are heavily dependent. This will further bolster medical tourism in India.

Second, with an efficient mass production capacity, India will export vaccines to the other poor and middle-income countries as part of an arrangement with GAVI, the vaccine alliance. India will export vaccines to other regions like Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. This will boost India's international standing, goodwill, and soft-power.

Pakistan: A "new era" with Russia

Abigail Miriam Fernandez, 11 April 2021

What happened?

On 7 April, the Foreign Minister of Russia Sergey Lavrov arrived in Pakistan for a two-day visit, the first in nine years. On his arrival, he met with the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, who termed the meeting as the beginning of 'a new era' with Russia. The two held wide-ranging talks during which they reviewed their bilateral cooperation in energy, security, including counter-terrorism and defence, besides having an in-depth discussion on the situation in Afghanistan. Lavrov said Russia was ready to build further counter-terrorism potential by providing military equipment to Pakistan. He said: "This is in the interest of all states of the region," adding that both sides also agreed on joint military exercises and drills.

FM Lavrov also met Imran Khan and General Bajwa. Khan reiterated the importance Pakistan attaches to Russia's relations as a key foreign policy priority and reaffirmed Pakistan's resolve to expeditiously conclude the requisite legal process for the "Pakistan Stream" (North-South) Gas Pipeline project and commence the work soon.

What is the background?

First, the warming up of Russia-Pakistan relations. FM Lavrov's visit to Pakistan is the first by a Russian foreign minister in nine years, marking the recent shift of ties between them. Over the last few years, both have made a substantial effort to improve ties by building a stronger and mutually beneficial relationship through engagement at bilateral and multilateral arenas.

Second, the multifaceted expansion in the relations. The deepening relation between Pakistan and Russia is not restricted to a single domain. The relation between the two is moving into more significant economic engagement, defence cooperation, and a strategic component. For example, in 2020, trade between the countries stood at almost USD 350 million, a 45 per cent increase from the year before. Further,

the two have also been involved in significant infrastructure projects, with Russia constructing a major gas pipeline along the length of Pakistan.

Third, the Russian and Pakistani interests in each other. Both Russia and Pakistan have their reasons for cooperating and strengthening ties with each other. Pakistan seeks to enhance defence cooperation and align itself with Russia, given the recent developments in Pak-US relations. Conversely, Russia is trying to make new allies in South Asia. Its multi-frontal engagement with Pakistan could be seen as efforts to secure its backyard in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Further, their interest in Pakistan lies in its strategic location, the CPEC project, the future of Afghanistan, markets for defence, and strategic sales, including space cooperation.

What does it mean?

First, a paradigm shift in Pak-Russia relations when compared to the 1980s. Although Pakistan and Russia have no history of a substantial relationship, their strategic realities have caused the current shift, which is a positive development for both Islamabad and Moscow.

Second, the Afghan factor is the start of something new. Their mutual interest in Afghanistan has brought the countries together. However, this factor can be seen as the start of bringing Russia and Pakistan towards further engagements.

Pakistan: Supreme Court orders the release of the accused in Daniel Pearl's murder case; the US says

D Suba Chandran, 30 January

What happened?

On 28 January, the Supreme Court of Pakistan ordered Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh's release in Daniel Pearl's murder case. Omar Sheikh is one of the primary accused in the kidnapping and beheading of Daniel Pearl, a journalist working with the Wall Street Journal in 2002.

On 29 January, the Sindh government has filed a review petition in the Supreme Court, asking for a reconsideration of the decision.

On 29 January, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken came down heavily on the release. The Department of State released a statement expressing the US's deep concerns over "the Pakistani Supreme Court's decision to acquit those involved in Daniel Pearl's kidnapping and murder and any proposed action to release them." The statement also read, "Ahmad Omar Saeed Sheikh was indicted in the United States in 2002 for hostage-taking and conspiracy to commit hostage-taking, resulting in the murder of Pearl, the South Asia Bureau Chief for the Wall Street Journal, as well as the 1994 kidnapping of another United States citizen in India. The court's decision is an affront to terrorism victims everywhere, including in Pakistan." More importantly, the statement read: "We take note of the Attorney General's statement that he intends to seek review and recall of the decision. We are also prepared to prosecute Sheikh in the United States for his horrific crimes against an American citizen. We are committed to securing justice for Daniel Pearl's family and holding terrorists accountable."

What is the background?

First, the 19-year-old case relating to the kidnapping and brutal beheading of Daniel Pearl. At the time of the kidnapping and the beheading, Daniel Pearl was working with the Wall Street Journal and was pursuing a story relating to militancy in Pakistan. This was a period in which many journalists from the rest of the world have been pursuing multiple angles over any lead relating to the 9/11 attacks in the US. Daniel Pearl was doing one and was abducted in Karachi in January 2002. Subsequently, he was beheaded on 1 February 2002 in front of a video that demanded prisoners' release in Guantanamo Bay.

Second, the Sindh High Court's judgment in April 2020, and the refusal of the Sindh government to release the four accused, including Omar Sheikh. A two-member bench of the Sindh High Court acquitted Omar Sheikh

and three others on the murder charge. The Court found the accused guilty of only kidnapping, for which it ordered a seven-year prison sentence. Since the accused were already in jail for more than 17 years at that time, the Sindh High Court ordered the government to release them.

Third, the case in the Supreme Court, following the Sindh government's refusal to release the accused. And a new petition by Daniel Pearl's parents; in May 2020, they appealed to the Supreme Court against the Sindh High Court's decision and made a plea for a common cause demanding justice: "We are standing up for justice not only for our son, but for all our dear friends in Pakistan so they can live in a society free of violence and terror and raise their children in peace and harmony."

Fourth, the new US administration and the latest demand by the US Secretary of State. While respecting the ruling of Pakistan Supreme Court, a statement from the US Department of State has stated that the US is ready to "prosecute Sheikh in the United States for his horrific crimes against an American citizen." Though the US may not have an extradition treaty with Pakistan, in the past, many prisoners who were caught in Pakistan have been transferred to the US and spending time in Guantanamo Bay, including the al Qaeda terrorists.

What does it mean?

First, the media freedom and the journalists' challenge – local and foreign in Pakistan to do their job, without fear and consequences. Worse, the legal system's ability in Pakistan to provide justice, in case anything goes against them while performing their duties, as Daniel Pearl did. During the last two decades, there has been a systematic campaign against the journalists and media houses, not only by the non-State actors but also the State actors.

Second, the problem of investigation and legal conviction on cases relating to terrorism. Daniel Pearl's murder case was a high profile one. So was Benazir Bhutto's. There is a serious problem with the investigation process in terror-related cases. Not only the friends and families of the

victims demand it, but also international actors, including the FATF.

Third, the larger questions. If Omar Sheikh and the three other accused are innocents of the crime, who killed Daniel Pearl? What was Omar Sheikh, a British national, with a long list of kidnapping and terrorism cases – from Bosnia to India, doing in Karachi? Will Pakistan allow the other countries to prosecute Omar Sheikh?

Nepal: Ending constitutional crisis, Supreme Court appoints a new Prime Minister

Sourina Bej, 18 July 2021

What happened?

On 12 July, the Supreme Court of Nepal overturned K P Sharma Oli's decision to dissolve the House of the Representative and issued a judicial writ to appoint the Nepali Congress leader Sher Bahadur Deuba as the Prime Minister under Article 76(5) of the constitution. The apex court order was based on the 30 writ petitions, including one from Deuba himself and 146 parliament members, demanding the appointment of Deuba as the prime minister. Upon reinstating the legislature, the court also said the lawmakers must meet within seven days.

What is the background?

First, Nepal's recurring political instability. Since the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) won the 2017 election after the new constitution was promulgated in 2015, the NCP has split, the legislature has been dissolved twice, and the country has a new Prime Minister. Twenty different governments have been in power in Nepal since 2000. While the immediate cause of the current crisis is an intra-party feud but weak democratic institutions, corruption, and politics of exclusion are primary reasons for protracted political instability. Deuba's oath-taking ceremony also witnessed tension between the leaders when President Bidya Devi Bhandari refused to explicitly appoint Deuba under Article 76(5).

Second, an end to Oli's tenure as Prime Minister. The tensions emerged after Oli refused to hand over power to his NCP's coalition leader 'Prachanda' after half his term leading to splits and weakening of Oli's power in the legislature. On 20 December 2020, Oli dissolved the House and called for snap polls to secure his prime ministerial position amid pressure from his coalition partners to resign. The office of the President played second fiddle, and as the opposition failed to lay claim to the government, Oli was reinstated as the Prime Minister despite losing his trust vote on 10 May 2021. Subsequently, Oli dissolved the parliament again and announced an election to stymie existing calls for his resignation and weave new political alliances.

Third, proactive Judiciary. From one dissolution to another, the Supreme Court has validated the lawmakers' writ petitions and reinstated the House. The bench has become the vanguard of the constitution in actively criticizing the legislative power struggle and the President's inactions to the effect that it has directed and upheld a new leadership this time. Furthermore, on 7 March, the Supreme Court has also invalidated the NCP in a separate hearing which subsequently brought the fractures within the coalition partners: CPN(UML) headed by Oli, and CPN (Maoist Centre) headed by 'Prachanda' to the fore.

Fourth, emergence of regional parties as important players. The dissolution has paved the way for Terai regional parties to play an active role in the new political alliance formation. On 23 May, the Mahantha Thakur-Rajendra Mahato faction of the Janata Samajbadi Party had already been in talks with Oli for a potential power-sharing deal. With Deuba in power, an opportunity arises when the support of the Terai political parties will be crucial for the floor test. This has also brought the Terai demands for constitutional amendment and release of jailed comrades at par for dialogue with parties in the Valley, more so that President passed the Nepal Citizenship (First Amendment) Ordinance on 23 May 2021.

What does it mean?

The constitutional crises end, but political uncertainties continue with challenges before Deuba. He will have to prove in a vote that he has the support of more than half the House members to continue in office. The Nepali Congress currently holds only 63 seats out of 275 and would need to put together an alliance with the Maoist faction of CPN and in all likelihood with the Upendra Yadav-led faction of the Janata Samajbadi Party to reach majority. A balance between the ethnonational demands of the Terai parties and a power-sharing deal with ideologically opposite coalition partner 'Prachanda' would be something to watch for during Deuba's tenure.

MIDDLE EAST THIS YEAR

Lebanon: a new government after 13 months

Rashmi Ramesh, 12 September 2021

What happened?

On 10 September, Lebanon's presidency announced the formation of a new government under the leadership of Najib Mikati, a former Prime Minister who has previously held the position twice. PM Mikati and President Michael Aoun signed a government decree regarding the formation, in the presence of Speaker Nabih Berri. The announcement ended a 13-month stalemate and a complex political crisis.

Addressing the press, Mikati stated that "the situation is very difficult. But it is not impossible if we unite as Lebanese. We have to put our hands together...work together, united with hope and determination." Welcoming the announcement, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged the new government to "implement a tangible reform agenda" in accordance with the aspirations of the people. France, an important stakeholder in Lebanon, welcomed the new government, and President Emmanuel Macron said that it is "vita that Lebanon's politicians stuck to engagements necessary to undertake key reforms."

What is the background?

First, the political crisis. The massive blast at the Beirut port opened the floodgates of an impending political crisis in Lebanon. On 4 August 2020, Beirut witnessed a major blast at the port, killing more than 200 people and injuring thousands. The incident triggered massive protests on the streets demanding action and justice. Owing responsibility, PM Hassan Diab resigned. With his resignation, the politicians failed to arrive at a consensus and put forth a stable political solution. Former PM Saad Hariri too, failed to form the government, stating differences with President Aoun. Najib Mikati's appointment as the PM-designate came in the backdrop of Hariri's resignation. The new government brings an end to the 13-month deadlock.

Second, the international pressure. France, the former colonizer, took a special interest in the political crisis of Lebanon and exerted immense pressure on the political elite to form a government. The US too joined the exercise. The overwhelming international and regional pressure to find a solution to the crisis is said to be one of the key reasons for the recent development. It must be noted that the presence of legitimate authority is extremely crucial for negotiating with the IMF and preventing Lebanon from a free fall.

Third, the crippling economic crisis. Lebanon is reeling under a severe economic crisis. Chaotic economic policies, extensive deficit expenditure, and mismanaged monetary policies have proved disastrous. The Lebanon Economic Monitor released by the World Bank in May 2021, concluded that the country's economic situation may be one of the worst crises in over 150 years.

Fourth, social fallouts of the crisis. With the virtual absence of a functioning government for more than a year, the Lebanese society is suffering from the health system breakdown and pandemic, long hours of blackout, fuel shortages, unaffordable inflation and consequential poverty. According to the UN, three-quarters of the population lives in poverty.

What does it mean?

First, a fresh start. Barring the two Christian parties, Mikati has the support of almost all the political outfits including Sunni, Shia and Druze parties. The newly formed cabinet is a fresh beginning, with some new faces, technocrats and specialists, nevertheless endorsed by various political parties. Though there is scepticism about what the cabinet is capable of doing, the fact that there is a full-working government is hope in the right direction. Marking this, the markets displayed optimism and Lebanese currency saw an increase in its value.

Second, a bumpy road. Mikati and his cabinet take over amidst a crippling crisis and have the daunting task of bringing Lebanon on the path to recovery. However, it is not an easy task, as gaining confidence both in the Parliament as well as among the public is important.

Implementing recovery plans together with the Lebanese political class and international actors like France and organizations such as WTO, IMF, requires multiple rounds of negotiation and confidence-building measures.

Lebanon: Appointment of a new PM raises hope for a revival of the economy

Rashmi Ramesh, 1 August 2021

What happened?

On 26 July, Lebanon's President Michael Aoun appointed Najib Mikati as the PM-designate, responsible for forming a new government for a country that has not had a functioning government since the crisis began in 2019. Mikati is a former two-time Prime Minister and one of the most successful business tycoons in the country. His appointment comes in the backdrop of Saad Hariri's resignation, citing differences with the President and accepting his failure to form a government. Post his appointment, Mikati stated: "alone I do not have a magic wand to achieve miracles. We are in a very difficult situation... it is a difficult mission that can succeed only if we all work together."

On 30 July, The European Union adopted a legal framework to impose sanctions on the Lebanese political elite, officials, and entities, for lack of governance and economic crisis.

What is the background?

First, the political crisis. Failing economic policies clubbed with political instability has pushed Lebanon into a war-like situation in the absence of war. Since Hassan Diab resigned in August 2020, Lebanon has been facing a political crisis. Lebanese leaders have failed to reach a consensus and provide a stable government. In October 2020, Saad Hariri, a former Prime Minister (2009-2011 and 2016-2020) was appointed as the PM-designate after Diab's resignation. However, he also failed to form a government, due to differences with President Michael Aoun and Hezbollah's role in cabinet formation. Hariri resigned in July 2021.

Najib Mikati's appointment comes in the above background.

Second, Lebanon's political arrangement with multiple power centers. Iran-backed armed political outfit Hezbollah, the Forward Movement, and Shi'ite Amal Movement decide the composition of the government. Alongside, the two Christian majority parties- the Free Patriotic Movement and the Lebanese Forces hold considerable sway in the system. Lebanon's political structure may also be a reason for the diverging interests that are evident currently. The Lebanese National Pact of 1943 provides for a Maronite Christian President, a Sunni Prime Minister and a Shi'ite Speaker for the National Assembly.

Third, the economic crisis. The Lebanese economic policy has been chaotic due to extensive deficit expenditure, and unsustainable mismanaged monetary policies. The GDP and per capita income fell by 40 per cent in 2020, pushing half the population into poverty. The Lebanon Economic Monitor released by the World Bank in May 2021, concluded that the country's economic situation might be one of the worst crises in over 150 years. Marking the anniversary of the Beirut blast, France will hold an international donor conference along with the UN in August, to raise funds for the deteriorating situation in Lebanon.

Fourth, the trigger and the protests. On 4 August 2020, Beirut witnessed a major blast at the port, killing more than 200 people and injuring thousands. The incident has left a trail of destruction in the capital city, and triggered massive protests on the streets demanding action and justice. Lebanon was in the midst of an economic crisis prior to 2020. However, the pandemic and the blast dealt a severe blow, challenging recovery in every aspect.

Fifth, the protests and related social challenges. Mass protests challenged both the then government and the larger direction in which the country was headed to. UNICEF warned about the impending water crisis, with approximately four million people, including one million refugees are at the risk of losing access to safe

water resources. Additionally, the population suffers from long blackouts, shortage of food, medicines, fuel, and exceptionally high rates of unemployment.

What does it mean?

First, a hope in Najib Mikati. Most of the political parties have announced support for Mikati. Barring the two Christian parties, he has the support of the Sunni, Shia, and Druze politicians, which may pave the way for a government. With optimism in the market, in the form of a slight rise in the value of Lebanese currency against the US Dollar, there is hope in the right direction. He stated that the first priority was to implement the French roadmap for recovery. It must also be noted that Mikati does not hail from a political dynasty unlike other politicians, instead is a successful entrepreneur. Second, a functioning government is a compelling necessity. Mikati is touted to form a government in a time of extreme crisis and is expected to take along the diverging political interests. It is time that the Lebanese political blocs come on the same platform to avoid further free fall of the economy and living conditions.

Lebanon: Deepening political crisis

Udbhav Krishna P, 18 July 2021

What happened?

On 15 July, Lebanon Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri stepped down after failing to form a government over the past eight months. Hariri resigned, following a brief meeting with President Aoun at Baabda Palace. Aoun accused Hariri of having already decided to step down prior to their meeting. According to Al Jazeera, the President's office said, "Hariri rejected any amendments related to changes in ministries, their sectarian distribution, and the names associated with them."

On the same day, during an interview with Lebanon's Al Jadeed TV, Hariri said he selected his candidates based on their expertise and their ability to reform the economy, but Aoun did not. Following Hariri's step down, his supporters

took to the street and there were few clashes with Lebanese soldiers. The Lebanese pound hit a new all-time low exceeding USD 21,000. Reuters reported: French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said Lebanese leaders seemed unable to find a solution to the crisis that they had created, calling the failure to form a cabinet another terrible incident. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Hariri's decision was "disappointing" and urged Lebanese leaders to put aside their differences and form a government.

What is the background?

First, Lebanon's unique power-sharing system. Different sects share and allocate key political and security offices. The president is a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament a Shia Muslim. Hariri, a former prime minister, and Lebanon's leading Sunni Muslim politician, was designated in October to assemble a government following the resignation of Prime Minister Hassan Diab's cabinet in the wake of the Beirut port explosion. Hariri is the most influential Sunni politician in Lebanon and has the support of the Lebanese Sunni religious establishment. Although support from Sunni-led Saudi Arabia waned in recent years, he still has backing from other Sunni Arab-led states like Egypt.

Second, the internal political deadlock. Hariri's decision to step down marks the culmination of months of conflict over cabinet posts between him and Aoun, the Maronite Christian head of state. The latter is allied with the Iran-backed Shi'ite Muslim group Hezbollah. According to the Al Jazeera report, on 14 July, Hariri proposed a 24-minister government, which according to local media, gave Aoun eight ministers, including the defense and foreign ministries. Hariri has been at odds with Aoun over the size and distribution of a new government. Aoun has accused Hariri's proposal of lacking Christian representation and dismissing the country's sectarian-based power-sharing system, while Hariri has accused Aoun of wanting too large of a share in the government.

Third, the economic crisis. The World Bank has described Lebanon's depression as one of the sharpest in modern history. The currency has lost more than 90 per cent of its value in two years; poverty has spread, and there have been crippling fuel shortages, prompting growing fears of social unrest. The economic freefall is Lebanon's worst crisis since the 1975-90 civil war.

Fourth, the external pressure. There have been sanctions by European Union on Lebanese officials preventing a new government from taking power. The international community has urged Lebanese officials to settle political differences and put together a government that would enact economic reforms to unlock billions of dollars in aid and make the economy viable again.

What does it mean?

Prime Minister Hassan Diab is staying in a caretaker capacity. A parliamentary election is due to be held next May; some believe the political vacuum will continue till then. With no candidate in place to replace Hariri, Lebanon's sectarian-based political system has been thrust into a period of further uncertainty. The continuation of a political vacuum will also impact Lebanon's ability to bring international aid to manage economy.

Lebanon: Protestors' return demanding resolution of political and economic crises

Dincy Adlakha, 21 March 2021

What happened?

On 15 and 16 March, protestors returned to the streets. The recent agitation arose as the Lebanese Pound broke the economy and hit a record low. The currency has lost more than 85 per cent of its value since 2019. The protestors blocked significant cities in the country like Beirut, Tripoli, and Sidon by burning tires.

On 17 March, the Central Bank of Lebanon received a letter from the EU, UN, and World Bank promising to provide aid to the bleeding country in US Dollars. Before the

announcement, the aid was delivered in Lebanese currency; since it crashed, the aid will be provided in hard currency. Although no comments were made by the Lebanese diplomats, various Human Rights groups and urged the parties to create a mechanism for aid to be transferred to the people directly.

On the same day, Lebanese President Aoun met the PM-designate Hariri to discuss the formation of the government. The President was hasty and stern in suggesting Hariri either form the government quickly or step aside from the political canvas. Hariri mentioned that he aims to keep communications open, which was still the case.

What is the background?

First, the deterioration of Lebanon's economy. This has been the case during the recent period, and the massive explosion in the Beirut port in 2020 and COVID-19 have led the economy to a breaking point. Problems of corruption, bankruptcy in every sector and the blow to the banking sector (the only flourishing sector due to unrealistic interests provided) fell apart, leading to Lebanon's downfall. The citizens have been facing food insecurity and electricity black-outs making the situation miserable and harsh.

Second, the nature and composition of the government. The government has provided space to various sects of the country and mandated a Maronite Christian President, a Shia Muslim Speaker of Parliament, and a Sunni Muslim Prime Minister. Established through the 'Taif Agreement' in 1989, it has failed in stabilizing the country's politics. The political crisis deepened since 2019 when PM Hariri stepped down, and the government was dissolved. Internal players from various sects have been unable to come to a consensus and have ignored the economic chaos engulfing Lebanon, rendering the Sectarian form of government ineffectual.

Third, the international players and their involvement. The Saudi-Iran rivalry plays a role in the Lebanon crisis; it has led to alliances being formed within Lebanon that assert themselves with force. The US and Saudi

backed camp has clashed on numerous occasions with the pro-Syrian camp as both hold different views on government formation. The US has been suspicious of Syrian involvement in the 2019 Beirut explosion and the financial crisis of the country.

What does it mean?

The growing tensions in Lebanon can only point to further chaos in the country. The many sects involved in the power struggle may lead the country to a probable civil war. The failure of state institutions is another imminent concern. The formation of government is nowhere in sight leading to a mismanaged system of corruption and downfalls. However, the focus needs to be shifted from power politics to the civilians in the line of danger. Growing humanitarian crisis and loss of dignified life is the only certain card based on current situations.

Iran: A predetermined election results in Ebrahim Raisi becoming the new President

Jeshil J Samuel, 20 June 2021

What happened?

On 16 June, three Presidential candidates decided to withdraw their participation from the elections. Mohsen Mehralizadeh, one of the three candidates, was, unfortunately, the only reformist candidate in the race.

On 18 June, Iran conducted its 13th Presidential elections with an all-time low voter turnout of 48.8 per cent. The election results were announced on 19 June, with ultraconservative cleric Ebrahim Raisi winning the polls with a landslide victory as expected.

What is the background?

First, the recent Presidential elections in Iran. The last Presidential elections in 2017 saw a massive voter turnout of 73.3 per cent and 40 million votes being cast. The competition was also stiff between the then President Rouhani and his rival Ebrahim Raisi, thereby asserting the legitimacy of the elections. Earlier, in the 2013 elections, Rouhani won the race with

securing more than 50 per cent in the first round; this election also witnessed more than 70 per cent of the voters taking part. In 2009, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad got reelected with a record 80 per cent polling and securing more than 60 per cent of the votes.

Second, the 2021 elections and the candidates. On 25 May, Iran's Guardian Council declared the final list of candidates, choosing seven candidates out of the 592 applicants. After three candidates decided to back out, the elections had only four contestants - Ebrahim Raisi, an ultraconservative cleric; Mohsen Rezaei, former commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard; Abdolnaser Hemmati, former head of the Central Bank of Iran; and Amir-Hossein, the deputy speaker of the Iranian parliament. With more than 59 million eligible voters, the elections saw a turnout of 48.8 per cent making it a lowkey election turnout. According to the election results, Raisi has won 62 per cent of the votes, followed by Rezaei with 11.8 per cent. The other candidates, Hemmati and Amir-Hossein, received 8.4 and 3.5 per cent of votes, respectively.

Third, the decline in voting. A row of controversies regarding bias in the Presidential elections began after the Guardian Council released the list of candidates. The Iranian public and the international community started calling the elections rigged as the list did not have a healthy mix of contestants, and most critics found the electoral process to be favouring Ebrahim Raisi. The Iranian public were also frustrated about the worsening economic conditions and the role of non-elected bodies (like the Guardian Council) in suppressing their choices. After three candidates dropped out of the race two days before the elections, the public opinion towards voting worsened. The Iranian public had made up their minds not to vote, knowing the inevitable outcome.

Fourth, the pre-election advantage for Ebrahim Raisi. He has been seen as a protege of the Ayatollah and has also found favour amongst ultranationalists through his father-in-law, the Grand Imam of Imam Reza shrine. The bias

towards Raisi became evident after the state media publicized his contributions and persona more than the other candidates during the election campaigns.

What does it mean?

The electoral processes in Iran would have to change. The Guardian Council, which is not elected by the people, has the power to choose or reject candidates without giving any reason. This unfair screening would reduce the standards and legitimacy of upcoming elections if continued. The Iranian public has already started boycotting regional elections in a quest for a more democratic selection process for future Presidential and Parliamentary candidates.

Iran: Tehran begins producing 60 per cent enriched uranium

Lokendra Sharma, 18 April 2021

What happened?

On 16 April, Iran announced producing 60 per cent enriched uranium at its Natanz nuclear facility, two days after the IAEA said that Iran "had almost completed preparations to start producing UF₆ enriched up to 60 per cent U-235".

On 15 April, talks resumed in Vienna between Iran, the US and European partners to salvage the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

On 14 April, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani said that 60 per cent enrichment was a response to the alleged Israeli attack on the Natanz plant. France, Germany and the UK called it a "serious development" in a joint statement. The US called the move "provocative" while Saudi Arabia asked Iran to "avoid escalation" and "engage seriously in the current negotiations" in reference to talks happening in Vienna.

Earlier, on 11 April, Iran's Natanz enrichment facility suffered a power blackout, damaging the underground centrifuges. The "sabotage" was widely attributed to Israel, including by Iran's Foreign Minister, who called it an act of "nuclear terrorism".

What is the background?

First, Iran's position on enrichment. Iran has an ambiguous position on enrichment and nuclear weapons. While its official narrative claims that enrichment is not for weapons purposes, its actions say otherwise. Iran had a clandestine nuclear programme in the 1990s and early 2000s (suspended in 2003) despite being an NPT signatory. Post-2003, it has used the rate, quantity and percentage of enrichment both as a symbol of defiance and also as a bargaining chip, especially in the run-up to the JCPOA. Its current production of 60 per cent enriched uranium only takes it closer to the weapons-grade level and, contrary to its claims, is not for civilian purposes.

Second, Iran's nuclear capability. Iran primarily uses first-generation centrifuges (IR-1) at its Natanz enrichment site, even as it has also introduced new-generation centrifuges (IR-5 and IR-6). On 14 April, the IAEA said that Iran would be installing "six additional cascades of IR-1 centrifuges" at Natanz "comprising a total of 1,024 centrifuges". Iran is also developing advanced IR-9 centrifuges, which will be 50 times quicker than IR-1. Even though Iran is currently producing small quantities of 60 per cent enriched uranium, it can ramp it up.

Third, JCPOA and the contentious issue of enrichment. The JCPOA mandated that uranium could only be enriched up to 3.67 per cent and allowed this only at the Natanz enrichment facility with strict IAEA inspections. This was a significant takeaway for the US and the European partners of the JCPOA as this low enriched uranium cannot be used for strategic purposes. However, after former US President Trump withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 and reimposed crippling sanctions (despite IAEA certified compliance), Iran responded by gradually breaching the nuclear deal. This includes surpassing the 300 kg limit on enriched uranium in May 2019 and enriching uranium up to 20 per cent in January 2021. Enriching uranium up to 60 per cent is the most significant breach of the deal so far. The question of enrichment is also central to the negotiations happening in Vienna currently.

What does it mean?

First, Iran's move to enrich uranium up to 60 per cent is not a surprising one; it has gradually breached the nuclear deal since Trump's withdrawal in 2018. However, the sabotage at the Natanz facility has speeded up the jump from 20 per cent enrichment announced in January 2021 to 60 per cent now.

Second, 60 per cent enrichment has also brought Iran very close to the weapons-grade requirement of 90 per cent and will provide an upper hand to the country in the talks at Vienna. It has to be seen how Israel and Saudi Arabia, Iran's regional foes, respond to this. The possibility of another "sabotage" cannot be discounted at this stage.

Third, irrespective of the developments of the past one week, the talks at Vienna will continue. Instead, there will be more onus on the negotiators in Vienna now to find a peaceful way out of the nuclear quagmire.

Iran: Return of the JCPOA talks

Poornima B, 11 April 2021

What happened?

On 9 April 2021, a Joint Commission meeting of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) members (excluding the United States) was held in Vienna. The meeting followed a virtual and in-person meeting held a few days earlier, resulting in two working groups. One group looks at the US sanctions imposed on Iran; the other will develop conditions that Iran has to comply with to execute the JCPOA. The US representatives stayed at a different hotel as the Iranian delegation refused to meet them directly. Messages about the negotiations were relayed to the US by the other signatories to the JCPOA- Russia, European Union, China.

As the talks' progress, the US and Iran will be involved in indirect talks from the coming week. Iran has expressed its willingness to negotiate provided the US also followed suit. The other parties expect that the negotiations will culminate with a credible outcome that outlines the measures needed to be taken by them to reignite the JCPOA.

What is the background?

First, the JCPOA initiative, as an effort to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. In 2015, President Obama signed the JCPOA to offer sanctions relief to Tehran in exchange to ensure a peaceful Iranian nuclear programme. Under this nuclear deal, Iran agreed to restrict the production of the nuclear material for ten years and dismantle its centrifuges, basically giving up the idea of developing its nuclear weapons. UK, France, China, Russia and Germany (P5+1) were also parties to the deal.

Second, Trump disrupting the progress of the Iran nuclear deal. Trump pulled out of the deal, following criticisms about the deal by the US' close allies - Israel and Saudi Arabia, and citing Iran's aggression in the Middle East. The other parties to the deal opposed Trump's decision; however, he reimposed sanctions on Iran. Tehran began producing nuclear materials, and considerable advancement in Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs was observed.

Third, Iran's response. In December 2020, Iran's Supreme Council passed a nuclear law that directs the state to bolster its nuclear enrichment levels up to 20 per cent Ur-235. Despite President Hassan Rouhani's warning against the consequences of such legislation, the Supreme Council passed it. As of February 2021, Iran had produced 17kg of weapons-grade Uranium.

What does it mean?

First, disagreement over what sanctions to remove could be a potential hurdle for the negotiations. While Iran demands all sanctions imposed after January 2016 be lifted, the US does not want to remove non-nuclear sanctions. Moreover, President Trump had smudged the difference between nuclear and non-nuclear related sanctions by placing some into terrorism-related sanctions. A major challenge for the US delegation would be deciding whether to stick to these designations or look beyond them. The US will also have to convince its allies in the Middle East.

Second, the negotiations have to fructify before the Iran presidential elections in June. If a hardliner replaces Rouhani (who is considered a

moderate), Iran could revisit its negotiations. The deal must see the light for the moderates to retain their face amid widespread call for a hardliner Presidential candidate in Iran. Such political change could delay the talks' outcomes, as opposed to what the other parties aim to achieve.

Iran: The new US offer to restart a dialogue

Rashmi Ramesh, 21 February 2021

What happened?

On 18 February, the United States offered to restart talks with Iran on the JCPOA. The Secretary of State Anthony Blinken held talks with the officials of the European countries that are party to the agreement and stated that the US would return to it formally if Iran treads the path of compliance. The US State Department signalled that Washington was ready to hold “informal talks” with Iran, on the invitation of one of the European countries.

On 19 February, in response, the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson tweeted that the country stood firm and would agree to compliance only when the US lifts the sanctions imposed on it by the Trump administration.

What is the background?

First, the new US administration, and a nuanced approach by Biden towards Iran vis-à-vis Trump's hammer strategy. Joe Biden's campaign highlighted the need to reverse Trump's policy on Iran concerning JCPOA. Offering direct talks with Iran is the first step that the Biden administration has taken, towards restoring the JCPOA. However, Biden has also cautioned about restarting the dialogue unless Iran returns to compliance. This is in stark contrast with the previous US administration, which withdrew from the deal in 2018, as part of the maximum pressure policy. Trump imposed a slew of sanctions that have crippled the Iranian economy and has taken several steps to curtail its regional influence.

Second, Iran's hardline position and the willingness to address the concerns if the sanctions are removed. Since the US withdrew

from the nuclear deal, Iran has gradually scaled down its commitments to the deal. In December 2020, the Iranian Parliament approved for increasing the uranium enrichment levels to 20 per cent, in a clear breach of the deal. The move came after the assassination of the country's top nuclear scientist Dr Mohsen Fakrizadeh, allegedly by Israel. The moderate cabinet headed by Prime Minister Hassan Rouhani is bound to implement the legislation passed by the hardliner Parliament. The Iranian Parliament Speaker announced in January that Iran has produced 37.5 pounds of 20 per cent enriched uranium at the Fordow nuclear facility. On 8 February, the IAEA reported 3.6 grams of uranium metal at Iran's Fuel Plate Fabrication Plant. On 16 February, Iran informed the IAEA that it “will stop implementing voluntary transparency measures under the JCPOA as of 23 February, including the Additional Protocol.” The Additional Protocol enables the IAEA to conduct inspections of undeclared sites on short notice. The Supreme Leader, in a televised address to the nation, said that the country would not comply with the deal unless the US lifts the sanctions that are crippling the economy.

Third, Europe's concerns regarding instability. The E3 (UK, Germany and France) fear the outcomes of a more hardline stance by Iran, particularly the regional instability. The joint statement that followed the virtual meet of the E3 and the US officials urged “Iran to consider the consequences of such (enrichment) grave action, particularly at this time of renewed diplomatic opportunity.”

What does it mean?

First, an emerging space for diplomacy with Iran. There have been indications of talks and negotiations from the US, E3 and Iran. Both Iran and the US, despite stringent stances, have expressed their willingness to restart talks that are mediated by one of the European countries. The US's formal call for talks will induce a new lease of life to the nuclear deal and the larger question of US-Iran relations.

Second, Biden's policy choices. While there is a significantly large section demanding a more nuanced approach, there are stronger voices

within the US that do not want to soften its stance on Iran. He risks being tagged as a pro-Iran president and angering the US's strong allies in the region- Israel and the Arab countries.

Iran, therefore, is a difficult nut to crack for Joe Biden.

Iran: Tehran announces 20 per cent uranium enrichment as a new US administration takes over

Lokendra Sharma, 9 January 2021

What happened?

On 4 January, the Iranian government's spokesperson said that the country has started enriching uranium up to 20 per cent purity. "The process for producing 20 per cent enriched uranium has started at Shahid Alimohammadi enrichment complex (Fordow)", the statement said.

Earlier, on 1 January, the IAEA released a statement which said: "Iran has informed the Agency that in order to comply with a legal act recently passed by the country's parliament, the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran intends to produce low-enriched uranium (LEU) up to 20 per cent at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant".

What is the background?

First, the passing of a law mandating enrichment. In early December, the Iranian parliament passed the Strategic Action to Lift Sanctions law which mandates the government to suspend inspections and enrich uranium to 20 per cent from the current 4.5 per cent level. This came after Iran's top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was assassinated, for which Iran blamed Israel. It also gave a month's time to European powers to lift the sanctions, failing to adopt the measures.

Second, the all-round failure of the JCPOA. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed in 2015 between Iran and the P5 (the US, China, the UK, France and Russia) plus Germany. The deal lifted crippling economic sanctions in return for Iran accepting a set of restrictions on its nuclear programme. The key provisions included: First, limiting the uranium

stockpile under 300 kgs with 3.67 per cent enrichment level for 15 years; second, at the Fordow nuclear site, which is in the limelight now, Iran accepted to introduce no uranium for 15 years; third, to remove the core of the Arak reactor which was considered to be capable of producing plutonium. In 2018, the US President Trump withdrew from the deal and re-imposed sanctions as part of "maximum pressure" on Iran. Even as the IAEA certified Iran's compliance with the deal, other signatories, failed to uphold the provisions of the deal and did not help Iran in addressing the US sanctions.

Third, Iran's breaches of the deal after Trump's withdrawal. In May 2019 Iran announced that it would not observe the 300 kg enriched uranium limit. In July 2019, it announced enriching uranium to 4.5 per cent, overshooting the deal mandated 3.67 per cent. In September 2019 Iran declared starting research on advanced centrifuges. In November 2019 Iran began enriching uranium to 4.5 per cent at Fordow site. In January 2020, Iran said that it is not bound by deal limits, but would maintain with its safeguard applications. The decision to enrich uranium up to 20 per cent purity is the latest breach of the deal.

Fourth, the Middle East's geopolitics. The Israel-US relationship has grown stronger; Israel has signed the Abraham Accords and improved relations with the Arab countries, altering the strategic landscape of the region. Iran's move comes amid this developing Arab-Israeli partnership which is threatening for the former.

What does it mean?

First, there is a pattern to Iran's breaches of the nuclear deal. It has gradually upped the ante, giving ample time to the other signatories of the deal to work around the US sanctions. It has not gone about the breaches secretly; rather, has announced all its moves to the world loud and clear. Even though scaling up from 20 per cent to 90 per cent (weapons-grade) is feasible for Iran given its technical capability, it is not the goal. If Iran wanted to build nuclear weapons at this stage, it would have also gone for the immediate revival of its Arak nuclear weapons site.

Second, by announcing to enrich to 20 per cent, Iran will have a bargaining chip when the Biden administration takes over and renegotiates the deal.

Third, the enrichment announcement is also aimed at satisfying the domestic constituency, which wanted a strong response to the killing of Fakhrizadeh.

Israel: End of Netanyahu era

Udbhav Krishna P, 6 June 2021

What happened?

On 31 May, far-right party leader Naftali Bennett threw support behind a 'unity government' in Israel to unseat Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

On 2 June, Israel's opposition cobbled together an eight-member coalition of right-wing, leftist, and centrist parties with a thin majority in a bid to end Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's 12-year run.

On 3 June, after his rivals reached an agreement on forming a new government in Israel, Netanyahu signaled that he would not go down without a struggle. He called the proposed new diverse coalition that would oust him a "dangerous, left-wing government."

What is the background?

First, Israel's electoral system. The 120 members legislative assembly, the Knesset, has a nationwide proportional representation system. Rather than electing individual candidates, voters cast ballots for an entire party. Due to such a system, one single party gaining a majority is very unlikely. This system results in many parties coming together to form a coalition government. After the fourth election in two years, Netanyahu's Likud Party and coalition allied parties could not cross the 61-seat threshold. Thus, the opposition leader Yair Lapid was given 28 days to form a coalition government by the Israeli President on 5 May.

Second, Yair Lapid as an alternative to Netanyahu. Lapid's party finished second to Netanyahu's right-wing Likud, with 17 seats in an inconclusive 23 March national ballot. He was given a 2 June deadline from the Israeli President to announce a new government. Lapid's chances of success rested largely with Naftali Bennett, 49, a former defense chief and tech millionaire whose Yamina party's seven seats in the Parliament was enough to gain him the status of kingmaker. According to the BBC, under a rotation arrangement Naftali Bennett, would serve as a prime minister until 2023 before handing over to Lapid.

Third, the new coalition. It contains eight very different political parties - Yesh Atid (centrist) - led by Yair Lapid (17 seats), Kahol Lavan (Blue and White) (centrist) - led by Benny Gantz (eight), Yisrael Beiteinu (center-right to right-wing nationalist) - led by Avigdor Lieberman (seven), Labor (social-democratic) - led by Merav Michaeli (seven), Yamina (right-wing) - led by Naftali Bennett (seven), New Hope (center-right to right-wing)- led by Gideon Sa'ar (six), Meretz (left-wing, social-democratic) - led by Nitzan Horowitz (six), Raam (Arab Islamist) - led by Mansour Abbas (four) with affiliations from left to the far right are working together. United Arab List (Raam) party, whose leader Mansour Abbas won four seats in the Knesset, became the first Arab party to join a right-leaning coalition in Israeli history.

Fourth, a likely agenda for the new coalition. Members are diverse members and do not have anything in common other than removing PM Netanyahu from his 12 years' run as Prime Minister. The issues facing Israel are substantial: economic recovery from the pandemic, contentious issues like Palestinian statehood, religion and society.

What does it mean?

Will the coalition succeed? The coalition is diverse, and Netanyahu's likely response. While it is easier to build a coalition against a single person, it would be difficult to sustain. On the other hand, Netanyahu will try to break the fragile coalition government and remain in power because losing his constitutional position would be troublesome due to the corruption

charges against him. He would want his country to go for a fifth election to gain more right-wing votes after the recent Gaza conflict.

Israel: Fourth Election in two years, but the stalemate continue

Jeshil J Samuel, 28 March 2021

What happened?

On 23 March, Israel held its fourth parliamentary election in two years. The election was conducted after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition government collapsed.

On the same day, Palestinian militants fired rockets at Beersheba moments after PM Netanyahu visited the city. The Israeli army responded with overnight aerial strikes targeting areas controlled by Gaza's Hamas Islamist rulers.

On 25 March, Israel's election commission announced the election results. The pro-Netanyahu bloc had won 52 seats, and the anti-Netanyahu bloc had won 57 seats out of 120 seats. The Likud party led with 30 seats, followed by the Yesh Atid party with 17 seats. Thus, the election has ended in a stalemate between both blocs since neither side has the required majority of 61 seats.

What is the background?

First, the continuing political stalemate. Since April 2019, Benjamin Netanyahu (Likud Party) and Benny Gantz (Blue and White Party) have failed to maintain a working coalition. Despite an agreement to switch powers after 18 months, PM Netanyahu denied Gantz, the leadership. Since its inception, the Knesset (Israel's legislature) has been mostly governed by coalition governments consisting of two or more parties. The problem within the coalition governments has been the primary issue for the stalemate.

Second, Netanyahu's survival strategy. Netanyahu has been the Prime Minister of Israel for the past 12 years, making him the longest-standing PM. Despite facing opposition

throughout his tenure, Netanyahu has always found a way to stay in power. He has used the legal system to validate his tenure. Even when faced with charges of corruption and bribery, Netanyahu was safeguarded by the legislature, which allowed him to remain in power. He had also pulled out support from coalition governments when his authority was challenged, knowing that re-election would end in a stalemate. This is one of the main reasons why Israelis have had to vote four times in the past two years.

Third, a divided opposition. Despite the opposing parties having won 57 seats in the recent elections and sharing the common goal of ending PM Netanyahu's tenure, they remain ineffective. Most of the opposition is highly diverse and comes from varying sides of the political spectrum. The chance for them to form a coalition is less than Netanyahu forming alliances with other rightist and orthodox parties to prove his majority.

What does this mean?

First, the ideological divide between the political parties has led to weak coalitions and has also impacted governance. If Israel is to recover from its economic slowdown due to the pandemic, then a stable government is essential.

Second, the uninterrupted reign of Prime Minister Netanyahu. Netanyahu and the Likud party seem to have made it clear that they intend to stay in power. He has used successive parliamentary elections as buffers to retain his political power. His support within the Israeli bureaucracy is still favourable and would continue to save him from allegations and criminal charges.

Third, the possibility of a fifth election. If neither of the blocs proves their majority, then Israeli citizens could be called to vote for the fifth time in two years.

Iraq: Pope Francis meets the Grand Ayatollah in Baghdad

Jeshil Samuel, 7 March 2021

What happened?

On 5 March, Pope Francis arrived in Baghdad, commencing his historic three-day visit to Iraq. This is the first-ever papal visit to the region, and also the Pope's first international visit since the pandemic began. During this visit, the Pope will meet prolific Islamic leaders and address the Christian community in the region.

On 6 March, the Pope visited the city of Nafaj, where he met the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Both the religious leaders spoke regarding the dwindling Christian community in Iraq and the threats against them. The Ayatollah affirmed that Christian citizens should be given a chance to live in peace and security just as any other Iraqi.

What is the background?

First, the Christian community in Iraq. Iraq has one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, dating back to 01 AD. The country's largest denominations include the Chaldean Catholics (67 per cent), who recognise the Pope's authority, and the members of the Assyrian Church of the East (20 per cent). The Christian population in Iraq was nearly 1.4 million before 2003, after which the number declined drastically.

Second, the rise in intolerance towards Christians and their persecution. After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the public opinion towards the West and its culture turned hostile. The Christian population were regarded as defectors siding with the US. Since then, churches were attacked, Christians could not practice their religion freely, and Islamic fundamentalists fuelled hatred towards Christians. The 2010 terrorist attack on Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad resulted in a massive exodus of the Christian population from the country. In 2014, when Islamic State militias overran northern Iraq, tens of thousands of Christians migrated to other countries fearing persecution.

Third, the decline of Christianity in Iraq. Once religious extremist groups like Al Qaeda started taking control over territory in Iraq, the country started exhibiting a zero-tolerance policy towards religious practices. Christians were either forced to convert to Islam or to leave the country. In other cases, they were not offered either of the solutions and were killed mercilessly.

What does this mean?

First, the Pope's visit could improve religious tolerance in Iraq and preserve the Christian community. At present, Iraq has 250,000-500,000 Christians. The Pope's call for an end to the violence and strife ensuing in the region could also push the Iraqi government to keep a leash on terrorism and religious extremism. Second, this visit could also cement a better relationship between Iraq and Europe.

Saudi Arabia: The criminal case against Mohammed bin Salman

Sourina Bej, 7 March 2021

What happened?

On 2 March, the Reporters without Borders (RSF) filed a criminal complaint in Germany, charging Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and four other high-ranking officials with crimes against humanity, including the 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The lawsuit has been submitted in front of Germany's Public Prosecutor.

The lawsuit comes less than a week after the CIA released an intelligence report that concluded the Crown Prince had "approved an operation to capture or kill Khashoggi."

What is the background?

First, Saudi Arabia's notorious records in stifling press freedoms. RSF has ranked Saudi Arabia 170th out of 180 countries on its World Press Freedom Index. Their complaint takes into account the situation of 34 journalists arbitrarily imprisoned in the country. It includes writer Raif Badawi, who was sentenced to 10 years

imprisonment in 2014 and 1,000 lashes for a blog he founded. The complaint comes after a detailed record of willful killing, torture, sexual violence, and enforced disappearances of journalists. Amongst it, the killing of Washington Post columnist Khashoggi has been one of the triggers for the RSF. After two years, the response to the killing has been only sanctions and visa bans by the US for 76 Saudi officials. The Biden administration has stopped short of pursuing a tough stance against Mohammed bin Salman.

Second, the spurt in crackdowns of dissidents by Mohammed bin Salman. Apart from imprisoning journalists, dissenting voices of several activists and royal members have been equally repressed by the crown prince. In February 2021, the mysterious disappearance of a Saudi dissident, Ahmed Abdullah al-Harbi, living in Montreal adds to the new fear among the Saudi exiles of abduction and deaths. Similar has been the fear allayed by Prince Khaled bin Farhan al-Saud, who now lives in Düsseldorf in Germany after leaving the Kingdom where he had incensed MBS with his calls for human rights reforms. In recent years, several reports have surfaced of Saudi authorities under the Prince, repeatedly intimidating critics living abroad and in some instances abduct or repatriate them to Saudi Arabia. Domestically, Prince Mohammed has been tightening his grip on power since he was appointed as crown prince in 2017. With King Salman's old age and possible ill-health as a trigger, he has detained senior royals in 2020 including two members, Prince Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz and Mohammed bin Nayef who were immediate contenders to the royalty.

Third, the role of Germany's judiciary in safeguarding freedoms under international law. Germany has been selected to file the complaint due to its legal system that gives the court jurisdiction over international crimes committed abroad. Germany's Code of Crimes Against International Law includes the right to prosecute crimes against humanity committed "as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilians." The principle of universal jurisdiction is enshrined in Article 1, allowing

German prosecutors and courts to prosecute crimes that were not committed in Germany or against German citizens. The most recent example has been on 24 February when under this law, a former member of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's security services was sentenced to four and a half years in prison for abetting the torture of civilians in the Syrian civil war. Commonly, the ICC hears the cases charged with crimes against humanity but Saudi Arabia has neither signed nor ratified the international agreement. Thus, making it important for RSF to choose Germany.

What does it mean?

Two questions: Will Germany prosecute? Even if it does, will it have any impact on MBS?

Until now Germany has led cases pertaining to the ones filed against the Islamic State and officials involved in the Syrian civil war. But in indicting the crown prince, if the German court decides to hear the case it will send a strong signal from Europe to the country, which until now has been lacking since the killing of Khashoggi. The diplomatic relation is bound to play a role in determining how the verdict will be delivered. But more importantly with an ambition to power, it remains to be seen what MBS would do next. Until now the international pressure against the crown prince has done minimal to upset the domestic clampdowns and a possible hearing could do the same.

The GCC Summit and the thaw in Qatar-Saudi Arabia relations

By Lakshmi V Menon, 9 January 2021

What happened?

On 4 January, the Abu Samra border between Saudi Arabia and Qatar was opened. Subsequently, on 5 January, the Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani headed to Al-Ula in Saudi Arabia to attend the 41st Gulf Cooperation Council Summit, during which, the Al-Ula declaration or the 'solidarity and stability' deal was concluded. The deal formally ended the Qatar blockade. The Summit outcome, titled "Summit of Sultan Qaboos and Sheikh Sabah",

aimed to "reinforce the Council's strengths, realize the aspirations of the citizens of the Gulf, and overcome all obstacles that hinder collaboration among Member States."

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman expressed hope to witness a unified effort to confront regional challenges, particularly Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programme. Meanwhile, Egypt signed a reconciliation agreement with Qatar at the summit.

Various states of the Arab world, including Iran, welcomed the deal. Iran's foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif congratulated Qatar for its "brave resistance to pressure & extortion". "To our other Arab neighbors: Iran is neither an enemy nor threat. Enough scapegoating – especially with your reckless patron on his way out. Time to take our offer for a strong region," he tweeted.

What is the background?

First, the blockade. On 5 June 2017, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain imposed a historic land, air and maritime blockade on Qatar. The corner-stone of allegations was Doha's alleged support for Islamic extremism in the Middle East. The coalition, or the anti-Qatar quartet, desired to strong-arm Doha into complying with their thirteen demands.

Second, Qatar's accusations. The Althanis further agitated the Saudis and Emiratis with criticism. In December 2018, Qatari Foreign Minister accused Saudi of destabilizing the region through the Yemeni war, blockading of Qatar and kidnapping of the Lebanese Prime Minister. He condemned the UAE for destabilizing Somalia by supporting Somaliland, paying Al-Qaeda fighters in Yemen and disrupting Libya.

Third, the US role. The declaration comes ahead of Joe Biden taking over presidency from Donald Trump on 20 January. The Trump administration had been pushing for the resolution of the blockade to complement the Trump-Jared "deal of the century" which aims to contain and counter Iran. It is a noteworthy

achievement for the Trump administration as the US pressure has made conflicting Middle Eastern powerhouses such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel concordant.

What does it mean?

First, the failure of the blockade. The quartet's demands included shutting down media outlets allegedly funded by Qatar, including Al Jazeera, expelling Iranian military representatives from Qatar, shutting down the upcoming Turkish military base and ceasing support to regional Islamist groups. Qatar rejected all accusations as baseless and expressed readiness for dialogue throughout the blockade. Today, Doha-Tehran working relationship has bolstered, and none of the objectives against Qatar has been achieved.

Second, Qatar has emerged stronger. Saudi Arabia's game plan was to convert Qatar into a vassal state and handicap her independent foreign policy. Riyadh carried out a massive public relations effort for escalating diplomatic pressure on Doha. However, Qatar emerged more self-reliant with flourishing multi-sectoral businesses and global trade.

Third, under the late Emir Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Kuwait had hosted numerous events for the resolution of the crisis, the deepest rift in the GCC in the last four decades. The Al-Ula declaration is a momentous step towards the conflict's resolution.

UAE: The Hope mission enters the Mars Orbit

Harini Madhusudan, 14 February 2021

What happened?

On 9 February 2021, the United Arab Emirates' first interplanetary mission to Mars, called Hope, was placed into orbit around the planet. The UAE becomes the fifth spacefaring country after the US, the Soviet Union, Europe, and India. Mohammad Al Gergawi, Minister of Cabinet Affairs, called the success a national achievement that brings pride to every Emirati and Arab, and stated, "The journey of the Hope Probe reflects the broader journey of the UAE."

The challenges that faced the mission team in turning the probe from a dream to reality in six years mirrors the challenges the UAE has faced in its journey as a nation who made the impossible possible.”

What is the background?

First, Mars Missions over the decades. 49 missions have been made to Mars, since the first successful flyby in 1965. The mission types include flyby, orbiters, or rovers. Four space agencies have successfully made it to Mars: NASA, the former Soviet Union space program, the ESA and ISRO. Space programs of Japan and China, have attempted Mars or Martian moon missions without success. The successful missions of UAE and China would add to the total successful agencies to six. Currently, China’s Tianwen-1 and the US’ Perseverance Rover, are expected to reach the red planet with a 10-day gap.

Second, the UAE’s Hope Mission. Hope is UAE’s fourth space mission and first interplanetary mission. The Hope probe was launched on 19 July 2020, onboard Japan’s H-2A rocket from the Japanese space centre and has travelled for seven months and at a speed of 120,000km/h. This week, it executed a 27-minute precise burn to manoeuvre and be captured by the Martian gravity. Hope probe has an overall mission life of one Martian year, about 687 earth days. The mission was announced in 2014 with a cost of approximately USD 200m, marking the Arab world’s first interplanetary mission. The satellite carries three instruments that will study the seasonal and daily changes in the Martian atmosphere. Hope is expected to collect more than one terabyte (1,000 GB) of new data, which will be shared with over 200 academic and scientific institutions worldwide for free. The mission has been developed and managed by seven engineers who are all said to be below the age of 35.

Third, the rise of the middle powers in Outer Space. The 2020s would see the domain grow both laterally and horizontally. A high number of space agencies have planned for ambitious missions in Outer space. In 2022, Russia and the

ESA have their Mars missions planned. The Hope mission’s success can be seen as a display of multi-institutional collaboration between the US, Japan and UAE. These collaborations could act as the driving force behind a significant increase in the number of nations that are developing their space programs for bigger missions but at affordable expenses.

What does it mean?

The missions to Mars in the 1960s and the 1980s were driven by the need to explore the planet. Since the confirmation of the presence of ancient water on the Martian soil in 2000, there has been a renewed interest to explore the planet. By the 1990s, the costs of outer space missions reduced, encouraging more projects to reach the red planet. The following decade is expected to see many such attempts at deep space explorations with long-term goals with crucial security implications. Having successful missions is a sign of national prestige, however, they carry the underlying political-economic interests of the nations investing in them. For example, the end goal of UAE’s mission is to establish a human colony on Mars by 2117.

The Middle East: Trump's latest move to designate the Houthis as 'Foreign Terrorists'

By Rashmi Ramesh, 16 January 2021

What happened?

On 10 January 2021, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared the Houthis a "foreign terrorist organization". The designation will come into effect from 19 January, a day before Joe Biden takes charge as the US president. He stated that the "designation is an attempt to achieve a peaceful, sovereign and united Yemen that is free from the Iranian interference and at peace with its neighbours."

On 14 January, the United Nations and other aid organizations that work in Yemen called the decision as a step backwards in a country that is torn by six years of war and poverty.

On 11 January, Iran’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson denounced the designation and

termed it as a move that would end as a failed decision. Iran's foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif condemned the decision for reflecting "utter contempt for peace", and said it will worsen the situation in Yemen.

What is the background?

First, the ongoing war. Yemen, the most impoverished Arab country, is in the midst of a civil war between the government and the Houthi rebels since 2014. While the government is supported by the Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia and UAE, the rebels are backed by Iran and its militias.

Second, the US role in the Yemen war. The US has been involved in Yemen since the Obama presidency. The US military was directly involved in the airstrikes targeting certain suspected Al-Qaeda terrorists and their camps. According to Airwars, an independent monitoring group, between 2017 and 2018, the airstrikes peaked, which claimed the lives of at least 86 civilians. The Trump administration has mostly depended on and supported the Arab coalition, particularly Saudi Arabia, for achieving its objectives in Yemen.

Third, the US's internal divide between the White House and Congress over the war in Yemen and the US's role. Trump has substantially increased the sale of arms to the Arab coalition countries, despite strong demand from the Congress to cut ties with Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, in 2019, the Trump administration managed to circumvent the Congressional review regarding major weapons sales worth USD eight billion, by declaring an emergency over Iran.

Fourth, the Trump administration's policy against Iran. The decision to designate Houthi militia as a terrorist organization is a part of Trump's 'maximum pressure' policy.

Fifth, the Houthis's resilience in the civil war began six years ago; they have gained support from Iranian militias, and are no closer to being defeated.

What does it mean?

First, the cascading ill effects. The UN Humanitarian Chief Mark Lowcock addressed the UNSC on 14 January, and warned that the designation is "likely to lead to large-scale famine on a scale that the world has not seen for nearly 40 years." The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also expressed concerns about the humanitarian crisis that would unfurl due to the US's move. The Houthis control approximately 70 per cent of Yemen and are a de-facto authority. Several NGOs and aid organizations serving in the country coordinate with the rebels to supply food and basic needs.

Second, the move plays into the expectations of the Arab coalition. The Arab coalition supports the internationally recognized Yemen government against the Houthis and its ally Iran. The GCC welcomed the US move to designate the Houthi militia as a terrorist organization.

Third, the pressure on the Biden administration. Many US lawmakers have called upon Biden to reverse the designation order, citing humanitarian crisis and famine. However, it would not be easy for the Biden administration to reverse it.

Libya: Ten years after Gaddafi, the Libyans look forward with a new hope

Apoorva Sudhakar, 21 February 2021

What happened?

On 17 February, thousands of Libyans gathered in the capital city of Tripoli to mark the 10th anniversary of the uprising that led to the end of four decades of Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi's dictatorship. Arab News quoted several of those gathered for the celebrations. One civilian, who took part in the 2011 uprising, acknowledged the conflict that followed. According to him, "It doesn't mean you have to choose between Qaddafi and chaos. Revolution is a process. We must build a new Libya that we deserve." Others blame the post-2011 leaders for the current state of affairs in Libya.

On 17 February, Amnesty International said, "A decade after the overthrow of Muammar al-

Gaddafi, justice has yet to be delivered to victims of war crimes and serious human rights violations including unlawful killings, enforced disappearances, torture, forced displacement and abductions committed by militias and armed groups.”

What is the background?

First, a brief recap of the revolution against Gaddafi. On 17 February 2011, protests erupted against Gaddafi. The protests escalated and threatened the interests of external powers in the oil-rich country. Subsequently, Gaddafi was killed in NATO-led intervention in October 2011. Libya descended into chaos resulting from the sudden power vacuum. An election dispute in 2014 led to the formation of the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), and a parallel rebel authority, the Libyan National Army (LNA). The GNA was centred in western Libya while LNA controlled the East.

Second, external interventions. After the formation of the two parallel authorities, external powers like Russia, Turkey, France got involved in the conflict, to safeguard their priorities regarding Libya’s oil and gas reserves. The GNA was supported by Turkey, Qatar and Italy. On the other hand, the LNA, led by a former general and aide to Gaddafi, was supported by Egypt, France, Russia and the UAE. The power struggle between the above countries fueled the conflict in Libya.

Third, the newly formed interim government. On 5 February 2021, 75 delegates from Libya agreed on a new united interim government during UN-brokered peace talks; the interim government will ensure parliamentary elections in December 2021. The new president has been chosen from eastern Libya and the prime minister from the west. This was the result of a ceasefire signed in October 2020 and also one of the first positive developments in the country since 2014.

Fourth, the Arab Spring of 2011. The overthrow of Ben Ali’s dictatorial regime in Tunisia inspired the revolution in Libya. Other countries like Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and Sudan followed

suit with a common demand to overhaul the authoritarian systems.

What does it mean?

First, external interventions without an exit strategy or a plan ahead for the country lead to increased instability. This is evident not just in Libya, but in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and other countries as well. More often than not, external powers let the conflicts continue to serve their self-interests and increase their leverage in big power politics.

Second, though the 2011 revolution did not produce an immediate victory for the protesters, they have now pinned their hopes on the newly formed unity government. How the government charts out its course over the months leading to the December elections will decide the future of Libya.

Tunisia: President announces rule by decree

Mohamad Aseel, 26 September 2021

What happened?

On 22 September, Tunisian President Kais Saied declared that he will 'rule by decree' and defy the constitution's parts that challenge his executive and legislative authorities. According to the new rules that have been published in the official Gazette allows him to release 'Legislative text' upon his decree, he is also entitled to appoint a cabinet and determine its policies and direction of implementation without any interferences. The announcements raised immediate concerns among the Opposition; a senior leader of the Heart of Tunisia party rejected the presidential decisions calling it a "premeditated coup". The leaders of the Ennahda, the largest opposition party condemned it, as the declaration meant "cancelling the constitution".

On 23 September, Attayar, Al Joumhour, Akef and Ettakatol parties released a joint statement calling for an end to Saied's intervention. These minor parties have significant influence among the non-elite sections of the country. The statement questions the President's authority and rejects his legitimacy, "He will be held

responsible for all the possible repercussions of this dangerous step". A senior official of the UGTT union said, "Tunisia is heading towards absolute, individual rule."

On 24 September, the UGTT labor Union, a powerful political entity in the country said in a statement the recent developments can be a "danger to Democracy". The union had earlier welcomed Saied's decision to dissolve the Parliament but had called for an immediate return political stability and to operate within the bounds of the constitution. The head of Amnesty International commented that the development is worrying and cautioned, "the warning signs are blinking red".

What is the background?

First, the suspension of the Parliament. Kais Saied suspended the Parliament and dismissed Rached Mechichi as the Prime Minister on 25 July; he took over the legislative and executive powers. The decision came after series of nationwide protests against the misgovernance of the moderate-Islamic Ennahda party resulting in a plummeting economy. The party was accused of being instrumental in establishing a highly a corrupted administration that failed to handle the covid pandemic effectively. The legal immunity enjoyed by all Parliamentarians were withdrawn, and travel bans imposed. The Opposition condemned the suspension to be a constitutional coup.

Second, the delayed decisions. The suspension was declared to be for 30 days, followed by the naming of a new Prime minister along with the cabinet. By 25 August, the interim administration was brought under both growing international and domestic pressure to name a new Prime minister.

The Opposition headed by Ennahda and other minor parties called nationwide mobilization against Saied's administration and called for a swift return to the former status quo. Meanwhile, many supporters of the recent interventions have openly expressed concerns regarding the absence of clarity of Saied's roadmap to a new government.

What does it mean?

First, Kais Saeid, despite denying any aspiration to rule, can become an authoritarian ruler in the future. The new administration lacks support from the existing political parties and bureaucracy. He is criticized for lacking any prior experiences in governance; critics warn of the formation of a highly authoritarian regime that is incapable of delivering efficient governance. The security forces have remained uninvolved after the suspension, but in the light of the recent reforms, Tunisia's military and intelligence can be a critical factor in the new administration.

Second, the fragmented and divided Opposition that had created disunity and lack of collective consensus is being brought under a single banner to resist Saied's administrative reforms collectively. A strong and combined opposition that resist the new governance can possibly recreate the bloody images of the 2011 Arab Spring that swept across various countries in the region.

Third, Tunisia was often seen as the beacon of democracy among the nations that was part of the Arab Spring. The new governmental policies can undermine the ideals and achievements of the revolution. A political tussle in Tunisia in the future can also cause regional instability in the North African Belt.

Sahel: End of France's military operation

By Anu Maria Joseph, 13 June 2021

What happened?

On 10 June, French President Emmanuel Macron said: "The time has come; the continuation of our commitment in the Sahel will not be in the same way. Following consultations with our partners, we will initiate a profound transformation of our military presence in the Sahel. We will keep a counter-terrorism pillar with Special Forces with several hundred forces. And there will be a second pillar that will be cooperation, and which we will reinforce."

He also said that those left with the French military would join with other European nations as a part of the Takuba Task Force fighting against the militants in the Sahel and the regional forces of Mali and Nigeria. The scaling down of troops would occur in an "organized way", and the details will be finalized by the end of June. Analyst Abudu Bulama Bukarti from Tony Blair Institute for Global Change said: "if France draws down its troops, it is going to create a security vacuum, because clearly the domestic troops and the UN peacekeeping missions don't have the required capacity to do the fight by themselves".

What is the background?

First, the political instability in northern Africa. On 3 June, France suspended its military support in Mali following the second military coup within nine months. President Macron said: "the long-term presence of France in external operations cannot be a substitute to the return of the state and services of the state to the political stability and choice of sovereign states". Fragile political regimes and local militaries are bogging down anti-terrorist operations. In the background, authorities in Mali and Burkina Faso are trying to negotiate with extremist groups.

Second, France's role so far, and a new approach. France has been actively leading counter-insurgency military operations in the Sahel region since 2013. Currently, it has deployed 5,100 troops in the region as a part of Operation Barkhane. Now, France is attempting to increase the local capacity. On 10 June, the International Counter-Terrorist Academy backed by France was inaugurated in Ivory Coast. The academy expects to train security forces, including national counter-terrorism officials, troops, and magistrates, to bring a regional competition in the fight against terrorism. The academy would be the beginning of the transformation of France's counter-terrorism efforts where it urges for coherent regional cooperation.

The change is also due to anti-French protests. Demonstrations against the French military presence in the region have been taking place on

a regular basis. Also the strains within France. France has lost 55 soldiers since 2013. Operation Barkhane costs more than USD 900 million per year alone for France. The deaths of soldiers and the high cost of operation made the mission unpopular in Paris.

Third, increasing anti-France sentiments and reasons behind it. There is growing suspicion of France's intentions as it maintains its strong cultural, economic, political and diplomatic influences, which adds hostility towards the French military presence in Sahel. During the NATO summit in London on 4 December 2020, Macron said: "I don't want to have troops on the ground in the Sahel where there is ambiguity towards anti-French movements."

What does it mean?

First, Africa has to take more responsibility - both at individual and regional levels. Second, the rest of the world has to build capacity in Africa towards the above. Third, the long road ahead in fighting extremism and militancy in Africa.

Mali: The "coup within a coup"

Apoorva Sudhakar, 30 May 2021

What happened?

On 28 May, Mali's constitutional court appointed Colonel Assimi Goita as the transitional President. It ruled that he would "lead the transition process to its conclusion" due to the "vacancy in the presidency."

On 27 May, Colonel Assimi Goita declared himself the transitional President; he led the military coup in August 2020. According to the BBC, Col Goita said: "President Bah Ndw and PM Moctar Ouane had failed in their duties and were seeking to sabotage the country's transition." On the same day, soldiers released Ndw and Ouane from detention.

On 26 May, Goita's aide announced that Ndw and Ouane had resigned and added that "negotiations are ongoing for their liberation and the formation of a new government." On the same day, the UNSC called on the security

forces for a "safe, immediate and unconditional release" of all detained officials.

On 24 May, the military detained Ndaw and Ouane following a cabinet reshuffle wherein two military leaders who led the August coup, including Goita, were left out. Aljazeera reported that the UN and African Union released a joint statement signed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), US, UK, France, and Germany, calling for the civilian leaders' "immediate and unconditional release." The statement said: "We emphasize that the ill-considered action taken today carries the risk of weakening the mobilization of the international community in support of Mali." BBC quoted the French President terming the development "a coup within a coup."

What is the background?

First, the two coups within a year. In early 2020, anti-government protests on the grounds of corruption, crippling economy, pandemic mismanagement, and a deteriorating security situation gathered momentum. The protests were consolidated and led by the 5 June Movement, also known as the M5-RFP. On 19 August 2020, the then President was overthrown by the military. Since September 2020, Mali has been under a transitional government; it is expected to last until the proposed elections in February 2022. However, the coup garnered criticism from several quarters. The military mitigated the threat of sanctions by appointing a civilian leadership with Ndaw and Ouane as the interim President and Prime Minister in September; they were former Defence and Foreign Minister, respectively. Meanwhile, Goita was appointed as Vice President. Over the months, the M5-RFP expressed its contentions with the military, claiming that it was excluded from talks and called for a cabinet reshuffle and a subsequent "broad-based" cabinet. This led to the latest cabinet reshuffle that triggered the second coup in May 2021.

Second, the political complexities in Mali. There is growing resentment within Malians regarding the security situation of the country. The August coup was celebrated with hope for improved security conditions, given that there is a growing

Islamist militancy in the country and in the neighbouring countries. Over the past few months, militants have targeted several military bases. Though France launched a military intervention in 2013, civilians perceive it to be ineffective, and there is growing anger within the civilians against the French military.

Third, regional and external reactions. The two coups have resulted in criticism against Mali. Following the August coup, ECOWAS had suspended financial assistance to Mali; the sanctions were lifted only after the transitional leadership was handed over to Ndaw and Ouane. Similarly, following the latest coup, France has threatened Mali with EU sanctions.

What does it mean?

First, the latest coup demonstrates the fragile leadership within Mali and the lack of political strength among the civilian leadership. It proves that the M5-RFP's criticism regarding the involvement of the military in the civilian-led transition was indeed correct. Further, the constitutional court falling in line with the military also highlights the weakness of democratic institutions.

Second, no amount of external pressure or troop deployment will solve the political complexities in Mali. Goita taking overpower has led to a renewal of the threat of sanctions, but it is unlikely that the military will yield to pressure this time.

Uganda: Museveni wins a sixth term amid politically charged elections

By Apoorva Sudhakar, 16 January 2021

What happened?

On 16 January, the incumbent president of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, won a sixth term with 58.64 per cent of the votes. However, the main opposition candidate, Robert Kyagulanyi, popularly known as Bobi Wine, alleged that the elections were rigged. On the same day, security forces had surrounded Wine's house.

On 14 January, Uganda held its elections under heavy security presence as political tensions

soared high between Museveni and Wine. Apart from complaints of technical issues and delay in the polling process, the election day remained largely peaceful.

On 12 January, Museveni announced a ban on social media. His announcement was in retaliation to Facebook's decision to suspend several official accounts the previous day. However, the ban on social media extended to an internet blackout subsequently.

On 11 January, Facebook suspended several accounts of government officials and members of the ruling party, alleging that the accounts engaged in "coordinated inauthentic behaviour" and "manipulating the public debate." In response, Museveni's senior press secretary accused Facebook of attempting to influence the elections.

What is the background?

First, the refusal by authoritarian leaders to step down. Museveni has been in power for 34 years; in 2021, he claimed that his governance expertise would make him the ideal candidate. Till date, Africa has witnessed several authoritarian regimes lasting for decades. For example, in 2020, Alassane Ouattara and Alpha Condé of Ivory Coast and Guinea respectively won their third terms by introducing constitutional amendments favouring them.

Second, Wine's popularity and volatile election campaigns. His campaign represented the ethnically and economically marginalized communities which made him a popular choice among the youth (under 30) which constitutes around 75 per cent of the population.

Third, stifling traditional and social media. During the election campaigns, journalists covering the Wine campaign were targeted by security forces. In December 2020, the government ordered all journalists to register with the Uganda Media Council; without accreditation from the Council, journalists were not allowed to cover political news. It also requested Google to take down 14 YouTube channels alleging that they fuelled the November violence. Authoritarian regimes in

Africa feel threatened by mobilization of masses through social media.

Fourth, targeting the opposition. Since the campaigns kicked off in Uganda, hundreds of Wine supporters and his campaign officials were detained on several occasions. Similarly, other opposition candidates were also arrested. In the pretext of COVID-19, the government called for online campaigns, thereby putting those with lower funds at a disadvantage.

What does it mean?

First, Museveni's win places him along with the long-term rulers in the rest of Africa who came to power as reformists but retained presidency through various means, legal or illegal. However, the victory was not easy; Museveni's relentless crackdown on Wine's campaign was an indicator that he underestimated Wine's popularity, which stems from Uganda's changing demographics.

Second, Wine previously urged his supporters to reject the early results, which showed a clear lead for Museveni. How the opposition leaders decide to address this dispute — whether they will boycott the results or approach the court — will decide their political standing. In various instances, boycotting the results has only led to the winners staying in power. However, Wine is likely to remain a popular figure in Ugandan politics for the coming years.

EUROPE THIS YEAR

Belarus: The migrant crisis and the state of political affair

By Joeana Cera Mathews, 14 November 2021

What happened?

On 9 November, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki accused the Kremlin of orchestrating the migrant crisis at the border. He said: "This is the latest attack of Lukashenko, who is an executor, but has an enabler, and this enabler is in Moscow, this enabler is President Putin."

On 11 November, in an emergency meeting with top ministers, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko extended a threat, saying: "We heat Europe, and they are still threatening us that they'll shut the borders. And what if we cut off (the transit of) natural gas to them? So I would recommend that the leadership of Poland, Lithuanian and other brainless people think before they speak." On 13 November, Russian President Vladimir Putin disapproved of the threat. He said: "This would be a violation of our transit contract and I hope it will not come to that."

What is the background?

First, Poland's complaints and threats. Poland, taking a strong stand, declared a state of emergency along its borders with Belarus. This enables them to push back migrants, ignore asylum requests, as well as deny access to NGOs and journalists. They believe militarizing the borders will force Belarus to stop the migrant inflow. The government intends to single-handedly manage the crisis and has repeatedly refused the EU's assistance. Although eclipsed by the ongoing crisis, the bloc's internal differences with Poland on the rule of law can be attributed to this refusal.

Second, the EU's options and strategies. The EU regards the border standoff as a 'hybrid attack'. Refuting assumptions of Belarus not being affected by sanctions, the European Commission spokesperson Peter Stano claimed Lukashenko had retorted to "(behaving) like a gangster regime," as sanctions were "biting". Economic

sanctions remain the primary retaliatory measure under consideration. An 'extended sanctions regime', building on the earlier four rounds, is predicted to affect 30 individuals and entities along with Belarus' national carrier Belavia. Besides, third-country airlines and those beyond the regime may also be targeted.

Third, Belarus' threat and counterthreat. Lukashenko, as a retaliatory measure to the sanctions, had warned of "drowning" the bloc in "migrants and drugs". The latest threat of cutting gas transit to the EU, though empty-sounding, has fallen right into the laps of all the Nord Stream 2 critics. Belarus continues washing its hands off the blame and accuses the EU and Poland of being the real culprits since they refuse to aid the asylum-seekers. The crisis also created a diversion by overshadowing Belarus' growing human rights violations.

Fourth, the Russia factor. Alleging Russian involvement, Morawiecki accused the Kremlin of "rebuilding the Russian empire" by using "a new kind of war" whose "ammunition is civilians". Against this backdrop, German Chancellor Angela Merkel conversed with Russian President Vladimir Putin via telephone, asking him to resolve the ongoing conflict. However, Putin strategically refused this request and suggested such negotiations to be done directly with Minsk. If the EU heeds to this, it would imply legitimizing Lukashenko's illegitimate regime. Notwithstanding the allegations, Russia does not seem to have manoeuvred the crisis, although it has capitalized on it.

Fifth, the humanitarian crisis. The political crises apart, the humanitarian one is of the utmost consequence. With winter approaching, migrants are struggling; nine deaths have been reported so far. Betraying their trust by giving them false hope of a 'promised land' and leaving them to die, all to prove a point, is simply cruel. To be used and abused for political gain will scar the already uncertain migrant lives.

What does this mean?

First, a shrewd Belarus. Cashing in on the bloc's vulnerable migrant policy, Belarus has created absolute chaos. Lukashenko has managed to

play it nasty and sly at the cost of innocent migrant lives.

Second, the EU is at an impasse. The EU is at a crossroads where both action and inaction seem troublesome. Considering further sanctions when the genesis of the present crisis was rooted in them, might prove detrimental for the EU, especially when it still lacks an efficient migrant policy. This may be a war that cannot be won, yet the EU cannot afford to lose.

Belarus: While the West impose bans, Putin supports "Europe's Last Dictator"

By Harini Madhusudan, 30 May 2021

What happened?

On 28 May, President Putin hosted Alexander Lukashenko at a resort in Sochi amid the global outcry over the forced diversion of Ryanair's plane and the arrest of a Belarusian journalist, an outspoken critic of the Lukashenko regime. Putin was seen praising Russia's closer ties with Belarus. He said: "We've been building the Union State" and added, "we are confidently moving in that direction, that work is already bringing concrete results to our citizens." Lukashenko stated the West was "seeking to stir up unrest in Belarus."

During the week, the EU and the US announced sanctions against the forced landing of the plane. On 27 May, the Foreign Ministers of the G7 countries and EU released a joint statement, calling for an "immediate and unconditional release" of the detained Belarusian journalist, Roman Protasevich. His Russian girlfriend was also detained; she admits to being the editor of the social media channel that revealed the personal information of the law enforcement personnel of Belarus.

24 May also marks one year since the protests against his decision to run for the 2020 Presidential Elections.

What is the background?

First, Belarus-Russia bonhomie and Moscow's interests. Russia has been steadily increasing its influence over Belarus. However, the two leaders are described as 'uncomfortable allies,' one that is born out of necessity. Russia has

backed Lukashenko's leadership for 27 years and remains Belarus' most powerful political and economic partner. For Russia, Minsk, geographically wedged between the NATO allies and Russia, would be one less neighbour who is influenced by the West. Russian and Belarusian air defence systems are known to be deeply integrated. Though the Kremlin has denied its involvement in the diversion of the plane, the UK Foreign Secretary claimed that it was "very difficult to believe that this kind of action could have been taken without at least the acquiescence of the authorities in Moscow."

Second, the Western pressure on Belarus through sanctions and beyond. On 28 May, the Biden administration reimposed sanctions against nine state-owned enterprises and is developing additional penalties to further target officials in the Belarusian administration. The EU on the same day pledged a financial package of USD 3.7 billion if Belarus starts a 'peaceful democratic transition.' Previously, on 24 May, the European Union urged all EU-based carriers to avoid flying over Belarus airspace, announced sanctions against all officials linked to the diverted flight, and asked the Civil Aviation Organisation to start an investigation into the forced landing of a passenger plane and demanded the release of the arrested journalist.

Third, Lukashenko's firm response despite international criticisms. The EU, since the beginning, has refused to accept Lukashenko's victory in the 2020 elections. It has called for new elections, condemned the repression and the violence against the protesters since August 2020. However, Lukashenko has stood his ground and has consistently defended his position. On 26 May, he claimed that he had acted legally and per international norms in the case of the diversion of the passenger plane and stated, "ill-wishers from outside and inside the country have changed their methods to attack the state."

What does it mean?

As someone who has used all means to suppress dissent within the country, the Lukashenko government's decision to divert a plane and arrest two young activists does not come as a surprise. Second, sanctions have failed to impact

the government's actions, and it seems like the two sides, the West and Belarus-Russia, have decided to expand their influence and use other tools to engage with each other.

The question is, how far would Russia be willing to go to defend Lukashenko?

Europe: France-UK tensions over a migrant disaster across the English Channel

By Padmashree Anandhan, 28 November 2021

What happened?

On 24 November, an inflatable yacht capsized on the beach of Calais in northern France; 27 people drowned while they were attempting to cross the English Channel to enter the UK. The Prime Minister of the UK Boris Johnson said: "We've had difficulties persuading some of our partners - particularly the French - to do things in a way in which we think the situation deserves. This is a problem we have to fix together." In response, French President Emmanuel Macron said: "France will not let the Channel become a Graveyard." He mentioned that France expects the UK to cooperate fully and abstains from instrumentalizing a tragic situation for political purposes.

On 26 November, a diplomatic rift developed between Johnson and Macron after France denied the Calais meeting with the Home Secretary Priti Patel. Macron blamed Johnson for "not being serious" and asking France to take back migrants.

On 27 November, a Kurdish woman from northern Iraq was identified as the first victim of the mass drowning. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said: "the Agency was deeply shocked and saddened by the unprecedented tragedy that unfolded in the English Channel. In the absence of safer alternatives, people will continue to resort to such perilous journeys, and their desperation and vulnerabilities will continue to be preyed upon and exploited by ruthless smugglers."

What is the background?

First, increase in the number of crossings. The number of migrants went from 1,835 to 26,560 in the last three years, with a majority of the crossings taking place in 2021. The French government is blamed for evacuating the migrants from the camps in the name of relocating them to shelters, thereby invoking many to move into the UK through the Channel.

Second, the UK as an attractive option for migrants. The origins of these migrants are from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Albania, and other North African countries. According to the survey taken by the researchers from International Health Journal from 402 migrants in Calais Jungle camp, only 12 per cent wanted to remain in France, and the other 82 per cent opted to go to the UK. Apart from seeking better living conditions or escaping the hostile situation, there are more significant reasons for the migrants to migrate to the UK. The first influencing factor is the treatment and recognition. The UK's approval of refugee status is much more flexible and beneficial in the long term. Upon crossing the Channel, the migrants can enter the UK and claim asylum, post which they have to prove the condition of non-return. At that point, they will be granted refugee status that lasts for five years, and later this becomes the base for them to settle in the UK. The second factor is connecting back with their families, thereby reestablishing ties with their culture, traditional practices, and languages.

Third, the inability of France and the UK to find an answer. Regarding the state response, both the UK and French leaders have not come forward to take in the migrants. The leaders continue to debate and clash over who will host the migrants and push them back to their homelands. While France has been a regular defaulter in allowing the migrants to flee, the UK has deployed patrol ships to send back the migrant vessels before they reach the shores. Additionally, the tensions have brimmed with France not agreeing to meet with the UK Home Secretary to resolve the situation. These actions do not reflect the responsibility of the state nor its leaders' will to resolve the issue.

What does this mean?

First, the EU negligence. With the rapid increase in migration, the absence of the involvement of regional heads to address the situation in France showcases how serious they are about the looming humanitarian crisis in the region. Second, the will of the migrants. The risks taken by the migrants to move into the UK shows the intensity and willingness of the migrants to endanger their lives and find a place for a peaceful living.

France: Trial begins for the 2015 terrorist attack

By Sourina Bej, 12 September 2021

What happened?

On 9 September, the trial began against those accused in the 2015 terrorist attacks that had left 130 people dead and 350 injured in central Paris and Saint-Denis. The court is going to weigh on the pleas of the 20 accused, including Salah Abdeslam, the mastermind behind the attack. While 14 of the accused face trials in person, six more are being tried in absentia.

What is the background?

First, six years since the terror attack. In 2015 attackers killed 130 people and wounded hundreds more in coordinated shootings and suicide bombings at the Bataclan concert hall, a sports stadium, and bars and restaurants across the French capital. In the six years prior to the trial, France has witnessed more such terror attacks which have marked a shift in the collective consciousness of the society. The Nice truck attack of 2016 was equally lethal with 86 killed. The January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks to the beheading of Samuel Paty in 2020, these attacks have only reminded France that anyone and anybody could come under a terror attack.

Second, trial as a symbolic gesture of collective memorialisation and healing. Symbolically the trial is the moment where facts could be examined, the ferocity of the act is acknowledged and the victims get justice if not compensation for the loss. One of the primary virtues of a trial is to situate the facts in order to understand exactly what happened. The trial

comes in the backdrop of similar hearings of those accused in the Charlie Hebdo terror attack and the Christchurch attack in New Zealand. It is an important step towards the beginning of memorialization of the event at the individual as well as at the societal level. In this the role of the Judiciary as an institution to identify and open pathways for healings is significant.

Third, the profile of the accused or the attackers. The attacks in 2015 were planned in Syria and carried out by Europeans who had joined ISIS and were able to travel back and forth undetected with the flow of migrants. The attackers were mostly French and Belgian citizens, born in Europe to immigrants from North Africa. Similar has been the ethnic background (that is second to third-generation immigrants) of the attackers who killed Samuel Paty, bombed the office of Charlie Hebo, or wielded the knife in Nice.

Fourth, France's own war on terror at home. In the past year, the state institutions have not only responded heavily in cracking down the financial routes of the small franchisee-terrorist groups but have also passed new anti-terrorism legislation that gives police extended powers to search homes and make house arrests without prior judicial approval. Religious sites deemed radical can now be closed down. And a social questioning or puritan screening has begun on who is a French in France? The French model of identity is steeped in civic nationalism over recognizing the diverse ethnolinguistic identity thereby making the minorities invisible in the French society.

What does it mean?

The trial will add to the existing social caveats of divisions within the migrant groups. The intra and inter-group cohesion in French society have never been simplistic. And the trial puts a check on what it means to practice violent radical attacks but how much will it facilitate a social dialogue on why Islamic extremism could become a trend in France is still in doubt. On the other side of the spectrum where lensing and seeing the act of one Muslim man as the burden of a whole ethnoreligious community is also painfully problematic and marks the beginning

of a social perception bordering on social exclusion.

Europe in Africa: France and Germany take responsibility for the past in Rwanda and Namibia

By Anu Maria Joseph, 30 May 2021

What happened?

On 27 May, French President Macron asked for "the gift of forgiveness" from the people of Rwanda in his speech at Kigali Genocide Memorial while he was visiting Rwanda. He said France bears an "overwhelming responsibility" over the 1994 Rwanda genocide, though it had never been an accomplice. He also said: "France failed to heed the warnings and overestimated its ability to stop something that was underway". Rwandan President Paul Kagame responded: "his (Macron's) words were something valuable than an apology, they were the truth." He called it an "act of tremendous courage".

On 28 May, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas officially recognized the mass killings in Namibia (then German South-West Africa) during 1904-08 as 'Genocide'. He said: "We will now officially call these events what they were from today's perspective: a genocide." Also, Germany has pledged to provide USD 1.3 billion for the reconstruction and development of the communities to recognize the suffering caused. He said: "In the light of the historical and moral responsibility of Germany, we will ask forgiveness from Namibia and the victims."

The Namibian government officials referred to the recognition as a "first step" towards reconciliation. But on the same day, Herero Paramount's chief, Yekuii Rukoro, replied: "This is a sellout job by the Namibian government. The government has betrayed the cause of people". He also said reparations should be collectively given to descendants of victims rather than as financial programs. Sima Luiper, one among Nama people, said: "Germany must come to Nama people, and Herero people, and ask for forgiveness, and it's up to us to decide if that apology is genuine or not".

What is the background?

First, the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. In Rwanda, the minority Tutsi community were targeted by the Hutus after the assassination of Hutu President Habriamana in 1994; the violence resulted in the killing of 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus. France supported the Hutu led government and its policies that suppressed the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) led by the Tutsis. It failed to recognize the warnings of an impending genocide. Operation Turquoise, the French-led military intervention backed by the UN in July 1994, failed to act, giving numerous Hutu perpetrators a chance to escape legal prosecution.

Second, the genocide in Namibia during 1904-08. Over 100,000 Hereros and 10,000 Namas people were killed as a part of an 'extermination order' in the then German South-West Africa, during the German colonial rule for rebelling. People were driven to the Omaheke desert and abandoned; many died of dehydration and hunger. Thousands were poisoned, persecuted, imprisoned in concentration camps and died of diseases and abuses.

Third, the post-genocide bilateral relations. The RPF government, led by Paul Kagame in 1994, deteriorated the relationship between France and Rwanda. The French President Emmanuel Macron assigned a Commission of French Historians led by Vincent Duclert in 2019 to investigate France's involvement. The report concluded the "overwhelming responsibility" of France on the genocide caused by the policies adopted by President Francois Mitterrand. On 7 April, Macron announced plans to make the Duclert Report public. On 19 May, he spoke at the Paris Summit on Financing Africa, where he announced his decision to visit Rwanda to re-establish the relationship.

Germany, since 2015 has been negotiating with Namibia. The objective was to "find a common path to genuine reconciliation in memory of the victims". However, Namibia rejected the compensation for using the term 'financial aid' instead of 'reparations.' In 2018, Germany returned skulls and other remains of the Namibians, which were taken for scientific racial experiments. Now Germany has officially

issued an apology. The government of Namibia has officially accepted the apology, but the descendants of the Herero and Nama people demand direct reparations. They rejected the offer as they say it would not be enough to replace the land and culture once they lost.

What does it mean?

First, the apology and visit from France and Germany. It signals an effort to correct the past and also a sincere effort to re-establish the relations. This should be welcome. Second, the response from Rwanda and Namibia. Since Rwandan President Paul Kagame has accepted the apology, it would mean an end to the controversies and a turn for new beginnings. But for Germany, even though the Namibian government has accepted the apology, demand for direct reparations from the Nama and the Herero community means more work needs to be done for reconciliation. Since France and Germany have taken the first crucial steps, they should stay the course.

Munich Security Conference: Biden's commitment, Discussion on withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Russia threat and NATO in 2030

By Sourina Bej, 21 February 2021

What happened?

On 17 February, the NATO defence ministers met to address NATO's missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, review progress for a fairer burden-sharing, and discuss the NATO 2030 initiative in their two-day virtual conference. The ministers also met with their NATO partners Finland, Sweden, and the European Union to address the shared security challenges. The important outcome from the conference has been US President Joe Biden's reaffirmation to NATO.

On 19 February, Biden told at the online session of the Munich Security Conference: "The United States is fully committed to our NATO alliance, and I welcome your growing investment in the military capabilities that enable our shared defenses." "An attack on one is an attack on all. That is our unshakeable vow." This was Biden's

first speech on the international platform after winning the election.

On 17 February, the NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said: "This is our first meeting with the new Biden administration and an opportunity to prepare the NATO summit in Brussels later this year."

What is the background?

First, Biden's restores the US commitment to the Atlantic alliance. Since the Trump administration, there has been a trust deficit and a strained partnership with the European leaders. Trump had publicly hammered and sought to shame, Germany and other NATO members for not meeting a target of spending 2 per cent of their gross domestic output on defence. But Biden's speech sort to signal a different approach. He reversed Trump's decision to withdraw troops from the US bases in Germany and also outlined a vision of international engagement that will put West-led multilateralism at the core of the security agenda of NATO.

Second, the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and Iraq. The issue of withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and Iraq has been a challenge discussed at the conference. The Doha Agreement formalized the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan by 1 May, however, neither the conditions are palpable or mature for it. Before the meeting, 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." Contrastingly, on 15 February, Stoltenberg said the presence of the alliance's troops in Afghanistan is "conditions-based." In Iraq, NATO has a training and advisory mission, which Biden welcomed in his speech. Thus, the ministerial meeting, that builds the groundwork for the larger NATO summit in Brussels later in the year, will face withdrawal question solemnly.

Third, a curtain-raiser for NATO's Brussel's summit. The Defense Ministers meeting has been a modest affair, unlike in the past, with representation only from the major Western

powers. Later in 2021, the conference in all likelihood will see participation from top officials from China and Russia. The defense meeting took stock of the threat posed by Russia in the backdrop of the diplomatic crisis over Navalny's arrest. "The Kremlin attacks our democracies and weaponizes corruption to try to undermine our system of governance," said Biden.

What does it mean?

The meeting charts the course for a probable future relationship between the European leaders and the US within the alliance. Though Biden made a passing reference to NATO budgetary contributions, the issue of sharing burdens and defence spending is not likely to outrightly smoothen a wrinkled relationship. Biden has made it clear for the NATO members that China along with Russia should be on any future agenda for NATO. Thus, one could anticipate a strategic blueprint for NATO in maintaining its relation with China.

The alliance may not simply return to an old-world order while the transition for NATO will be an important marker to watch for in 2021.

The EU: Poland continues to defy the EU

By Joeana Cera Mathews, 24 October 2021

What happened?

On 12 October, a Polish Constitutional Tribunal ruling that declared the primacy of Polish law over the EU law came into force. On 19 October, at the European Parliament plenary held at Strasbourg in France, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said: "If you want to make Europe into a nationless superstate, first gain the consent of all European countries and societies. The supreme law of the Republic of Poland is the constitution."

The Commission President Ursula von der Leyen responded: "It is a direct challenge to the unity of the European legal order. This is the first time ever that a court of a member state finds that the EU Treaties are incompatible with the national constitution."

On 21 October, at the European Council summit held at Brussels, Belgian Prime Minister

Alexander De Croo said: "If you want to be part of a club and have the advantages of a club, you must play by the rules."

What is the background?

First, the trigger. Poland and the EU have had a long-standing feud challenging the rule of law and the supremacy of the European Court of Justice (ECJ). It is in this backdrop, the highly-criticized Constitutional Tribunal passed the ruling. Allegedly influenced by Poland's ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS), the Tribunal is condemned for its illegitimate and biased undertakings. The PiS largely backed the ruling as it would facilitate in ridding judicial independence, letting them control the judiciary. Despite the MEPs' decision to not discuss Poland in-depth — fearing the length of such a discussion — this is exactly what happened. Overshadowing the Council summit's agenda, Poland challenging EU supremacy stole the show.

Second, the critics and supporters. Opponents to the Polish stance maintained that it could not "choose" to apply laws it had formerly ratified. The declining state of Europe's democratic values was another concern. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who is also at odds with the EU, was Poland's primary advocate. He questioned the need for imposing sanctions on "one of the best European countries," referring to Poland. Germany's Angela Merkel warned the EU against isolating Poland and called for measures that would unite the bloc instead of dividing it. Several EU leaders also requested that Poland change its stance.

Third, the Polish response to the retaliatory measures. Poland's pandemic recovery funds, which accounts for EUR 24 billion, are yet to be approved by the EU. At the plenary meeting, Morawiecki blamed the EU for singling out Poland by unjustly discriminating against them. He said that Poland would not "back down" in the face of "bullying and threats."

Fourth, no 'Polexit'. Similar to Brexit, 'Polexit' as a term has been coined to refer to Poland's potential exit from the bloc. However, Morawiecki has repeatedly denied the possibility of the same. He said: "We are here, we belong

here and we are not going anywhere." Unlike Brexit, which received popular support prior to the exit, Polish citizens repel the thought of leaving the bloc. Staunch supporters of the EU, Poles are too accustomed to the benefits of being an EU insider.

What does this mean?

The reality of the situation is that it is an unwinnable one and both parties are aware of this painful truth. The EU lacks the mechanisms to punish Poland such that it would revert its stance, while Poland's challenge against the EU will remain just that. An event wherein the EU budges on Poland's request is when the bloc will see its end; the supremacy of the rule of law is the bloc's foundation. If the EU were to emerge victorious by some fortuitous series of events, it would imply risking its own agenda — every major policy decision requires the bloc's unanimous vote; upsetting Poland will not help. Thus, the EU cannot afford to go into battle with one of its own.

Europe: The impending energy crisis

By Vaishnavi Iyer, 10 October 2021

What happened?

On 6 October, European gas prices saw a record increase. The Spanish Prime Minister Sanchez said: "We are facing an unprecedented crisis that requires extraordinary, innovative, serious measures from the EU in order to control this price hike." Addressing the EU Slovenia Summit, he called for the European Council and the European Commission to help resolve the crisis.

The EU Energy Commissioner Kadri Simson said: "the bloc should provide targeted support to citizens and small businesses that were hardest hit." She called for a shift in taxation which is facilitated under EU directives. With the economic nature of the crisis, Simson notes no quick fixes could help the situation.

An energy expert, Thierry Bros said: "You're finding yourself in an area where demand has rebounded and on the other side, supply is more constrained. On 7 October, Russia pledged to increase its gas supplies to Europe. Dmitry

Peskov said: "existing gas transit routes allow for bolstering supplies before the new Nord Stream 2 pipeline that is intended to bring Russian gas to Germany begins operating. It all depends on demand, contractual obligations and commercial agreements." Russia's deputy Prime Minister Novak promoted launching Nord Stream 2 to facilitate easier gas transit.

What is the background?

First, an unplanned clean fuel transition. In an attempt to attain carbon neutrality, the large-scale transition from coal to cleaner fuel has already begun impacting Europe negatively. Europe began decreasing its coal dependency by phasing out its renewables sector. The Netherlands, Europe's largest producer of natural gas, phased out its Groningen gas field in 2018. The current working gas storage remains at 75 per cent as compared to 94 per cent last year. Wind power produced meagre outputs this year owing to a dry weather spell. The consequent dependency of Europe on natural gas rich counterparts like Norway and Russia worsened the crisis when Russia terminated its gas exports.

Second, consumer behaviour. In a colder winter last year, citizens used more coal to heat their homes, leading to a hike in prices. Moreover, the UK's fuel crisis worsened with lower availability of truck drivers owing to Brexit. In an event of delayed gas supplies, consumers emptied most gas stations in the UK.

Third, gas "peakers". The pandemic led to a surge in the demand of electricity across Europe. As a system dependent on renewables, European grids experienced surges owing to weather changes. In a normal scenario, companies would fill such surges using gas peakers. However, the pandemic promoted a mismanaged use of these gas peakers by companies to generate more profits. Gas producers like Equinor and Gazprom hold the market tight till 2025, creating increasing price hikes.

What does this mean?

First, the global hike in gas prices. This not limited to Europe. A primary reason for the supply shortage has been the pandemic along with colder winters this year. Industrialists and

suppliers have profited from limiting gas supplies causing a consequent hike in prices. Government intervention seems to be the most favourable solution. France and other few countries began price capping and scheduled a planned increase in electricity tariffs for its consumers. The EU has also begun the process of changing its taxation mechanisms to facilitate a smoother winter.

Second, promotion of Nord Stream 2. Russia has intervened in the EU natural gas crisis. It has assured the EU of a consistent supply of natural gas, but there remains an undercurrent of pressure to start formal preparations for Nord Stream 2. The EU may have to hasten the approval of Nord Stream 2 for continued cooperation. Given the economic nature of the problem, there is no quick fix.

Europe: The Annual State of the EU address 2021 by President Ursula von der Leyen

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 19 September 2021

What happened?

On 15 September, the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen addressed the European Parliament on the State of the Union in Strasbourg, France. A large portion of her annual State of the European Union (SOTEU) speech dedicated itself to climate change, the importance of European youth, and the larger issues affecting the bloc. She said: "But as I look back on this past year, if I look at the state of the Union today, I see a strong soul in everything that we do... We did that together as Commission, as Parliament, as 27 Member States. As one Europe. And we can be proud of it."

What is the background?

First, the primary issues of the speech. In her second SOTEU speech, von der Leyen primarily focused on two issues impacting Europe – climate change and the pandemic. Recalling the recent European summer - the Belgian and German floods, the wildfires from Greece to France, and placing this alongside the latest

IPCC report implied tackling climate change held utmost priority. Calling the Union to resemble the present generation as it was one with a conscience, she stressed the importance of the European youth in bringing about climate awareness. Along with commending the European Green Deal and related schemes, an additional EUR four billion was proposed to finance poorer countries fighting climate change. She also urged speeding up the global vaccination rates to avoid a case of the 'pandemic of the unvaccinated'. Acknowledging the supply disparity between rich and poor countries, an additional 200 million doses were also pledged to low-income countries fighting the pandemic.

Second, other issues covered. A range of other issues like defense, security, freedom, migration, etc was covered. Citing the sudden fall of Kabul to the Taliban, calls for women's rights and the importance of regional security was emphasized. An Afghan support package will be unveiled in the coming weeks alongside EU's jointly financed humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan being furthered another EUR 100 million.

Third, proposed plans. One of the primary proposals was HERA – Europe's health crisis body to increase preparedness and future response measures to pandemics. A European Chips Act, which would boost Europe's microchip industry to rival the US and China was another major proposal. A unified approach wherein member states wouldn't compete within the bloc but build together to create a 'state of the art ecosystem' of microchip companies. This decision comes after Europe suffered a chips shortage due to global supply chain disruptions. Von der Leyen maintained that it was not just a matter of competitiveness but of 'tech sovereignty'. The much deliberated-upon "Global Gateway" project was also promised by the EC Chief as she stated her intention to 'create links and not dependencies', hinting at Europe participating in China's BRI. Fourth, reprimands in the SOTEU address. The EC President sharply criticized Belarus' instrumentalization of migrants and said that the move was not appreciated. Further, she vowed that no concessions over democratic standards

would be made regarding battles with Poland and Hungary. In fact, they were threatened with more legal action and blocking of funds.

Fifth, China as a priority. Though Beijing's climate goals were praised, she enquired on how it intended to achieve them. Europe's 'Global Gateway' scheme and the new EU-Indo Pacific strategy, are both seen as a counter to China. A move to ban Chinese goods produced by forced labour was also announced. The rise of China seemed to be a primary focus of her speech as Xi Jinping's name found a mention in her speech over USA's Biden.

What does it mean?

Von der Leyen's concluding note maintained that the EU would undergo a test of character next year as well. Her prioritization of climate and the pandemic showed what the EU will be focused on. Without sounding complacent, she commended the actions taken by the bloc while reprimanding undemocratic moves within. The rising China and efforts to balance this will be another EU focus.

Europe: EU's climate package amidst the rains and floods

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 18 July 2021

What happened?

On 15 July, German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated on the flood situation in Germany: "... there is a dramatic increase in such unusual weather phenomena and we have to contend with this." On 16 July, she said: "My thoughts are with you, ... will do everything under the most difficult conditions to save lives, alleviate dangers and to relieve distress." The torrential rains and floods have hit Germany and Belgium the hardest. Over the past week, it has claimed at least 143 lives in Germany and 27 in Belgium, while hundreds remain missing. It has been attributed to be Germany's worst natural disaster in half a century as power and communications remain cut in several regions across the country. Showing the direness of the situation, France's national weather service said that two months of average rain had fallen in two days. The

Netherlands also remains on alert, taking precautionary measures against potential floods.

On 14 July, the European Commission announced its 'Fit for 55' package as Europe experiences scorching temperatures and floods over the past few weeks. The European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: "It is our generational task... [to secure] the wellbeing of not only our generation, but of our children and grandchildren. Europe is ready to lead the way."

What is the background?

First, the recent weather anomaly. Prior to the floods, parts of the US and Canada had experienced a blazing heatwave that killed hundreds. Scientists claim that this extreme heat was triggered by climate change which supposedly increased Europe's chances of flooding. The record-breaking temperatures in the Arctic and its subsequent melting have also raised concerns of the global community. Climate scientists remain baffled by the speed at which the change is occurring.

Second, the EU package - 'Fit for 55'. Aimed at achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 as part of the European Green Deal, the ambitious package comprises 12 legislative proposals. Its name is derived from the bloc's 2030 goal of reducing emissions by 55 per cent from 1990 levels. The package includes various proposals, from taxing aviation fuel to further tightening emission limits. One of the key proposals is a carbon border tariff – the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), that will increase the import costs for non-EU manufacturers. A EUR 72.2 billion Social Climate Fund is suggested to fund the entire package from 2025 to 2032. However, the proposals are yet to be approved by the EU member states and the EU Parliament. Given its nature, these negotiations could take years to complete.

Third, the divide in the response. Negotiations are expected to be prolonged since the bloc is internally divided. The bloc sees both regional as well as a national divide. Poland and other central and eastern European countries that rely heavily on fossil fuels are likely to lead the resistance. They remain wary of the social and

economic costs of the deal. Critics opine that Brussels risks a backlash from low- and middle-income earners, and should avoid repeating anti-establishment protests like the yellow vests of France. There also exists an East-West divide, given the increased support from the western countries contrasting the critical approach of the east. Internationally, CBAM has become controversial in the US, China and Russia. Environmentalists have also criticized the proposals saying they are not enough. Greenpeace, an NGO, mocked the announcements as "a fireworks display over a rubbish dump".

Fourth, the necessity of action. According to climate scientists and activists, inaction is not an option. While critics fear increasing costs, they appear ignorant of the already large costs being paid via climate change-triggered events. The effects are becoming more evident, rapid, and disruptive. Aggressive policies to prevent or reduce the rates of climate change are necessary to avoid the extremes. The EU seems to be taking the global leadership in climate action. It shows how willing the bloc is to stake its domestic and international benefits to fulfil its climate goals. However, criticisms pertaining to the package remain.

What does it mean?

Europe seems to have taken the first step in a long road. The proposed climate package is nothing short of transformational, given its scale and impact range. However, questions on the practicality of the package and its ability to curb the adverse effects of climate change loom large.

Europe: The EU Council summit discussions on migration, LGBTQ, and COVID-19

By Keerthana Nambiar, 27 June 2021

What happened?

On 26 June, following the two-day meeting of the EU Council, President Charles Michel observed the following: "First, mobility. How is it possible to coordinate, to cooperate, especially when we face new variants. Second topic: international solidarity. We had the opportunity

in the past to reaffirm our commitments to demonstrate our effective international solidarity... A quick word on the issue of migration. The debate was not very long on this subject in the room because the debate had been prepared by our teams, by the ambassadors who worked. We were able to quickly agree on operational conclusions... There was a discussion again about Russia. This was the opportunity, after a high-quality debate a month ago, to take a step forward and clarify the way in which we want to envisage the implementation of the five principles which, in our opinion, are the basis of the relationship with Russia."

What is the background?

First, the issue of migration. The European Union discussed migration and the measures taken in recent years to tone down the irregular flows of migrants. The EU and its member states agreed on 'mutually beneficial partnerships' and 'cooperation with countries of origin and transit' to prevent loss of human lives on the European borders. Since 2015, irregular arrivals have heightened. In 2018, the council codified the integrated political crisis response (IPCR) into a legal act. The IPCR supports decision making related to major crises and disasters that creates a surge in migration. The European Union leaders plan to aid Turkey with EUR three billion (USD 3.6 billion) over the next few years for assisting the Syrian refugees on its territory and to help in border controls.

Second, the tug of war with Russia. The European leaders discussed its strained ties with Russia and expect a "more constructive engagement and political commitment" from the Russian leadership towards the council. The EU has placed economic sanctions on Russian financial, energy, arms sectors and individual sanctions on human rights abuses and usage of banned chemical weapons. The council adopted a strong stance after Baltic countries and Poland rejected the Franco-German plan to resume dialogue with Putin at a summit. "In my opinion, we as the European Union must also seek direct contact with Russia and the Russian president," stated Angela Merkel. The proposal follows Joe Biden's summit with Vladimir Putin in Geneva to repair the ties. Russia being the EU's biggest

natural gas supplier, influences international conflicts and issues. The last EU-Russia summit was in January 2014, shortly before the annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula.

Third, progress on COVID-19 vaccination. The council acknowledged the EU's improvement in handling the pandemic and the necessity to continue with the vaccination efforts. The leaders addressed the importance of the agreements on the EU digital COVID certificate and recommendations on travel within the EU and non-essential travel into the EU.

Fourth, EU leaders defend LGBT rights. The European Union leaders had a heated discussion over the new legislation in Hungary that bans content about LGBTQ issues to children.

Fifth, the EU Next-generation economic recovery plan. The EU approved the Greek-recovery plan of EUR 30.5 billion which will 'supercharge investment, reform, and growth throughout the country.' The investments are being aimed at green and digital transitions, health care sectors which will expectedly deeply transform the European economy.

What does it mean?

The European Union stresses the need to integrate and intensify the cooperation in political, economic, and human rights domains. The motive is to increase the flexibility within the partners and also corner countries like Poland and Hungary that hollows the democracy in Europe.

The focus on LGBTQ rights indicates that this was not just a regular council meeting failing to meet the expectations rather an honest effort for a true democratic recovery.

EU: The Merkel-Macron proposal on an EU-Russia summit, and its opposition

By D. Suba Chandran, 27 June 2021

What happened?

On 25 June, the Conclusions adopted by the European Council meeting during 24-25 June, on Russia observed: "The European Council expects the Russian leadership to demonstrate a more constructive engagement and political

commitment and stop actions against the EU and its Member States, as well as against third countries." It also asked "Russia to fully assume its responsibility in ensuring the full implementation of the Minsk agreements as the key condition for any substantial change in the EU's stance." However, it also observed: "The European Council reiterates the European Union's openness to a selective engagement with Russia in areas of EU interest."

On 25 June 2021, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, after the meeting with the rest of the European Union leaders, referring to a possible European summit with Russia said: "It was a very comprehensive discussion and not an easy one... There was no agreement today on an immediate leaders' meeting."

What is the background?

First, the EU-Russia relations since the Minsk agreements in 2014. Ever since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, there have been tensions between the EU and Moscow. The Minsk agreements signed in 2015 on Ukraine has become one of the basis for the EU's Russia approach. Since 1997, the EU and Russia have been holding regular summits, but they came to an end in 2014. Ever since, the EU has repeatedly been emphasising on "five guiding principles" that include the following: "full implementation of the Minsk agreements; closer ties with Russia's former Soviet neighbours; strengthening EU resilience to Russian threats; selective engagement with Russia on certain issues such as counter-terrorism; and support for people-to-people contacts." Sanctions on Russia remained one of the primary EU strategies. However, the sanctions strategy of the EU have not yielded much results to what Europe wanted Russia to do. Instead, sanctions only reduced Europe's leverage.

Second, the idea of selective engagement with Russia. Irrespective of what the EU wants, there were selective engagements of European countries, for example, Germany with Russia over the gas pipelines. Despite objections from most of Europe, Germany has pushed its Nord Stream II plans with Russia. Merkel also had a meeting with Putin in 2020. Now, Germany, along with France, is floating the idea of

engaging with Russia. According to President Macron, Europe needs dialogue to defend its interests and is necessary for the stability of the European continent. There seems to be an understanding to discuss with Russia on issues relating to climate, health, JCPOA, Syria and Libya.

Third, the fallout of the recent US-Russia summit in Geneva. As a part of his Europe tour, US President Biden had an exclusive summit with Putin in Geneva. Though there were no major breakthroughs in the Geneva summit, it has established a process. Perhaps, France and Germany are looking at the larger picture vis-à-vis Russia.

Fourth, the opposition to Europe-Russia engagement, especially from the Baltic states. While Germany and France are floating the idea of an engagement, the Baltic states – Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia are apprehensive, given the immediate geography with Russia and the long history.

What does it mean?

While the Baltic States are opposed to the idea of a direct dialogue with Russia, the idea of talking directly with Kremlin is finding roots in Europe. While there is likely to be an initial opposition, the debate is likely to expand and reach a common minimum programme within Europe.

Europe: Russia's responses

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 27 June 2021

What happened?

On 23 June, the Russian ambassador to the EU Vladimir Chizhov said: (EU should) get its act together and define what it really wants from its relations with Russia."

On 25 June, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova commented: "On our part, we reiterate our readiness for the continuation of an equal dialogue with the European Union... contrary to the hopes some the EU capitals are cherishing, cannot be based on preliminary conditions. The more so, on threats of unilateral and illegal sanctions against our country, which will inevitably be followed

by a proportionate response, and Brussels is well aware of that." Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said: "In general, President Putin was and remains interested in improving working relations between Moscow and Brussels... The European position is fragmented, not always consistent, and sometimes unclear."

What is the background?

First, the Russian response to the EU sanctions. Following the 2014 Ukraine invasion and Crimean annexation, the EU sanctioned Russia on its energy, financial, and arms sectors and imposed individual sanctions on those Russians accused of human rights abuses. The latest EU summit saw the possibility of further sanctions with EU diplomats saying that it could target Russian money laundering or powerful oligarchs suspected of corruption abroad. Most EU countries are concerned that the Kremlin does not take the bloc seriously, given its dramatic expulsion of EU diplomats in February. On the other hand, Moscow has repeatedly warned the EU not to meddle in its internal affairs. Russia believes that the bilateral relations have been severely undermined by the unilateral sanctions that affect the economic interests of both sides for the sake of promoting 'dubious' geopolitical schemes. The confrontational stereotypes that characterized the Cold War period continuing to linger in the minds of the EU members doesn't help Russia's case.

Second, Putin's Europe strategy. Russia has clear goals and tactics regarding Europe – to undermine democracy, undermine the trans-Atlantic unity, and restore Russian primacy. The Kremlin aims to achieve this by establishing an energy reliance (the Nord Stream 1 and 2), engaging in strategic corruption, and vicious disinformation campaigns. During the EU summit, Germany with France's backing proposed a summit with Putin which was disagreed upon as it caused major division within the bloc.

Third, the China factor in the Russian response. An Estonian member of the European Parliament stated: "We should not overlook the deepening relations of two authoritarian states – Russia and China – as this also influences

Europe." This just goes on to prove how worried Europe is about the Chinese factor in Euro-Russian relations. Russia has always had an identity crisis of belonging, and considering the increasing camaraderie between Xi Jinping and Putin, the EU cannot but think the worst. Russia and China seem to have reached an accommodative situation wherein Moscow provides security while Beijing provides development, enabling both to stay out of each other's way. But it is not just the EU that is concerned over this budding relationship. The Biden-Putin summit also saw this as an ulterior motive – to divide and conquer.

What does it mean?

Under no circumstances will Russia give up on its core interests and pushing them to the edge will further strain bilateral relations. The growing Sino-Russian bond will also provide a boost to Putin's confidence in defying the world order and attaining its strategic goals.

The G7 Summit 2021: Focus on pandemic recovery, climate action, and global economy

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 13 June 2021

What happened?

The 47th G7 summit took place at Carbis Bay in Cornwall, England. Along with its members, the summit also witnessed Australia, India, South Korea, and South Africa as guest countries.

On 10 June, US President Joe Biden announced: "...the United States will donate half a billion new Pfizer vaccines to 92 low and lower-middle-income countries."

On 12 June, the UK PM and G7 President tweeted: "The #CarbisBayDeclaration marks a proud and historic moment ... the world's leading democracies will commit to preventing a global pandemic from ever happening again."

What is the background?

First, the focus on pandemic recovery. This year's summit assumes significance as it is the first in-person meet between G7 leaders since the pandemic began. The 'return of face-to-face

diplomacy' is a welcome change to the 'zoom diplomacy' that affected leaders during the pandemic. The theme of the meeting, 'Build Back Better' coincides with the global effort to rebuild economies from COVID-19. As the UK hosts the summit, four focus areas have been laid out: the pandemic recovery and prevention of future health crises, tackling climate change, free and fair trade, and strengthening shared values. Though each leader of the summit has their own agendas, the pandemic and climate action are likely to dominate the meeting.

Second, Biden's first foreign trip and summit as President. During his tenure, former President Donald Trump managed to antagonize the US allies. One of Biden's major goals through this tour is to undo Trump's damage as well as to reclaim the US' global leadership role. Europe regards Biden as a 'reliable ally' and is relieved that Biden represents the US at G7. They appreciate that he does not cosy up with Russia's Putin and call the EU a foe, unlike Trump.

Third, the discussion on vaccines. The G7 finance ministers discussed a USD 50 billion vaccine distribution plan for poor nations collaborating with the IMF, WHO, and WTO. Before his arrival at the summit, Biden pledged the US would buy 500 million doses of the vaccine for distribution to developing countries. The UK has pledged 100 million doses, and the G7 is expected to make commitments that total to one billion by the end of the year. Johnson has sought a commitment to vaccinate the adult population of major economies by the end of 2022. The signing of the Carbis Bay Declaration aimed at taking steps to prevent another health emergency is also key. Aid experts opine that the G7 has failed to understand the urgency of the situation as their distribution goals only account for a tenth of the number required. Support for the discussion on patent waivers is also in view.

Fourth, talks on Russia and China. The G7's initiative of a global pandemic program is a geopolitical move as it is a humanitarian one. Countering China's vaccine diplomacy, strengthening the Clean Green Initiative rivalling Beijing's BRI, and taking joint action

against the human rights abuses in Xinjiang are also key talking points. A call for Russia to tackle groups carrying out cybercrimes from home is also considered. Discussions would also include the ongoing discontent over Russia's destabilizing actions and the prospect of more sanctions on the country. However, Merkel's support for China stating the impossibility of containing the pandemic without cooperating with China complicates things.

What does it mean?

If the G7 remains just as a talking shop that never gets anything realized, it will further global spiralling. A deadline of 2022 is undoubtedly a stretched goal given the inadequate doses. If the doses for distribution are increased and effective implementation undertaken, a substantial difference can be brought about. It is the time for brave global leadership; half measures won't help in achieving this goal – delivery is all. A united front will be key to bringing change.

EU-China: European Union Parliament freezes Comprehensive Agreement on Investments with China

By Dincy Adlakha, 23 May 2021

What happened?

On 20 May, the European Union Parliament passed a resolution to freeze the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) with China. It cites the crackdown on democratic opposition in Hong Kong, forced labour and other conditions of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang as major reasons for the freeze. The Parliament halted any discussion or consideration of ratifying the deal because of the sanctions imposed by China. The resolution "demands that China lift the sanctions before the Parliament can deal with the CAI". The Parliament also calls "to use the debate around the CAI as leverage to improve the protection of human rights and support for civil society in China." It has cleared that the Hong Kong situation will be accounted for while considering any discussion on CAI.

The resolution also called on the EU to "increase coordination and cooperation with the US within

the framework of a Transatlantic Dialogue on China" and that "other trade and investment agreements with regional partners, including Taiwan, should not be held hostage to the suspension of the CAI ratification."

What is the background?

First, the EU-China economic dialogue. The economic partnership between the EU and China was established after China entered the World Trade Organization in 2003. Over the years, the dialogue has seen major shifting trends. The High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue, started in 2008, focused on better market access, reduction of trade barriers, and boosting custom policies in sectors like innovation, technology, intellectual property rights, energy and climate change. Launched in 2012, the negotiations on CAI increased the economic ambitions.

However, it has seen multiple disagreements arising out of political issues such as the Dalai Lama visit to France and weak dispute management mechanism. The EU and China are their largest trading partners. Nevertheless, the differences in ideological values have led to the freezing of the CAI.

Second, the issue of investment. The Chinese foreign direct investment in the EU has increased exponentially over the years, but the lack of reciprocity plagues the investment ties. The EU firms have been unable to enter the Chinese market due to an unbalanced playing field, domestic security laws, technology protection laws and other discriminatory regulations. The CAI aimed to provide a legal framework to increase the EU investment in China; however, even after seven years of negotiations, the gap between the two entities continues to widen. Recent efforts at inviting foreign firms by the passing of Foreign Investment Law (2019) in China did not appease the EU as they demand free-market conditions that Chinese firms have access to.

Third, points of EU-China contention. In March 2021, the EU imposed sanctions on four top Chinese officials; China retaliated with hefty sanctions on EU representatives. The EU opposes the following Chinese actions: the crackdown of democracy in Hong Kong, human rights violation of ethnic minorities,

assertiveness in the South China Sea, and the disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. China's record of violating the international labour organization's regulations have made the EU apprehensive of ratifying the deal. These contentions are influenced by other global factors to some extent and are deeply rooted in the liberal values that the EU proudly holds.

Fourth, the divergence of opinion within the EU member states. The massive majority of the resolution does not speak for all member states. The CAI was "spearheaded" by Germany and has received ample support from France. Many eastern European countries have been benefitting from Beijing and the potential interconnectedness in the region. However, the persisting issue of technology sharing has left the EU internally divided.

What does it mean?

First, China needs to open its economy, which is mainly restrictive and requires the CAI more than the EU does. The EU has witnessed Chinese discrimination and is apprehensive of investing in a certified complication.

Second, these gaps in trust are not merely bilateral problems but have global roots lying in other links such as US-China, US-EU, and the Chinese perplexity with western democracies.

Vaccine patent waiver: The new debate stands divided

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 9 May 2021

What happened?

On 5 May, Katherine Tai, the United States Trade Representative, announced the Biden administration's position on the proposal that India and South Africa submitted at the WTO: "The administration believes strongly in intellectual property protections, but in service of ending this pandemic, supports the waiver of those protections for Covid-19 vaccines."

On 6 May, Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission President, said she was considering the proposal. She said: "The European Union is also ready to discuss any proposal that addresses the crisis in an effective and pragmatic manner... ready to discuss how the US proposal

for a waiver on intellectual property protection for COVID-19 vaccines could help achieve that objective."

On 7 May, Albert Bourla, Pfizer's CEO, warned that the move "threatens to disrupt the flow of raw materials... will unleash a scramble for the critical inputs we require in order to make a safe and effective vaccine."

What is the background?

First, the demand-supply imbalance. Advocates of the waiver believe there is a widespread imbalance in the demand for and supply of vaccines. Only a few companies have exclusive rights to manufacture vaccines. AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson had promised global manufacturing of vaccines but remain suspended. The Serum Institute of India, a key supplier for Asia, Africa, and South America stands prohibited from exporting by India. Huge global supply gaps mean many people in the developing world are not expected to receive vaccines until 2023.

Second, the emerging debate on the relaxation of vaccine patents. The primary argument for the waiver is on the demand numbers; it emphasizes the ability to provide vaccines by increasing production in the poorer parts of the world lagging behind in their inoculation drives. The critics, however, argue that waiving patents will not increase production. Since countries would face hurdles with raw material access, distribution, and safety standards, they argue, it would eventually lead to the quality and efficacy of the vaccines being questioned. They also refer to the risk of imminent counterfeit doses.

Third, the different positions of the US and the EU. The US strongly believes in intellectual property (IP) rights, but ending the pandemic is a greater need. The US has kept most doses produced domestically while exporting a portion to Mexico and Canada. This raises questions about the intent behind the sudden US support for the waiver. The EU thinks that the IP rights waiver can wait and suggest countries follow the bloc's example to permit ample export of doses. The US is backed by Australia and New Zealand

while the EU by the UK, Japan, and Switzerland.

Fourth, the stance of the pharmaceutical industry. The industry is worried that the waiver would cut into their profits. To eliminate the need for a waiver, the companies consider alternate solutions like deals that increase vaccine supply to countries facing shortages – via donation or selling them on a non-profit basis. The drug industry now has strong motivation to shift the debate to that of a 'global equity problem' and is taking pragmatic steps towards solving this imbalance.

What does this mean?

The crisis is enormous. The focus should be on steps making an immediate difference to the demand-supply imbalance countries face. As the immediate measures to meet vaccine requirements need to be prioritized. This needs to be addressed with the argument, that the waiver would disincentivize anyone from taking big risks in the face of future global health threats. A via-media is required.

European Union: New challenges in addressing delay in vaccine supplies, new variants and anti-lockdown protests

By Harini Madhusudan, 30 January 2021

What happened?

On 29 January, the European Union, amid a row with the vaccine manufacturers for delivery shortfalls, announced introducing export controls on the vaccines made in the bloc. "The protection and safety of our citizens is a priority and the challenges we now face left us with no choice but to act," the European Commission said. AstraZeneca, BioNTech, and Pfizer have their production units in the European Union. Under the new rule, vaccine firms will have to seek permission before supplying doses beyond the EU. The EU member states will be able to vet those export applications. Vaccine deliveries from two of the EU's biggest suppliers, AstraZeneca and Pfizer, have been falling short of promised numbers by up to 60 per cent.

What is the background?

First, the delay and supply in vaccine manufacturing. The EU's public dispute with the vaccine-maker AstraZeneca began when it was revealed that the bloc is set to receive only a quarter of the 100 million doses that were to be delivered to the EU by the end of March. Both AstraZeneca and Pfizer have communicated their inability to deliver to issues of production and management. With the new export controls, the EU has said that it would allow exemptions that would include vaccine donations to Covax, and the exports to Switzerland, countries in the western Balkans, Norway and North Africa. But the UK will not be exempted.

Second, coronavirus and the new variant in the region. As of 28 January, 18,849,065 cases and 449,395 deaths have been reported in the EU/EEA region. France, Spain, Italy, Germany and Poland have the top five highest number of cases. In December 2020, a new contagious variant of the virus spread across Europe, prompting the governments to introduce harsh new lockdowns and curfews. This saw some resistance in some countries in the region, inversely adding to the increase in the number of cases.

Third, the EU's logic and complaint. The dwindling supplies have caused many countries to redesign their vaccination schedules. Hungary has gone ahead and announced that it would acquire the Sputnik V vaccine for its population. Other member countries too, have begun to express their discontent with the situation with many countries announcing the desire to start procuring vaccines in their individual capacities. The problem of transparency in the deal that has been signed between the EU and the vaccine companies seems to be causing issues in the early months of delivery processes which is not a good sign for the bloc as a whole that is hoping to vaccinate a large chunk of its population in the first half of 2021.

What does it mean?

The EU hoped to project its vaccine procurement scheme to reflect the EU's solidarity and strength. However, when the new variant of the virus emerged, all countries in the region closed off their borders to each other with

a stark contrast to the region's approach to 'vaccine nationalism' in the world. The capitalist business models have a history of overpromising and under-delivering. The promises made in the early days of vaccine announcement were clearly overestimated, considering AstraZeneca had to undergo an additional round of testing. The export control measures placed now may be targeted specifically towards manufacturing in the UK. Nevertheless, the process of vaccine manufacturing is expected to take more time than earlier estimated, and the decision taken by the EU to ensure export controls seem timely.

UK and France: BREXIT pangs deepen as a new rule restricts fishing rights

By Sourina Bej, 9 May 2021

What happened?

On 6 May, France dispatched two naval policing boats as French fishermen, angry over the loss of access to fishing off their coast, protested off the English Channel island Jersey. The French fishermen have steamed into Jersey waters to demonstrate against new rules requiring them to submit their past fishing activities in order to receive a license to continue fishing in the island's waters. On 5 May, Britain directed two Royal Navy vessels, HMS Severn and HMS Tamar, to patrol the waters around the Jersey port, which is a self-governing British Crown Dependency near northern France.

What is the background?

First, the new restriction by Jersey. The Jersey port has become the flashpoint over access to fishing rights as post-BREXIT regulations are implemented. According to the rules, which came into force this month, 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 during Brexit transition talks. Jersey's role in the dispute gets complicated as it is not part of the UK or as part of the EU. This Crown dependency island means freedom from Westminster and the power to exercise day-to-

day control over its fishing waters. However, the UK government is ultimately responsible for its international relationships. That is why access to fishing waters around the Channel Islands is dealt with specifically in the new UK-EU trade agreement.

Second, conflict over fishing rights a post-BREXIT reality. When the UK left the EU in January 2020 – the talks during the transition period left the common fisheries policy that has peacefully divvied up the spoils of Europe's waters since the 1970s. The Brexit talks also ended the Bay of Granville agreement between Britain and the Channel Islands government, which had established a pattern of rights for French boats up to three miles from the islands' coasts. Within the Brexit trade and cooperation agreement struck there is a new EU-UK fisheries agreement that offers French fishers the continuation of the status quo in a zone between six and 12 miles from the UK's shores up to 2026 if they can prove that they had previously been operating in those waters. With the end of several common rules, the fishermen would be without livelihoods, a reality post-BREXIT Europe begins to face.

Third, unheard demands by fishermen communities. From Ireland to Jersey, the fishermen's voice has been largely missing while signing any agreement over access to fishing rights. In addition, when the Jersey government adds two conservation measures, dealing with dredging and nesting areas, it means the creation of restricted zones, and limit the kind of fishing equipment which can be used. Many of the local boats could be put out of business, and smaller boats would also be affected.

Fourth, domestic issues pushing the nationalist narrative around fishing rights. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been seen escalating the crisis and using the fishing spat as an "Election Day stunt." Choking and scramble to gain access to the English Channel has been a historical precedent since the Cold War. Even though Jersey is economically insignificant, it is culturally important, and fishing was the thorniest issue during the UK-EU divorce talks. Similarly, the fishing rights issue is also a central issue for the 2022 French presidential

election. Amid this, Jersey's rule gets embroiled in the larger expression of domestic issues in the regional relations.

What does it mean?

Both the UK and EU are stuck with wider disputes for the long haul. From Northern Ireland to Jersey island, the EU-UK relation will have to accommodate the deeper nuances and economic needs of those impacted in the divorce. The French fishers ended their protest, but the row remains unresolved. The workable solution would be to form a consultation body with various fishermen communities and chart a policy accommodating the grassroots voices.

UK: The BBC apology for the 1995 Diana interview highlights the good and bad sides of the UK media

By Vishnu Prasad, 23 May 2021

What happened?

On 14 May, an inquiry found that the BBC acted in an unethical and deceitful manner to obtain a 1995 interview with Princess Diana. The inquiry, conducted by retired judge Lord Dyson, found that journalist Martin Bashir had "deceived and induced" Diana's brother Earl Spencer to arrange an interview with her by falsifying bank documents. Dyson report said: "Without justification, the BBC fell short of the high standards of integrity and transparency which are its hallmark by covering up in its press logs such facts as it had been able to establish about how Mr Bashir secured the interview too and failing to mention Mr Bashir's activities or the BBC investigations of them on any news programme."

The BBC subsequently apologized to both Earl Spencer and Diana's son Prince William, but the latter hit out against the media outlet nevertheless. Prince William said: "The interview was a major contribution to making my parents' relationship worse and has since hurt countless others."

What is the background?

First, the importance of the integrity of big media houses. With terms like alternative truth and fake news dominating the discourse over the

last few years, premier news outlets like the BBC must retain their credibility that has been the hallmark for over a century. While the blame, in this case, falls largely on the shoulders of Bashir, the report has blamed BBC for a "woefully ineffective" investigation into the affair in 1996.

Second, the unethical practices of media houses and individual reporters. The scandal once again brings to attention the unethical practices that journalists often resort to for a breaking story or a scoop. Ten years ago, a phone-hacking scandal, where it emerged that reporters had hacked the phones of hundreds of people, including members of the royal family, had caused the closure of the 'News of the World' newspaper.

Third, the market for tabloid journalism. While the blame does lie solely on Bashir's and BBC's shoulders, the fact remains that such sensationalist content attracts a significant number of viewers. A case in point is the recent interview that Prince Harry and his wife Meghan Markle had held with Oprah Winfrey, which attracted 17.1 million viewers. It can be argued that ultimately the media is giving the public what they want the most and the unethical practices that go hand-in-hand with the nature of the content.

Fourth, the obsession that UK media have with their royalty. The lengths to which Bashir went to get the interview, and the frenzy with which it was received, exemplifies the hype that surrounds the British royal family, something that often ends up having negative consequences. Two decades later, the sensationalist coverage of Prince Harry's split with the family shows that nothing has changed.

What does it mean?

While the incident and its handling is a blot on BBC's credibility, the fact that they have owned up to their mistakes and apologized for them is a good sign. On 7 May, the Guardian had apologized for the errors in judgment that it had made during its 200 years of existence. These are indeed good precedents for media companies to follow when accountability has been sacrificed for a short-term gain.

UK: Defence and Foreign policy review indicates an expansion in strategy

By Harini Madhusudan, 21 March 2021

What happened?

On 16 March, the government released an Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development, and Foreign Policy. The document is seen as the UK's biggest strategic shake-up since the Cold War era. The highlights of the document include: threats facing the UK, a tilt toward the Indo-Pacific, increasing the nuclear stockpile, and plans to send troops across longer distances for more extended periods. There is a greater emphasis on science and technology, especially in the aftermath of the COVID crisis. This is the first document that shows the UK's step forward outside of the EU. On 15 March, news reports revealed that Trident plans to massively expand its nuclear weapons arsenal from 180 to 260 warheads.

What is the background?

First, the emphasis on trade and S&T. Emphasizing trade and making it central in the review is a conceptual shift. Trade is seen as a tool playing a vital role in fulfilling the foreign policy agenda alongside development. The report also highlights science, technology, and digital as main areas of focus and promises bold new investments into research and development. Second, the Indo-Pacific focus. There are obvious reasons for the UK to look away from their immediate neighbourhood after the Brexit. There is a strong focus on the Indo-Pacific in the review, which is an area of interest for the new Biden administration as well. The tilt would be beyond the defence and security context, which would include the increasing involvement of the UK in trade through the CPTPP. They also hope to support climate change action, promote British values, reinvigorate relationships with India, and pursue their request for partner status at ASEAN. This would essentially broaden their presence across the world.

Third, defining terrorism, Russia, and China as the main threats. The report recommends a new Counter-Terrorism Operations Centre to bring together police and spies in a "state-of-the-art facility". It names the threat of nuclear attack by

a terrorist/ non-state imminent by 2030 as a pretext to increasing the nuclear stockpile. Besides, the report names Russia as a strategic rival and looks at China's growth as a systemic challenge.

Fourth, military spending. The main focus of defence spending is the new frontiers of space and cyber-warfare. There is an announcement of a £24 billion increase in defence spending. Significant cuts in troops, weaponry, and fighting vehicles have been announced, some of which may be replaced by drones. However, for security and deterrence from terrorists, the troops would train, exercise, and operate alongside allies and partners across all priority regions and build the capacity to fight in faraway places and for longer periods.

What does it mean?

The document tries to portray a strategy with a careful blend of trade, defence, security, and diplomacy. There has been an immediate backlash to some of the plans that have been put forth. However, it seems like the UK is trying to tackle structural challenges while also hoping to retain a leadership status in the world. Though the long-term strategy caution against China, the UK's immediate challenge would be to remain balanced to ensure the trade relations do not clash with the security interests. The report places the UK's strategy on a promising pedestal, leaving behind the popular narrative of being a retreating power.

The UK: The post-Brexit fallout with the EU over Northern Ireland

By Harini Madhusudan, 7 March 2021

What happened?

On 3 March, the EU announced that the 'unilateral decision' of the United Kingdom on Trade Rules is a breach of international law and threatened legal action. During Westminster's annual budget, the UK announced its decision to unilaterally extend the grace period on the checks for goods moving between Britain and Northern Ireland, which is a violation of the Northern Ireland Protocol.

On 2 March, Michel Barnier stepped down as the EU's chief Brexit negotiator and his specialist team of eurocrats have been disbanded. Barnier warned that there remain "many challenges ahead" for the EU and UK.

What is the background?

First, the unilateral decision by the UK and the apparent breach of international law over the Northern Ireland Protocol. As the tensions between the two sides escalated, the European Commission Vice President said that the British decision to take unilateral action on trade rules relating to Northern Ireland marks the second time it has declared its intention to breaching international law. The UK had previously asked for the deadline to be extended until 2023, but the EU had not agreed to it. The UK government's decision indicates that it will waive customs paperwork on food entering Northern Ireland until October. This is beyond the 1 April deadline it had previously agreed with the EU. In September 2020, the UK had considered breaking the terms of the Brexit divorce agreement relating to Northern Ireland, only to back down. Both cases give the EU leverage to start legal proceedings through the terms of the protocol.

Second, new issues vis-a-vis Northern Ireland. With the decision to keep the land borders free of checkpoints, they hoped to prevent additional troubles between the UK and Northern Ireland. This came with a price; that is, the goods arriving from the rest of the UK would be subject to checks and extra paperwork as they cross the Irish Sea. Many members of PM Johnson's party and Unionist politicians in Northern Ireland believe that the deal treats the region differently from the rest of the UK. On 2 March, Ireland Democratic Unionist Party's agriculture minister ordered officials to halt work on permanent border control posts. In January 2021, the EU triggered an override clause in the Northern Ireland Agreement, to secure vaccine supplies. This unilateral decision was taken without consulting in London or Dublin.

Third, emerging EU-UK complexities from the two months of the new arrangements. When the deal was signed in December 2020, many issues

were given a grace period to ensure the proper measures are in place. For example, the immediate impact was felt with the fisheries sector and the lorry workers who would transport goods across the borders. Both complained of longer paperwork and processing time. Late January also witnessed the EU taking export control measures to deal with the imbalance in the vaccine procurement and administering strategy of the UK. Following this, new issues relating to the banking and financial sectors have emerged. This way, political and legal obligations have propped up many times during the past months.

What does it mean?

Though the EU and UK were expected to face short-term losses and logistical challenges, Northern Ireland seems to face the substantial brunt of the post-Brexit trade deal. Second, the new trade deal disputes over border protocols have wreaked havoc among the already fragile arrangements that exist between them. The unilateral decision would necessarily ease the impact of the Brexit on the businesses in Northern Ireland but comes in the way of "the proper implementation," of the Brexit deal.

India and Russia: Modi and Putin try to rekindle the bilateral relations

By Ashwin Immanuel Dhanabalan, 12 December 2021

What happened?

On 6 December, India and Russia held their first 2+2 dialogue format in Delhi. The bilateral meeting involved foreign and defence ministers discussing bilateral, regional and international issues.

Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh held discussions with their Russian counterparts, Sergey Lavrov and Sergey Shoigu, a few hours before heads of the two countries met.

Russian President Vladimir Putin met Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi. Putin visited Delhi on a short visit for the 21st annual summit between India and Russia. The discussion is the first in-person meet between

the two leaders since they met on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in November 2019.

Prime Minister Modi, during the meet said: "Despite the challenges posed by Covid, the pace of relations between India and Russia has not changed". At the same time, Putin mentioned India as a "great power and a time-tested friend," as the two countries signed 28 agreements during their discussions.

What is the background?

First, the seesaw relations. The bilateral relations between the two countries have witnessed closeness and also growing uneasiness. The primary cause of discontentment for the Russians was India joining the Quad. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov spoke about the West influencing India by "trying to engage India in anti-China games by promoting Indo-Pacific strategies". Nevertheless, the two countries have shared good relations historically.

In recent years, India extended a billion-dollar line of credit to invest in Russia's Far-East. Russian direct investment was used to manufacture the Sputnik-V vaccine in India. Second, the primacy of defence, in bilateral relations. Russia is said to deliver the S-400 missile defence systems to India, giving Delhi a strategic deterrence to counter China and Pakistan. Russia is India's top defence partner, with defence contracts to USD 9-10 billion. Russia has also participated in the make in India program, transferring defence technologies and investments only to Indian sectors to generate employment. Russian cooperation on the defence investments created and expanded the Brahmos missile system, which is the world's fastest anti-ship cruise missile in operation.

Third, shared concerns on Afghanistan. Both countries have concerns about the future of Afghanistan and the potential use of its soil for terrorism which could impact their countries. Over a telephone call in August 2021, Modi and Putin discussed the formation of an inclusive government in Kabul and reiterated their support for a peaceful, stable and secure Afghanistan. Russia also participated in the National Security Advisers Conference on Afghanistan hosted by India in November 2021. In addition, the

countries previously discussed the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and pledged immediate support for the Afghan populace; India had offered to send 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat via Pakistan.

Fourth, the China-Russia-India triangle. India-China relations have been tense lately, with the recent clashes. China and US ties have been deteriorating, which has led to Beijing and Moscow moving closer. However, India's trade with China is about USD 100 billion as Indian corporates focus on China and America. At the same time, Russia needs India's help to gain influence in Eurasia.

What does this mean?

First, India and Russia have historically shared close ties since India's independence. Even with strains, the relationship is likely to continue and grow. Second, India and Russia are currently working on Brahmos Mark II, and with the deliveries of the S-400 missile defence systems, the defence relations will thrive. Third, the countries have decided to extend support to Afghanistan and have a joint view for its future. Fourth, the China-Russia-India triangle will continue as the countries are intertwined in border issues, trade and mutual self-interests.

Russia: The Anti-Satellite test

By Harini Madhusudan, 21 November 2021

What happened?

On 15 November, a missile from the earth was launched to target and destroy a Russian satellite in low-earth orbit, also known as a Direct-Ascent Anti-Satellite(DA-ASAT). The target was a defunct satellite from the Soviet-era called Tselina-D or Cosmos-1408. Following the test, instructions were given to the crew at the International Space Station, consisting of two Russian astronauts, four US astronauts, and one German, to take shelter in their capsules for two hours as a precaution.

The Russian test has come when there has been an increase in the activities and actors in Outer Space. "Russia has demonstrated a deliberate disregard for the security, safety, stability, and long-term sustainability of the space domain for

all nations," US Space Command Commander James Dickinson said in a statement. Antony Blinken condemned the test as "reckless and irresponsible." The US State Department, NASA, and the officials from the Pentagon raised alarms about the impact of the debris generated by the test. The Russian military responded by calling the US 'hypocritical' as the resulting fragments from this test are unlikely to pose a threat to space activities or assets.

What is the background?

First, Russian activities in Outer Space and the recent ASAT test. The Russian direct-ascent anti-satellite missile targeted and destroyed a defunct Soviet signals intelligence satellite. Russia has repeatedly spoken about the plans of the US, France, and NATO as a whole of placing weapons in Outer Space. During the year, Russia had issues with its capsules launched to the ISS, and a crew from Russia launched a private mission to Outer Space to shoot a movie. On 16 November, Russia called on the US air force's testing of their X-37 spacecraft to indicate the country developing space weapons.

Second, a profile of ASAT tests in the past. The US, Russia, China, and India have previously conducted ASAT tests by shooting their satellites. India has been the latest entrant to the successful display of ASAT capabilities. China tested an Anti Satellite in 2007, which became one of the early factors of the growing mistrust among countries. In 2008, as a response to China, the US tested its anti-satellite weapon. In 2015, Russia conducted its first successful ASAT test, and in 2019, India conducted its ASAT test called 'Mission Shakti.'

Third, the importance of ASAT capability. The anti-satellite is an effective tool to use against an adversary's space-based weapons or nuclear weapons. It can be considered as a countermeasure against an adversary's anti-ballistic missile defense or simply a force multiplier for a nuclear first strike. The need for an anti-satellite comes from the nuclear defense preparedness and holds the ability to disrupt the normal functioning of the Lower-Earth Orbit.

Fourth, criticisms of ASAT over debris and the threat to space assets. The immediate output of an ASAT test is the space debris that it generates. Every test releases thousands of particles of various sizes that pose a threat to the assets in outer space. For example, the test by Russia created almost 1,500 measurable pieces of debris and many more pieces of smaller particles. Compared to the statistics from early November, there are about 20,000 objects that are traceable pieces of debris. The Russian test is expected to add another 10 percent to the same in the lower earth orbit. The Outer Space Treaty restricts the testing of weapons of mass destruction in Outer Space. The display of ASAT capability would technically be a violation of International Law. Since the countries have shot down their satellites, the threat of a weaponized space takes a back seat over the debris in all the tests.

What does it mean?

The Russian officials have revealed that the present ASAT test responded to the US announcement of a Space Force. There has been a sizeable growth in the space industry in terms of innovation, investments, and cost management, which directly influences the need for ASAT capability. The Secure World Foundation has called for a formal halt among all countries to stop ASAT testing, which sounds similar to the NPT model of nuclear energy. However, the more effective response would be to work towards robotic management and efficient safety protocols that ensure the safety of technology and crew. Additionally, the outcomes of an ASAT test need not be seen as a Space Debris problem, as it is not the primary outcome of the test.

Russia: The Afghan summit

By Harini Madhusudan, 24 October 2021

What happened?

On 20 October, Russia hosted the "Moscow format" talks with delegates from ten countries and the Taliban. The joint statement formalized the position and demands of the member countries to the Taliban.

In order to obtain recognition, the Taliban is expected to create a state management system and form "a truly inclusive government that adequately reflects the interests of all major ethnopolitical forces in the country," as a prerequisite to completing the national reconciliation process in Afghanistan, said the joint statement.

To address the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, the statement proposed that the Taliban adopt a moderate and wise internal and foreign policy that would help "achieve the shared goals of durable peace, security, safety and long-term prosperity and respect the rights of ethnic groups, women and children. Last week, Vladimir Putin noted that there has been no rush to officially recognize the Taliban but there was a need to engage in talks with them.

What is the background?

First, the history of the Moscow format. Russia has established the Moscow Format talks since 2017 to address the issues related to Afghanistan. This is the third meeting and the first one since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. The talks are significant because it aims to consolidate the international community's efforts in preventing a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Importantly, it includes representatives of China, Pakistan, Iran, India, and the former Soviet nations of Central Asia, along with representatives of the Taliban and other Afghan factions. All participants of the Moscow format are close to the region and have substantial stakes in the crisis in Afghanistan.

Second, the Russian interests in Afghanistan. Moscow has been engaging with the Taliban during the recent period. Despite being on Russia's list of banned groups, representatives of the Taliban have visited Russia for talks regularly since 2018. The Russian approach can be seen in two aspects; one, they are embracing closer ties with the Taliban after the US withdrawal, and to ensure stability in the surrounding Central Asia. Russia would want to avoid getting its military involved in any way. Unlike many countries, Russia has not evacuated its embassy from Kabul, and the Russian Ambassador is known to have maintained

regular contacts with the Taliban since they took over Kabul.

Third, the participants of the Moscow format. The following took part in the summit: Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Iran, Pakistan, China, Turkmenistan, India, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. They called on the Taliban to pursue a moderate and wise internal and foreign policy, be friendly to the neighboring states, and achieve the shared goals of "durable peace, security, safety, long term prosperity, and respect the rights of ethnic groups, women, and children.

Fourth, the Taliban's interest in the Moscow format. The Taliban used this opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to preventing the use of Afghanistan territory against its neighbors and other states. One of the primary interests was to receive official recognition.

What does it mean?

The Moscow format is one of the many attempts at balancing power with the new realities in Afghanistan. It is significant because of the presence of Russia, China, and Pakistan along with the Taliban, in the absence of the US. There has been a softer approach in the rhetoric from the Russian side; for example, the state news agency, which is mandated to use certain terms, was seen replacing the word 'terrorist' with 'radical' in their reports of the Taliban. Though a joint statement was released, there is no sign of officially recognizing the Taliban government until they observe promising actions from their side. The timely role taken by Russia, by organizing the Moscow format summit, and also making a statement by skipping participation in the G20 attempt of the same, indicates a difference in approach to the issue at hand.

Russia: General Elections 2021 underlines Putin's political hold

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 26 September 2021

What happened?

On 17 September, Russia began polling for its three-day general elections both online and offline. The parliamentary election, which ended

on 19 September, elected 450 deputies to the State Duma for five years. Despite an easy win of 49.82 per cent votes, the United Russia party lost significant ground compared to their 2016 election win of 54 per cent votes. Contributions by other parties included the Communist party with 18.93 per cent of the vote, while the LDPR party and the Fair Russia party garnered 7.5 per cent individually. Overall, the elections saw an official voter turnout of 51.7 per cent.

On 20 September, jailed critic Alexei Navalny's aide Lyubov Sobol said: "With such a colossal number of violations, the results of the State Duma elections cannot be recognized as clean, honest or legitimate."

On 24 September, after announcing the final results, Russia's Central Election Commission (CEC) Chairperson Ella Pamfilova said: "We did everything we could, based on our understanding of honour and conscience, everything we could, and it's up to you to judge."

What is the background?

First, the pre-election controversies. Before the elections, Kremlin critics were barred from participation while others were implicated with legal suits or unexplained arrests. The Smart voting app promoted by jailed Alexei Navalny's supporters was banned. The subsequent crackdown on civil society, media, and other NGOs also raised concerns about attempts to silence the Opposition. During the elections, criticisms ranged from accusations of voter fraud to requests of annulling the results. Ballot box stuffing, pens with disappearing ink, and threats against observers were other alleged violations.

Second, the Opposition's role. The opposition parties that participated in the elections provided a pretence of pluralism, as critics were carefully excluded. This lack of real electoral competition implied the results were a foregone conclusion. Over the years, this has been the case with Russian elections. Since the beginning of Putin's regime, all of his elections have been termed fraudulent, and every time, these allegations have been strategically silenced. Alexei Navalny, the prominent Kremlin-rival, had

managed to garner an efficient opposition. The idea of Navalny – Opposition to the Kremlin became quite popular despite the Kremlin crackdown. Once Navalny's organization was termed 'extremist', and he was jailed, the vocalicity of the Opposition was lost.

Third, fairness of the election. Russia's 'managed/guided' form of democracy was evident via this election. The 'opposition' was Kremlin-approved since critics were effortlessly silenced or taken off the arena. According to the Interior Ministry, none of the 750 complaints on voting violations received was severe enough to affect the results. For the first time since 2007, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), didn't send in election observers due to limitations set by Moscow. It seems only fair that this year's elections were dubbed 'a transition from a flawed democracy to a fully-fledged authoritarian state'.

Fourth, the backlash. Internal criticisms included a coalition of defeated candidates claiming foul-play over the online voting system; they also asked for annulling the results. However, these claims were not taken into consideration by the Russian CEC. There was also an international backlash. From the US State Department spokesperson Ned Price to the EU Foreign Affairs spokesperson Peter Sano, the elections were termed undemocratic and staged. Other European countries also called out Moscow's growing authoritarianism.

What does it mean?

First, questions over democracy in Russia. The opinion polls had predicted United Russia's popularity accounting for less than 30 per cent; however, the Kremlin achieved a supermajority despite a low turnout. In light of this, questions arise regarding Moscow's larger democratic process and whether the concept of Russian democracy is a sham. It also indicates that a return to full-fledged democracy is not in the cards for Russia.

Second, Putin's hold over Russia. Despite the widespread violations by his administration, Putin's popularity in terms of votes was unaffected. Kremlin's justification of the crackdown prosecuting those deviants of the law

rather than one with political motives shows how effortlessly critics are silenced in Russia.

Russia: Alexi Navalny's network added to the 'Extremist List'

By Harini Madhusudan, 9 May 2021

What happened?

On 4 May, changes to the election law in Russia were submitted to the lower house of Duma, which seeks to ban people linked to terrorist or extremist organizations from running for office. It includes anyone in the hierarchy of extremist groups, including the financial donors or individuals who played a role up to three years before the court ruling.

On 30 April, Russia's state financial watchdog Rosfinmonitoring blacklisted Alexi Navalny's political network as a 'terrorist-linked organization, which means authorities can choose to block the organization's bank accounts at will. A court ruling to ban the network's crowdfunded work, and name Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), as an "extremist" organization is expected in June, which would further restrict the party's 50 regional headquarters from operating and potentially put members and supporters at risk of lengthy jail terms. "We've seen a lot of 'laws against Navalny,' but this is something new," tweeted Navalny's senior aide Leonid Volkov. However, he says, the "extremism" court ruling will not affect the team's "Smart Voting" strategy that seeks to unseat the pro-Putin ruling party in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

What is the background?

First, Putin's consolidation of power within Russia. Putin has remained the central authority figure of Russia since 2000. In early 2020, he announced a number of constitutional amendments in his annual address at the Federal Assembly. An amendment allows two more terms for Putin's rule until 2036. In early 2020, the Prime Minister was forced to resign, and several members of the Parliament were replaced. Restrictions have been placed on foreign investments in Russian entities, while also redefining what a foreign agent is. The

Putin government managed to place Navalny back in prison just in time for the elections. Subsequently, the government has cracked down on Navalny's network and frozen the party's assets to suppress their movement against him. All of these played a part in consolidating powers.

Second, the rise of Navalny as the internationally popular opposition to Putin. Alexi Navalny rose to popularity when his attempt to contest for the 2018 elections against Putin was quashed. In 2020, the poisoning of Navalny garnered him the limelight as the solid opponent for Putin. The Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) has represented Navalny in his absence by instigating protests and investigating corruption. In January 2021, Navalny released a video on YouTube of Putin's palace exposing the corruption within the party. This video gained three million views. Following his arrest, they organized protests in 198 towns and cities across the country. The network members have also shown genuine successes in local and regional electoral politics, particularly in the Siberian cities of Novosibirsk and Tomsk.

Third, the increasing international attention towards Russia. In the months since President Biden took office, Russia's actions at the borders, cybersecurity, and the mistreatment of Navalny in prison have been criticized by the US and its Western allies. The West has also placed sanctions condemning Navalny's arrest and his prison treatment. Along with this, there is an emphasis on domestic issues like rampant corruption, income inequality, and a weak economy within Russia.

What does it mean?

President Putin now has the power to continue until 2036, and he would not let anything come in the way of it. The Russian government's approach to Navalny's organization would be made an example of what would happen to those that defy Putin. The multiple sanctions and the international criticism have not stopped Putin from taking drastic measures to suppress all forms of opposition. There is no other force within Russia that is as strong as Navalny that would replace him in his movement against the

ruling party. Would Putin then remain undisputed until anything happens to him?

Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation seems to have served its purpose and now has become a liability to the members who were a part of it. And despite the suspension of the party's activities from 29 April, the members intend to uphold the spirit behind the movement and participate in their individual capacities. This could be seen as a stepping stone. Many individuals of the disbanded party seek to participate in the elections in their individual capacities while securing the safety of the people who supported them. The impact of Navalny's popularity on the people of Russia is unknown, and the "Smart Voting" strategies of the movement could still stand as a surprise factor in the September elections.

Russia: Putin draws redlines against the West, but withdraws troops from the Ukraine border

By Harini Madhusudan, 25 April 2021

What happened?

On 21 April, during his state-of-the-nation address, President Vladimir Putin issued a warning regarding Russia's "swift" and "severe" response to hostile foreign actions. He told both houses of Parliament: "We want good relations...and really don't want to burn bridges." While referring to the West, he said: "I hope that nobody would decide to cross the so-called red line in relations with Russia, and we will define those [red lines] on our own in every individual case." He also discussed the issues of Covid in Russia, protests in favour of Navalny, and domestic economic hardships.

On 22 April, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu announced the withdrawal of its military forces from the Ukrainian border. The announcement comes after weeks of military buildup at the Russia-Ukraine border, causing concerns of renewed conditions for a clash between Ukraine and Russia. The announcement states that the troops will withdraw from the region between 23 April and 1 May.

What is the background?

First, Putin's Redlines. While referring to the US, NATO and the EU, he said: "like a kind of sport, they have developed a 'highly unseemly habit' of picking on Russia for any reason, and most often for no reason at all." In recent weeks, there was a series of threats between the West and Russia, which Putin says targets their "core security interests." However, there is no mention of what the 'red lines' actually mean. Analysts like Sam Greene, the director of Russia Institute at King's College, called it an intentional policy paralysis, a deliberate move by Putin to keep everyone guessing what the redlines would mean.

Second, the growing international concerns about Russia and the US sanctions. First should be the recent legislation allowing Putin to contest till 2036. He is also seen preparing for the parliamentary elections in September 2021. A recent provocation also is the assassination attempt against the Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko. Russia's border tensions with Ukraine is another issue. Two sets of sanctions have been placed on Russia, one for the jailed opposition leader Navalny and the other over the solar-winds cyber attacks, since Biden took office in January. Biden, while stating that the Russians were involved in the 2020 US elections, has threatened to place more sanctions. Domestically, people took to the streets in demand of medical care and protested against the treatment of Alexy Navalny in jail. There is also a sense of dissatisfaction among the people over stagnant incomes and the rising inflation.

Third, the withdrawal of troops from the Ukraine border. During the recent weeks, despite fears of escalation, Russia maintained that the movement of troops in the borders was only part of their military exercises. Russian military blocked flights and closed navigation in the Black Sea and parts of Crimea for 'winter period control checks' throughout April. The withdrawal announcement could be unrelated. Or, it could indicate political balancing after a strong statement earlier by Putin to ensure the tensions do not escalate beyond control.

What does it mean?

During the recent weeks, there is international pressure on Putin. The redline statement by Putin is an effort to respond. Both Biden and Putin seem to be testing waters and see who blinks first.

With the Parliamentary elections in Russia six months away, Putin's statement could be catering to a local audience. Though the redline statement can be a political grandstanding, it was timely and carefully balanced with troops' removal from the borders.

Ukraine: Escalation of tensions with Russia

By Chetna Vinay Bhora, 11 April 2021

What happened?

On 10 April, Ukraine's defence minister warned against Eastern Ukraine's Donbas region's Russian exacerbation as a provocation. Kyiv has raised the alarm over Russian troops' buildup along the border that separates Ukraine and Russia in Donbas. The Kremlin rebuffed accusations of the troops being a threat.

On 9 April, Russia admonished that in the event of an attack on the Russian population in the Eastern part of the country, Moscow might intervene to protect and aid the Russian speaking residents. Ukraine argued that two of its soldiers were killed due to the shooting by the pro-Russian separatists. According to the open-source intelligence reports, the satellite images showcase an increased presence of tanks, artilleries and short-range ballistic missiles transported to just 150 miles from Ukraine. The Ukrainian President has implored NATO to set up a membership path for Ukraine to join the military alliance to stop the confrontations with Russia.

What is the background?

First, the conflict since 2014. The Russian intrusion in the region set in a significant rift with the West, propelling the European Union and the US to impose sanctions on Russia. The situation in Ukraine intensified into an international crisis, with the US-EU deadlock

against Russia after a Malaysian Airplane was shot down at Ukrainian airspace, killing all passengers on board. In 2015, France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine undertook the mantle to broker a ceasefire through the Minsk Accords.

Second, NATO's entry. In 2016, NATO disclosed that the alliance would set up four battalions in Eastern Europe to avert possible future Russian aggravation, particularly in the Baltics. However, efforts to reach a diplomatic compensation and assuaging resolution have been unsuccessful.

Third, an increased focus of the US, under Biden. In April 2021, Biden's administration pointed out that the latest US-Russia friction is due to the military buildup in the region, disputes over arms control and human rights issues. Biden had extended "unwavering support" to the Ukrainian President in his confrontation with Russia. Subsequently, on a call, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany urged that Russian President Vladimir Putin to pull his troops back to mitigate the situation.

What does it mean?

Russia has been building its military presence in the region, causing instability. One of the objectives is to ensure that Ukraine does not side away with the EU or NATO and drain the Russian earnings from the region. Ukraine has also been an important location for the former USSR and now Russia in the post-cold war period.

The intervention is also meant to support the pro-Russian rebels in Eastern Ukraine. Putin has been backing the rebels to maintain a perpetual separatist crisis, maintain clout over the Ukrainian government, and encroach the region as he did in Crimea.

The recent developments do not clarify the Russian move; it could just be an intimidation tactic or a prelude to a major escalation. However, the massive troop movements and the antagonistic attitude have caused a ripple in Kyiv and the other Western capitals. The US and NATO will be obligated by Article 5 of the NATO treaty to retaliate. This could escalate into a war between Russia and the United States, and its NATO allies.

Russia: New tension with Europe, Moscow expels European diplomats

By Sourina Bej, 7 February 2021

What happened?

On 5 February, Russia expelled diplomats from Germany, Sweden, and Poland for joining the protests in support of opposition activist Alexei Navalny, who was jailed earlier last week. In its statement, the Russian foreign ministry said the diplomats had taken part in "illegal demonstrations" held on 23 January and "such actions do not correspond to their diplomatic status. Russia expects that in the future, the diplomatic missions of Sweden, Poland and Germany and their personnel will strictly follow international law norms."

The diplomats' home countries have condemned the expulsions along with the UK, France and the EU. German Foreign Minister Heiko Mass denounced the expulsion as being "in no way justified." Sweden said the claim was unfounded and said it reserved the right to an appropriate response. Poland reiterated that the expulsion could lead to the "further deepening of the crisis in bilateral relations." EU's foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell, who is currently in Russia, on behalf of the EU, said he "strongly condemned this decision and rejected the allegations that they conducted activities incompatible with their status as foreign diplomats."

What is the background?

First, a new low in EU-Russia relation. The expulsions were announced in the immediate context of Borrell's meeting with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Borrell is the first senior EU official to travel to Russia since 2017 and had sought to extend an olive branch to Moscow when he called for the EU to approve the Sputnik vaccine. However, the expulsions are timely messages to the West on Moscow's brazenness. Since the claims of Russia's support to Belarus to the poisoning of its strongest critic Alexei Navalny in Berlin, the relation between EU and Russia has remained stiff. In 2018, similar was the response from the UK and the US in expelling Russian diplomats over the poisoning of a former Russian spy in

the UK. Relations between the two had also soured over energy issues when on 21 January, the European Parliament members called on the EU to immediately stop work on the Nord Stream 2 as it "violates the EU's common energy security policy."

Second, dipping human rights record and culture of impunity in Russia. Navalny's arrest and subsequent imprisonment for his campaign against corruption is not the first act of human rights violation in Russia. On 12 June 2019, the Russian police detained over 200 people at a protest march in Moscow demanding the release of the investigative journalist IvGolunov. Russia ranks 149th out of 180 countries for press freedom, according to an annual index published by international media watchdog Reporters Without Borders.

Third, the slow return of the Transatlantic condemnation of Russia. Along with Germany, Poland and Sweden, France and the US has joined in condemning Russia's decision to expel the diplomats. This collective condemnation had been seemingly absent during Trump's tenure which was marred with his bonhomie for Putin despite alleged Russian involvement in the 2016 US election. The US President Joe Biden said there would be no "rolling over" to the Kremlin any more under his watch.

What does it mean?

First, despite tensions, the EU has not engaged in constructive criticism of Russia. Instead, they have come together to negotiate on the Iran nuclear deal or the Paris climate agreement. The EU is still Moscow's most significant trade and investment partner, and Merkel on 6 February has said Berlin's stance on the Nord Stream 2 remains "unaffected". Thus, it is difficult to foresee any untoward pushback from the EU yet. Second, international pressure didn't alter Russia's defiance on human rights and freedom in 2014. It probably will not now as the hallmarks of Moscow's preparation to handle the "Navalny issue" is the same as it did with the Crimean crises.

THE AMERICAS THIS YEAR

Brazil: The COVID turmoil spills over into a political one

By D Suba Chandran, 4 April 2021

What happened?

On 30 March, the military leadership heading the three branches – Army, Navy and Airforce resigned following the Bolsonaro replacing the minister of Defence. During mid-March, Bolsonaro also replaced the health minister. On 29 March, Bolsonaro also removed three ministers from the cabinet – foreign minister, defence minister and justice minister.

On 31 March, President Jair Bolsonaro, a former military officer, observed the military coup in 1964. His Vice President, a former General, tweeted: "On this day, 57 years ago, the Brazilian people with the support of the armed forces stopped the international communist movement from sticking its tongs in Brazil." A small crowd gathered in Rio to observe the same.

What is the background?

First, the rising COVID-19 casualties and the public anger against the President. Brazil's casualty rates have been climbing steeply during the recent weeks and have already crossed 310,000. President Bolsonaro has been accused of not paying serious attention to the nature of the threat and taking adequate action to address the pandemic. He refused to impose lockdown or to insist on social distancing. As a result, there is a mounting casualty, which is yet to reach its peak. There is anger against the President – both at the national and provincial levels.

Second, the efforts by President Bolsonaro to shift the blame on the others. Brazil has witnessed four health ministers during the COVID period since January 2019. The present minister - Marcelo Cartaxo Lopes replaced Eduardo Pazuello in March 2021. Eduardo served only for seven months; he replaced Nelson Teich in September 2020. Nelson Teich replaced Luiz Mandetta; the latter served until March 2020, when Bolsonaro disapproved of his

position on social distancing and COVID strategy. Bolsonaro also replaced Brazil's foreign minister, blaming him for failing to secure COVID vaccines for the country.

Third, a political development outside the COVID crisis in Brazil. The former President of Brazil Luiz Lula (2003-2010) is back now after the Supreme Court dismissed the corruption charges against him. This would mean Lula would be contesting in the forthcoming Presidential election in 2022 against Bolsonaro. Given the public anger, Bolsonaro should be deeply worried, and the changes at the top level in the government should be an attempt to deflect criticism against him.

What does it mean?

Bolsonaro's decision to replace the defence minister and the resignations of the three military chiefs should underline the efforts by the President to have a pliable military. Bolsonaro never shied away from applauding the role of the military and even eulogized it. As the opposition against him mounts, and with Lula's return to politics, he is no longer the strong man of Brazil. The question is: Is Bolsonaro trying to get the military on his side and getting ready to engage it if the opposition mounts against him?

Haiti: Political crisis follows the assassination of President Moïse

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 11 July 2021

What happened?

On 7 July, Haiti's President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated at his residence in Port-au-Prince. Hours later, Joseph Claude Joseph took charge as interim Prime Minister and stated: "A group of individuals who have not been identified... attacked the private residence of the President of the Republic and fatally injured the Head of State." He then declared Haiti to be in a state of siege. A statement made by Claude – Ariel Henry, who Moïse suggested as Prime Ministerial replacement highlights the issue of leadership: "It's an exceptional situation. There is a bit of confusion. I am the Prime Minister in office."

On 8 July, amidst suspicions of external involvement, US President Joe Biden said: "We condemn this heinous act, stand ready to assist as we continue to work for a safe and secure Haiti." Also on 8 July, Colombian Defense Minister Diego Molano, on the identity of the perpetrators, stated: "Interpol has officially requested information about the alleged perpetrators of this crime. Initially, the information indicates that they are Colombian citizens, retired members of the National Army."

What is the background?

First, the assassination of President Moïse. A heavily armed commando unit of 26 Colombians and two Haitian Americans is believed to be behind the attack. The motive of the assassination remains unclear. While a section is accusing the outsiders - especially the mercenaries from Colombia, there are other versions also over the reasons behind his assassination.

Second, the post-assassination political crisis. According to the Haitian constitution, if the President abruptly departs, the head of the Supreme Court is to lead the government; but this position remains vacant since the former head's death. In this power vacuum, the National Assembly could select a new leader; but there is no National Assembly since legislative elections are interminably delayed. This leaves Claude in charge, yet the dilemma persists as Moïse had announced that Claude would be replaced by Ariel Henry, a neurosurgeon connected to the opposition. Despite politicians and other stakeholders expressing their displeasure in Claude taking charge, a transition seems unlikely amidst the crisis.

Third, the pre-assassination political crises. Even before the assassination, Haiti was in chaos. The country was battered by protests, economic crises, and the pandemic. The crux of the problem was Moïse's illegitimate rule – him overstaying his mandate garnered strong opposition and subsequent nationwide protests. Limiting judicial review and the creation of an intelligence service that answered only to the President further aggravated the public. Haiti's shaky political situation also increased the

violence by armed gangs across the country. Large parts of the country are now controlled by these gangs, and the police are rendered inefficient. With the spiralling inflation, worsening coronavirus pandemic, and scarcity of food and fuel – the economic and social crisis only worsened the situation.

Fourth, the history of external interference in Haiti. International actors like the US and the UN have failed to stabilize Haitian politics despite their immense influence and long history of intervention. Despite the Biden administration's pledge to assist in the investigation, the US turned down Haiti's request for troops to help maintain security – stating they had no intention of providing military assistance at this juncture. Another matter of Haitian concern is the Colombian involvement – 17 of the 26 assailants involved had retired from the Colombian army. The play of double standards raises questions about foreign collusion.

What does it mean?

The assassination has raised more questions over immediate and long term issues. With the power struggle already in motion – who will lead the country? The political crisis will exacerbate the security situation. Though Haiti would be looking for some international support to maintain order in the immediate future, the US is less likely to get involved.

The deteriorating economic and social situation will only worsen the situation for Haiti.

Elections in Honduras

By Porkkodi Ganeshpandian, 5 December 2021

What happened?

On 28 November, Honduras held its presidential, congressional and local elections. Early counting of the votes indicated the lead of Xiomara Castro, a leftist candidate of the Liberty and Refoundation Party (LIBRE).

On 1 December, the presently ruling conservative National Party's candidate, Nasry Asfura, conceded defeat. This paved the way for the rise of the first female President in Honduras,

Xiomara Castro. This also leads to the return of the left in Honduras after twelve years.

What is the background?

First, the elections. Honduras is known for its low-voter turnouts. The protests following the 2017 elections caused a massive migration of Hondurans. However, the 2021 elections witnessed the highest voter turnout in twenty-four years and a peaceful post-election process. Hernandez is implicated in a narcotic case, under investigation in the US.

Second, the politics of Honduras. The institutions established to battle corruption in Honduras had existed as a mere shadow under the Hernandez administration. Several graft scandals have plagued the ruling National Party for years. Two hurricanes and the covid19 pandemic has led to a nine per cent reduction of Honduras's GDP, resulting in a sharp rise in poverty and unemployment in the region. The campaign promises made by Castro offered to lessen the restrictions that Honduras faced under a conservative rule for twelve years. These include liberal abortion restrictions, support to the UN's fight against corruption, and a major constitutional overhaul.

Third, the campaign promises of Castro. She has promised to institute an anti-corruption commission backed by the United Nations to probe the allegations of corruption under the Hernandez administration. She has also promised to strengthen diplomatic relations with Beijing. This has served to cement her victory as she is seen to be the only leader who can navigate through the economic and political chaos of the past four years. Her rival, Asfura, was less advantaged with his association with Hernandez's party, despite his promise to attempt a tax reduction scheme.

Fourth, the support for the left. Past election trends in Honduran elections since the coup of 2009 indicate a minor difference between the votes secured by the National Party and the LIBRE. However, the 2021 elections broke the tradition. Among the fifty-two per cent of the votes counted, Castro had secured fifty-three per cent whereas her rival had secured only thirty-four per cent of the votes.

What does it mean?

The return of the Left in the Honduran elections establishes no observable pattern in Honduran politics. However, the victory of the Castro could significantly alter Honduran politics in the days to come. First, Honduras is bound to contribute to the emerging divide between the leftist and rightist rulers in the Latin American Region. Second, Honduras is set for stability in domestic politics, given the ambitious and necessary campaign promises of Castro. The aim to fight Honduran corruption has already met with the approval of the United States. This would result in a turbulence in the Honduran foreign policy, especially with Castro's desire to establish friendly relations with Beijing, the rival of the largest trading partner of Honduras. Yet, the 2021 elections in Honduras with the highest voter turnout in twenty-four years has proven that the state is now set to establish a more liberal democracy that would attempt to gradually undo the shortcomings of the past.

Peru: The election is symbolic of the left-right struggle in South America

By Porkkodi Ganeshpandian, 13 June 2021

What happened?

On 6 May, the runoff presidential elections were held in Peru between the top two contenders Pedro Castillo and Keiko Fujimori. On 11 June, with 95 per cent of the vote tallied, Castillo claimed victory by virtue of having a lead of 0.5 per cent over Fujimori, who promptly disputed the results. However, the country's electoral board is yet to certify the elections officially and is reviewing disputed ballots. After Fujimori's allegations, Castillo said: "We call on the Peruvian people to stay alert."

What is the background?

First, the contrasting background of the two candidates. Fujimori is the scion of Peru's powerful political families. Her father Alberto Fujimori ruled Peru in the nineties and is currently in jail for atrocities committed during his rule. Her far-right philosophies contrast with those of Castillo, a Communist school teacher and an outsider who was not even a member of

his Peru Libre party before entering the presidential race.

Second, the anger in Peru over Lima's political elite. Peru is marked by a deep divide between the capital Lima and the interior regions. More than 65 per cent of the country's GDP is concentrated in Lima. The country's statistics bureau estimates that urban poverty is 26 per cent but the number for rural communities is 46 per cent. Rural indigenous voters were not even able to vote until 1979, when suffrage was extended to illiterate voters as well. Castillo's election slogan — no more poor in a rich country — has managed to tap into the sentiment of the rural population who believe that the rural regions were governed for Lima's benefit. Castillo is only the second president in modern Peru's history to come from the country's interior provinces. Eighty per cent of Castillo's support comes from the Ayacucho, Cusco, and Puno, regions where in recent years, the rise of extractive industries have gone hand-in-hand with an increase in poverty.

Third, the upheaval caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Peru has the biggest per-capita death toll from the coronavirus pandemic in the world, with more than 180,000 people dead. A sizeable section of Peru's workforce is informal workers who were particularly hit-hard by the lockdowns and social distancing measures. Multiple reports credited the deep divide in society to the upheaval caused by the pandemic.

Fourth, the battle between right and left in South America. The election in Peru is symbolic of the larger battle between the left and right-wing forces that is characteristic of South American politics. Ever since South American countries established democratic governments after Cold War-era dictatorships, their elections often have been a straight shoot-out between left-wing parties promising social change to the marginalized populace and right-wing politicians seeking to profit off anti-Communist propaganda. The Peruvian elections were no different with Castillo appealing to Peru's rural masses with promises of nationalization of resources but having to fight off allegations of links to the far-left terrorist outfit, the Shining Path. Fujimori, a relatively unpopular candidate,

hit by repeated corruption allegations, only managed to gather just 13 per cent of the vote in the initial elections. She was able to close the gap on Castillo in the runoff, only because of the anti-Communist feat among certain sections.

What does it mean?

The result is likely to continue the chaos in Peruvian politics. Peru has already seen four presidents in the last five years. The uncertain mandate, along with Fujimori's allegations of voter fraud and a hostile parliament, will make Castillo's position precarious. His radical electoral promises of land reforms and a new constitution are likely to be met with significant resistance from the country's conservative forces.

Read alongside victories for the left in Chile and protests against conservative rulers in other South American countries, the result in Peru might be the harbinger of a second pink tide. The coronavirus pandemic has only added impetus to this process by exposing the deep divide between various classes across the continent.

Peru: After month-long political drama, Castillo's election confirmed

By Vishnu Prasad, 25 July 2021

What happened?

On 19 July, Pedro Castillo was confirmed as Peru's president-elect by the country's election authority more than a month after the elections. Castillo, a Marxist school teacher, had led his right-wing rival, Keiko Fujimori, by 44,000 votes before the latter's allegation of voter fraud delayed official certification of results. Castillo will be sworn in on 28 July.

Castillo said: "We are going to work together and bring this country together. We are going to reject anything that goes against democracy." On the same day, Jorge Luis Salas, head of the Jurado Nacional de Elecciones (JNE) elections jury, announced Castillo's victory.

What is the background?

First, Peru's fragile democracy. At one point, the tactics utilized by the Fujimori camp made it look like the verdict of the people would not be respected. Despite multiple officials and organizations certifying the elections as clean, Fujimori had made claims of voter fraud. Clearly the camp with more financial and political power, she had hired an army of lawyers in an attempt to overturn the result. However, the country's election authority had held firm and systematically disposed of all her claims before declaring Castillo the winner. The development comes after a few rough years for Peruvian democracy, with five presidents coming and going in five years. Castillo's rival had contested the results from Peru's rural areas where she had virtually no support and had disputed almost 200,000 ballots. Her camp had filed 760 requests for annulment of polling stations. However, she had furnished little to no evidence to back up her claims.

Second, the rise of the Left in Peruvian politics. Leftist forces had been of little consequence in Peruvian politics, with the country remaining a bastion of neo-liberal forces since Alberto Fujimori's rule in the 1990s. While the rest of the continent had turned towards the left during the pink tide of the early 2000s, Peru had staunchly stayed out. This was especially peculiar considering how unequal wealth distribution was in Peru. Castillo's election finally represents a credible leftist movement in a country that had resisted one for decades.

Third, the influence that the Right still holds. Castillo may have won the election, but that he was only able to do so with a thin margin is telling. The same goes for the Peruvian Parliament where Castillo's Peru Libre, the largest party with 37 seats, still find themselves outflanked by various right-wing parties. Despite all the factors against them, the right in Peru has not been swept away in the wave that had propelled Castillo to power.

What does this mean?

Castillo has some difficult promises to keep. The 51-year-old ran a populist campaign with promises including the nationalization of

resources and heavy spending on welfare activities. Though he has softened on some of his more radical promises, it remains to be seen just how much of his agenda he will be allowed to pursue by Peru's parliament which is still controlled by right-wing parties. Fujimori, after losing the 2016 elections, had used her party's numbers in the parliament to make the country virtually ungovernable. There is every chance that right-wing parties could form a coalition against Castillo's leftist policies and force a repeat of the same.

Castillo's victory also raises the prospect of a second pink tide in Latin America. The past couple of years have seen setbacks to conservative governments. Mexico and Argentina elected presidents with leftist leanings while Chile recently gave right-wing parties just 20 percent of the vote when they elected a constitutional assembly. Colombia's Ivan Duque finds his position precarious after recent turmoil. In Brazil, former president Lula Da Silva is leading opinion polls ahead of next year's elections.

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masses with promises of nationalization of resources but having to fight off allegations of links to the far-left terrorist outfit, the Shining Path. Fujimori, a relatively unpopular candidate, hit by repeated corruption allegations, only managed to gather just 13 per cent of the vote in the initial elections. She was able to close the gap on Castillo in the runoff, only because of the anti-Communist feat among certain sections.

What does it mean?

The result is likely to continue the chaos in Peruvian politics. Peru has already seen four presidents in the last five years. The uncertain mandate, along with Fujimori's allegations of voter fraud and a hostile parliament, will make Castillo's position precarious. His radical electoral promises of land reforms and a new constitution are likely to be met with significant resistance from the country's conservative forces.

Read alongside victories for the left in Chile and protests against conservative rulers in other South American countries, the result in Peru might be the harbinger of a second pink tide. The coronavirus pandemic has only added impetus to this process by exposing the deep divide between various classes across the continent.

Canada: Justin Trudeau wins but fails to secure a majority

By Vaishnavi Iyer, 26 September 2021

What happened?

On 20 September, Trudeau's Liberal Party won the snap elections with a minority vote. The party won 158 seats as compared to the 157 seats in the 2019 elections. Despite the conservative party's extremely moderate pitch, the party won 119 seats as compared to the 121 seats in 2019. The bloc won 34 seats, and the NDP won 25 seats. Thus, the new government elected in Canada is again a minority government.

On 21 September, in his victory speech, Trudeau said: "Our government is ready." He also noted:

"You are sending us back to work with a clear mandate to get Canada through this pandemic and to the brighter days ahead, and my friends, that's exactly what we are ready to do." In his short speech, he stated that the moment Canada faces demands real and important change and that the voters have given his government clear direction.

On 21 September, Erin O'Toole, the opposition leader spoke to his supporters on the night of the elections where the Liberals were projected to lead a minority government. He said: "I will never stop serving this great country". He emphasized that Canadian voters did not give Trudeau the majority he desired and that "A few days ago Mr. Trudeau was saying he would hold another election in 18 months if he didn't get what he wants". He called Trudeau's moves a "power grab" and insisted that Canada must heal divides and not risk the nation for selfish gains.

What's the background?

First, the snap elections. The call for the snap elections came on 15 August 2021, just halfway into Trudeau's term. The next round of elections was scheduled for 16 October 2021; however, the Trudeau government insisted that the Parliament was slipping into "dysfunctionalism" along with "obstruction and toxicity" levels, which was of real concern.

Second, the electoral debate. Both parties indulged in aggressive campaigning. Trudeau focused on the management of the pandemic by his government and vaccine passports. He attacked the Opposition for bolstering anti-vaxxers as O'Toole had previously opposed mandatory vaccination. He mentioned his campaign is: "at a crossroads, at a moment where we have to make a really important choice". The Opposition referred to Trudeau's call for snap elections "selfish" amidst the fourth wave of the pandemic. O'Toole said: "Now is the time for Canadians to make a choice. We can choose to settle for second-best - for a party that hardly tries and barely delivers. Or, we can choose to believe in a brighter, better, more united future."

What does this mean?

First, the failure of Trudeau to garner majority. The motive of the snap elections was to generate a majority government. Polls in August reflected a slight rise in the popularity of the Liberal Party. Relying on the conventional wisdom of Canadian voters preferring a majority rule by the incumbent rather than a prolonged minority rule, the snap elections were expected to generate a clear majority. This was not achieved.

Second, the no-change Parliament. Trudeau will have to address the same issues of climate change, opioid abuse, debt and deficit planning in an almost similar parliamentary set-up. The electoral debates revealed the dissatisfaction of the Opposition; this may lead to a slightly more unstable parliament for Trudeau to rejoin. Moreover, the polls revealed that the opposition seats fell by two, indicating that a moderate pitch for conservatives was ineffective.

Greenland: Opposition's electoral victory will affect the rare earth mining

By Harini Madhusudan, 11 April 2021

What happened?

On 6 April, Greenland's main opposition party, a left-leaning Community of the People party, or Inuit Ataqatigiit, secured more than a third of votes in the snap parliamentary elections. In the 31 seats Greenlandic National Assembly, this indigenous, pro-environment, and pro-independence party has secured 12 seats, with a 37 per cent share of the votes. The ruling centre-left Forward or the Siumut Party won 10 seats, with 29 per cent of the votes.

Inuit Ataqatigiit's leader Múte Bourup Egede who campaigned with an anti-uranium stance, stated that "the people have spoken" and revealed that the project would be halted. The head of the Siumut Party, Erik Jensen, admitted that the controversy surrounding the Kvanefjeld mine to be "one of the main reasons" for its defeat.

What is the background?

First, the controversy over the mining project and the collapse of the government. Two issues dominated the current elections: the people's living conditions and the health and

environmental concerns. At the core of the snap elections stood the proposed international mining project by Greenland Minerals - an Australia-based company with Chinese ownership. Greenland Minerals has been seeking a license to operate the Kvanefjeld mine in southern Greenland. Despite the intentions to break away from its economic dependence on Denmark, many concerns have been raised about the potential for radioactive pollution and toxic waste in the farmland surrounding the proposed mine. A strong disagreement over the project within the Parliament led to the collapse of Greenland's government earlier in 2021.

Second, the eco-geopolitics of rare earths and the mining industry. So far, China accounts for more than 90 per cent of the global rare earth production. The Kvanefjeld is near the Ilimaussaq Alkaline Complex in southern Greenland. The project has promised a large-scale, low-cost, long-term supplier of products. The location has year-round direct shipping access and is comfortably situated less than 10 km from tidewater. Uranium estimates show the Kvanefjeld mine could hold the largest deposit of rare-earth metals outside China. The calculation has led to international interest in Greenland's natural resources. While the winning party has announced to halt the project, on 9 April, Greenland Minerals, which has been operating in the region since 2007, revealed that their environmental and social impact assessments would run till 1 June. The company has met the requirements for public consultation and had been accepted by the Greenland government.

Third, the role of rare earths projects in the local economy. Greenland's economy relies on fishing and subsidies from the Danish government for almost half of its budget. Due to the climate impact on the region and the melting ice, mining opportunities increase throughout the lower Arctic region. This is coupled with an increasing sentiment within a part of the Greenland society to move away from their dependence on Denmark. While Kvanefjeld's development strategy is focused on the production of rare earths, almost 80 per cent of the project revenue is expected to be generated with Uranium, Zinc,

and Fluorspar byproducts. Greenland minerals have often asserted that it is focused on the rare earths and not just Uranium. These production strategies of the company have raised strong concerns over the impact on the pristine environment of Greenland. However, it also remains one of the very few sustainable options for the independence of the Greenland economy.

What does it mean?

This election result, marks an end to the Forward Party's almost-continuous reign of the Greenlandic National Parliament since 1979. The increase in popularity of the Inuit Ataqatigiit, and the increase in awareness of the impact of climate change, can be seen in line with the growth of green/ pro-climate/ pro-environment political parties within Europe.

Though the left-leaning party has emerged victorious, an estimated 34 per cent of the voters have not voted for either party, which could mean that the other concerns of the Greenland peoples took a back seat over the mining issue.

The US and Russia: Biden-Putin video conference

By Padmashree Anandhan, 12 December 2021

What happened?

On 7 December, US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin met in a video conference in a diplomatic effort to reduce the building tensions in the eastern border of Ukraine.

The US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said: "President Biden was direct and straightforward with President Putin, as he always is. He reiterated America's support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. He told President Putin directly that if Russia further invades Ukraine, the United States and our European allies would respond with strong economic measures. He also told President Putin there's another option: de-escalation and diplomacy."

The Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said: "I believe that Ukraine's victory is that the United States has always supported Ukraine, our sovereignty, our independence, and we enjoyed bipartisan support. But, most importantly, we now see that there is a personal, real reaction and role of President Biden in resolving this conflict, the war in the east of our country."

Russian President Putin refused to make a clear statement on the incursion of troops into Ukraine. However, he firmly said that Russia would not sit back while NATO grew stronger.

What is the background?

First, the search for a Russia strategy by the US. The post-2014 US towards Russia began to shift when Trump wanted to strike a balance between sanctions and rapprochement with Putin and Russia. The Biden administration now continues this strategy. On the one hand, Biden held a virtual conference with Putin. On the other hand, Biden is also conducting a democracy summit and calling other democratic nations to defend democracy, with Russia and China in mind.

Second, the China factor. With the rise of China and the growing closeness between Moscow and Beijing, the US is redrafting its foreign policy towards Russia and Putin. The Biden-Putin meeting for the US is a strategy to smoothen relations with Russia. To compete with China and for any UN-based approach, having Russia by its side is an advantage for the US.

Third, Ukraine as a trigger. Ukraine is only a spec in America's agenda, as the US aims to have positive relations and redraft its foreign policy towards Russia. For Ukraine, the meeting is not a breakthrough.

What does this mean?

The virtual meet is timely as Russia assembles tens of thousands of its troops in the Ukrainian borders. For the US, the primary aim is to prevent Russia from joining hands with China, especially when the US might need Russia's support in the UN.

From the US to China: Releasing the strategic oil reserves

By Ashwin Immanuel Dhanabalan, 28 November 2021

What happened?

On 23 November, the US President announced the release of 50 million barrels of oil from the "Strategic Petroleum Reserve" to counter the rising oil prices. India announced to release 5 million barrels of crude oil from its reserves with China, Japan, South Korea and the UK. The US would release 32 million barrels as an exchange over the months, which would eventually return to the reserves. While only 18 million barrels will be sold, this sale was approved by Congress in 2018 under the Bipartisan Budget Act.

On 24 November, China stated that it would release strategic crude oil depending on its actual needs. This would be the second time in two months that China has released its strategic reserves. The UK Government had authorised the release of 1.5 million barrels of strategic reserves to ease pressure on oil prices and mentioned that they would work closely with the US to support the global economy during the pandemic. The OPEC+ coalition, led by Saudi Arabia and Russia, are considering pausing their effort of increased production of "400,000 barrels a day until they hit pre-pandemic levels of production".

What is the background?

First, the strategic oil reserves, and their release in the recent decades. The idea of strategic oil reserves was introduced after 1973 when the OPEC countries had imposed an embargo concerning the US's support of Israel. The US strategically released oil "For Operational sale" for the first time in 1991 during Operation Desert Storm. The second time was in 2005 during Hurricane Katrina and the last time was in 2011 due to the civil war in Libya.

Second, the 2011 and the 2021 releases. The difference between the two periods is how the US releases oil without an immediate emergency. In 2011 there was an urgent need for

countries to step in as Libya was not supplying oil to Europe, its predominant importer of crude oil. So, the US and other countries compensated by releasing their strategic oil reserves to meet the demands. In 2011, the Obama administration's oil reserve release was managed by the International Energy Agency (IEA). While now, it is spearheaded by Biden, who has been coordinating with other countries to reduce the global prices of oil.

Third, the OPEC response. Biden had approached the OPEC countries to rapidly increase their production to bridge the gap in supply and demand. But, the OPEC countries declined, as they were already on a plan to increase production by 400,000 barrels per day till they reached pre-pandemic levels of production. Another reason was the pandemic and the disruptions faced by the OPEC countries in 2020, which led to them downsizing their oil production as the demand fell to an all-time low.

Besides, the 23 nation OPEC+ coalition has planned to meet on 1 and 2 December to decide if they would have to pause their increase in production in January 2022 to tackle the sudden release of strategic oil reserves.

What does it mean?

First, volatile oil prices, as there has been a rapid rise and fall in the price of oil before and after the announcement. Second, the importance of strategic oil reserves during emergencies will be rethought as a medium to counter oil politics globally. Third, the world will reconsider its global shift to cleaner renewable energy sources with the surging demand and not enough time to meet those requirements. Fourth, the upcoming OPEC meeting would be a game-changer as it would either make or break the oil prices.

The US: After getting passed by the Senate, Biden's infrastructure bill is in trouble as the House Democrats differ

By D Suba Chandran, 3 October 2021

What happened?

On 1 October 2021, after meeting the Congress legislators over the voting of his ambitious and historic bill on infrastructure, Biden said: "It doesn't matter whether it's in six minutes, six days or six weeks, we're going to get it done." Biden has also asked the House to delay the voting until there is an agreement within. The bill aims to invest massively in the infrastructure – in terms of building and repairing roads, bridges and related infrastructural projects.

On 30 September, in a statement released by the White House, Jen Psaki, the Press Secretary, said: "While Democrats do have some differences, we share common goals of creating good union jobs, building a clean energy future, cutting taxes for working families and small businesses, helping to give those families breathing room on basic expenses—and doing it without adding to the deficit, by making those at the top pay their fair share." He also said: "A great deal of progress has been made this week, and we are closer to an agreement than ever. But we are not there yet, and so, we will need some additional time to finish the work...."

On 28 September, Rashida Tlaib, one of the Democrats who questions the bill tweeted: "Let me be clear: bringing the so-called bipartisan infrastructure plan to a vote without the #BuildBackBetter Act at the same time is a betrayal... We will hold the line and vote it down."

What is the background?

First, the ambitious infrastructure bill announced by Biden. In his words, it is "a historic investment in the nation's roads and highways, bridges and transit; in our drinking water systems; in broadband, clean energy, environmental clean-up; and making infrastructure more resilient and the climate crisis much more in our minds as to how do we deal with it." On 9 August, the Senate passed the

USD 1.2 trillion package, with a 69-30 majority; this happened after a bipartisan debate that included 19 Republicans voting in favour of the bill. Following the vote by the Senate, the House was to vote this week; however, this could not happen due to differences within.

Second, the divide within the Democrats. While Biden could get the infrastructure bill passed in the Senate, he is facing a challenge in the House, primarily from his party – the Democrats. The party stands divided between the moderate and progressive sections. The progressives, questioning the bill (and Biden) within the Democrats, want a broader social safety net package. They would like to pass the Build Back Better Act, along with the infrastructure bill. According to a White House brief, "the Build Back Better Agenda is an ambitious plan to create jobs, cut taxes, and lower costs for working families – all paid for by making the tax code fairer and making the wealthiest and large corporations pay their fair share." While the infrastructure bill itself is ambitious, the other one is even more, with a budget of over USD 3.5 trillion. A section within the Democrats, including Biden, have decoupled the two and prioritized the infrastructure bill; this is the primary difference between the two groups. The larger difference between the two sections is over whether the focus should be primarily on building infrastructure or on social welfare. While the conservatives within the Democrats look at the former, the other section opposing the infrastructure bill see the larger bill and investment in infrastructure as a part of a strategy. While Biden would agree to both, he will have to calibrate the expenditure that comes with, and the numbers that he has in the Senate.

Third, Biden's recent troubles. The President has been engaged in firefighting since August, diverting his attention. Strong criticism and condemnations over the US exit from Afghanistan, treatment of migrants along the US-Mexico border (especially the Haitians), and the COVID numbers and recovery have placed Biden on a backfoot.

What does this mean?

The good thing over the recent differences within the Democrats on the infrastructure bill is Biden's statement and efforts to build consensus within before passing the same. The challenge for him is to reach there. The divide within the Democrats should be the single largest challenge for Biden – both within and outside. Despite the challenge, Biden is likely to reach a consensus.

Quad: Expanding the areas of cooperation into regional infrastructure, emerging technologies and cyber

By D Suba Chandran, 26 September 2021

What happened?

On 24 September, welcoming the other three leaders of Quad, the US President Biden said: "This group meeting of democratic partners who share a world view and have a common vision for the future, coming together to take on key challenges of our age, from COVID to climate to emerging technologies... When we met six months ago, we made concrete commitments to advance our shared and positive agenda for a free and open Indo-Pacific. Today, I'm proud to say that we're making excellent progress... In sum, we are four major democracies with a long history of cooperation. We know how to get things done, and we are up to the challenge." The other three Prime Ministers echoed the same sentiment in their statements.

On 24 September, the Quad leaders also released a joint statement. The joint statement stressed "shared security and prosperity" and "a free and open Indo-Pacific." The statement recommitted "to promoting the free, open, rules-based order, rooted in international law and undaunted by coercion, to bolster security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and beyond." It also emphasized "the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and territorial integrity of states."

The joint statement also stressed the need for the Quad to work with partners in Southeast Asia and Europe. It said: "We commit to work together and with a range of partners. We

reaffirm our strong support for ASEAN's unity and centrality and for ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, and we underscore our dedication towards working with ASEAN and its member states—the heart of the Indo-Pacific region—in practical and inclusive ways. We also welcome the September 2021 EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific."

The joint statement stressed cooperation in five specific fields – COVID vaccines, climate change and clean energy, emerging technologies, regional infrastructure, and cyberspace. Besides the above five areas, the joint statement also had a special focus on the Indo-Pacific and the role planned for the Quad. Recognizing that the shared futures of the four countries "will be written in the Indo-Pacific," the joint statement has promised redoubling the efforts "to ensure that the Quad is a force for regional peace, stability, security, and prosperity."

What is the background?

First, the Quad reemphasis and broadbasing. Ever since Biden took over as the President, there has been a push to make the Quad effective. Though the idea of Quad emerged in 2004, there was a slow push during the first phase. In recent years, there has been a new push to realize the potential of the four countries in the Quad. With Biden at the helm, there has been an effort to find specific areas that would bring the four countries closer; cooperation in emerging technologies, cyberspace and COVID vaccines – is an attempt to broaden the Quad focus.

Second, Quad as a pillar of the Indo-Pacific push. Obama referred to a US Pivot and later the Indo-Pacific; however, none transformed into an action plan with specific goals and strategies. Under Biden, there is an effort to see the Quad as not an end (in terms of cooperation between the four countries), but a means to achieve a larger objective in the Indo-Pacific.

Third, building a larger partnership along with the Quad. During the last few months, the US has attempted to revisit its Southeast Asia linkages. Vice President Kamala Harris visited Southeast Asia. The recent pact between

Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS) aims to widen the US partnership in the Indo-Pacific. The 24 September Quad statement on North Korea, ASEAN and Europe should be viewed in this backdrop.

Fourth, the China factor. Though the Quad has been careful in not bringing Beijing as a part of its focus or statements, China's absence in the statements makes it more present. All four countries have bilateral issues with China at different levels.

What does it mean?

First, the operationalization of Quad. The recent statement provides a larger space for the Quad to cooperate; from issues of COVID vaccines to emerging technologies, cyber, and regional infrastructure, there is a new critical push. Building regional infrastructure is an essential prerequisite to make the region self-sufficient; as collateral, a regional infrastructure may also provide an alternative to the countries in the region. Currently, China has been the most significant player in the region in supporting the regional infrastructure through its BRI.

Second, Biden taking the Quad mantle. The other three countries, though work closely at a bilateral level, may not lead, given their limited political, economic, and technological capabilities.

Third, China factor in bringing the four countries on a common platform. With the bilateral relations with Beijing strained during recent years, India and Australia are keen to find multilateral frameworks to meet the China challenge. Did China force the Quad countries to come together is a different question; Beijing would see the four countries exploring new avenues to bring them together.

AUKUS: The US-led new security alliance brings UK and Australia onboard but upsets France

By Lokendra Sharma, 19 September 2021

What happened?

On 15 September, the US President Joe Biden, the UK PM Boris Johnson and Australian PM Scott Morrison, in a joint virtual press conference, launched a new security partnership in the Indo-Pacific. AUKUS is an acronym for Australia, the UK and the US. According to the joint statement, the AUKUS "will focus on cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and additional undersea capabilities". However, the main highlight is the pledge by the US and UK to "support Australia in acquiring nuclear-powered submarines for the Royal Australian Navy".

The US President Biden said in a statement: "Today, we're taking another historic step to deepen and formalize cooperation among all three of our nations because we all recognize the imperative of ensuring peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific over the long term". Australia PM Morrison called it a "next-generation partnership" while the UK PM Johnson called it "a new chapter in our friendship". The Chinese Foreign Ministry called the move "extremely irresponsible" and said that the alliance "seriously undermines regional peace and stability and intensifies the arms race and undermined international non-proliferation efforts".

On 16 September, New Zealand's PM reaffirmed her country's decades-old policy of being a nuclear-free zone. She said: "New Zealand's position in relation to the prohibition of nuclear-powered vessels in our waters remains unchanged".

On 17 September, France recalled its ambassadors to the US and Australia over the cancellation of the multi-billion-dollar deal for conventional submarines by Australia in lieu of the new deal for nuclear-powered submarines. The French Foreign Minister called it "unacceptable behaviour between allies and partners".

What is the background?

First, the US efforts to build multiple alliances in the Indo-Pacific. Considering China as the primary security threat and in continuation with the Obama-era pivot, the US has in recent years been shifting its attention to the Indo-Pacific from the Trans-Atlantic and Middle East regions. This has entailed establishing multiple arrangements like Quad (and now the AUKUS), strengthening engagement with regional groupings like ASEAN and repurposing long-standing alliances like Five Eyes.

Second, the centrality of Australia and the deteriorating China-Australia relationship. While Australia was already a part of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance and the Quad, membership in the AUKUS has cemented the centrality of Australia in the Indo-Pacific strategy of the US. It has also pushed the already deteriorating relationship between China and Australia over maritime and trade issues to a point-of-no-return.

Third, the UK's role in the Indo-Pacific. While Australia and the US are part of the Indo-Pacific, the UK is not (except some colonial territories). The UK's assertiveness in the region has increased in recent months, especially after Brexit, to arrest its declining global influence. In July 2021, a British naval strike group led by the country's largest warship HMS Queen Elizabeth sailed through the hotly contested South China Sea and held naval drills with Japan. The UK has also announced its intention to station two patrol ships permanently in the Indo-Pacific with logistical support from Japan, Australia and Singapore. France has also increased the frequency of naval deployment in the Indo-Pacific, including the South China Sea.

What does it mean?

First, the significance of nuclear-powered submarines. While the AUKUS alliance partners have clarified that the submarines would not be armed by nuclear weapons but would only be powered by nuclear energy, it would still give Australia the capability to project power in the maritime region. These submarines are capable of staying underwater for long durations and also are comparatively more silent and harder to

detect. This will be disadvantageous for China, which, despite decades of investment in its navy, still lags in underwater warfare capabilities.

Second, the US move to build a security alliance with the UK and US while sidelining Quad for this purpose implies a realization in the US that India and Japan would be reluctant to give the Quad an explicit security and military character. It appears that the US is moving forward on a two-pronged strategy to contain China in the Indo-Pacific region: a security alliance on the one hand and a larger political alliance on the other. This will also pave the way for further expansion of Quad to include other countries threatened by China. How China reacts to this two-pronged strategy beyond the usual rhetoric has to be closely watched.

Third, while the cancellation of the deal by Australia after years of negotiations has instilled a sense of betrayal in France, it would take considerable diplomatic effort to heal the strained ties between the AUKUS members and France. The divide, however, would be a temporary one.

US: 20 years after 9/11

By D Suba Chandran, 12 September 2021

What happened?

On 11 September 2021, the US remembered the terrorist attacks that took place twenty years ago on the same day. President Biden and two former Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama took part in the ceremony at ground zero in New York, where more than 2700 people lost their lives when those two planes plunged into the twin towers. As had been the case since 2001, the family members of those who had lost their lives in those attacks, came to the venue, read the names and remembered them. President Obama said: “9/11 reminded us how so many Americans give of themselves in extraordinary ways - not just in moments of great crisis, but every single day...Let’s never forget that, and let’s never take them for granted.”

Similar events were held in Shanksville in Pennsylvania, where the United Airlines flight 93 crashed, after the plans of the hijackers’ failed. Former President George Bush took part in the remembrance meeting; President Biden also was there, after being at ground zero in New York. George Bush in his remarks, warned of the “violence that gathers from within” and said: “There is little cultural overlap between violent extremists abroad and violent extremists at home...But in their disdain for pluralism, in their disregard for human life, in their determination to defile national symbols - they are children of the same foul spirit, and it is our continuing duty to confront them.”

Elsewhere in the US, at the Pentagon ceremony, where 184 were killed on the same day in 2001, Gen Mark Milley said: “The people we lost that day are not just names and numbers...We remember them today for not only who they were, but who they could have become.”

On 10 September, President Biden, in a video message, remarked: “To me, that’s the central lesson of Sept. 11th, is that at our most vulnerable - the push and pull of all that makes us human, and the battle for the soul of America - unity is our greatest strength...We find light in the darkness. We find purpose to repair, renew and rebuild. And as my friend told me that September, 20 years ago: We must not be afraid.” He tweeted: “20 years after September 11, 2001, we commemorate the 2,977 lives we lost and honour those who risked and gave their lives. As we saw in the days that followed, unity is our greatest strength. It’s what makes us who we are - and we can’t forget that.”

What is the background?

First, remembering 9/11. Ever since 2001, the Americans have come together on 11 September on the three main locations – Pentagon, Manhattan and Shanksville to remember the lives lost to the terrorist attack perpetrated by al Qaeda. As President Biden remarked in his video message, they would commemorate those whose lives were lost. Biden said: “To the families of the 2,977 people, from more than 90 nations...America and the world commemorate you and your loved ones, the pieces of your

soul... We honor all those who are risked and gave their lives in the minutes, hours, months and years afterwards.”

Second, the global position of the US as a superpower, since 2001. When al Qaeda terrorists attacked the US in 2001, the US was leading a unipolar world. Russia was weak, and China was yet to emerge. Europe was an American ally. Outside the 9/11 attack, that should have been one of the significant moments for the US as a sole superpower in the post-World War II period. In the next twenty years, that moment would slowly. In 2021, as the US commemorate twenty years of 9/11, its global position as a superpower is questioned by the rise of China, resurgent Russia and a troubled relationship with its trans-Atlantic partner – Europe. Afghanistan and Iran, where the US invested substantially in the last two decades are seen as failures.

Third, the US legacy of the War on Terrorism. After 9/11, the US declared a war on terrorism. As Bush said, one is with the US, or against it. From the United Nations to Russia, many went along with the US. Al Qaeda was the primary target then; later, Iraq became the second major target. Today, twenty years later, after the killing of Saddam Hussain and Osama bin Laden, has the US emerged successful? Al Qaeda network has been neutralised; some would argue, it has got dispersed more in the last two decades and have found its place in Africa and Southeast Asia. The last two decades also witnessed the rise of ISIS, another global terror network, deadlier than al Qaeda. While the US mainland has been saved from any further terrorist attacks, there were a series of high profile terror attacks in Europe. Madrid train bombings in 2004, London bombings in 2007, Paris attacks in 2015 and Brussels attacks in 2016 were a few high profile attacks in Europe.

Fourth, the divide within the US, during the last two decades. Former President Bush’s remarks on 11 September 2021, regarding the violence that is gathering “from within” and the “cultural overlap between violent extremists abroad and violent extremists at home” should underline the decline within. The Trump years, the attack on

US Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Texas legislation banning abortion are a few examples of the challenges that the US poses across the spectrum from within covering extremism, racism and gender.

What does it mean?

The challenge for Biden is substantial, as he leads the US into the third decade after 9/11. There are serious fault lines within, besides the above social ones. Post-pandemic economic recovery, industrial resurgence, and infrastructural investments are a few areas, where the US would have to look inwards if it has to play a larger global role. An internally divided and economically weak US would pull Washington down to act as a global player. Externally, the rise of China would pose a challenge; however, it is not insurmountable. The challenge would be to build a coalition with its trans-Atlantic partners and build new ones across the Indo-Pacific.

Biden could either remake the US and ensure that it plays its global role, or break it further, and lead to its further decline. The 2020s should be the most crucial decade for the US, since the end of the Second World War.

The Nord Stream-2: Agreements, disagreements and controversies

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 25 July 2021

What happened?

On 15 July, US President Joe Biden said: "My view on Nord Stream 2 has been known for some time. Good friends can disagree... Russia must not be allowed to use energy as a weapon to coerce or threaten its neighbors."

On 21 July, the US-Germany joint statement released by Biden and German Chancellor Angela Merkel saw Germany promising to implement the Minsk agreements via the Normandy format while condemning Russian aggression. It reiterated how Germany would retaliate – both from the European and national level – if Russia weaponized' energy to achieve

its political agendas. It also promised a 10-year extension of the Moscow-Kyiv gas transit agreement. Energy transitions of Ukraine and other Central and Eastern European countries will also be supported. The establishment of the Green Fund backing Ukraine's energy sector through investments was also announced.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov responded: "Russia has always been and remains a responsible guarantor of energy security on the European continent." The office of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy opposed the deal, saying: "The decision on Nord Stream 2 cannot be taken behind the backs of all those whom the project poses a real threat to."

What is the background?

First, the Nord Stream-2 pipeline. It is a part of the larger Nord Stream offshore natural gas pipeline system running under the Baltic Sea from Russia to Germany. It includes two active pipelines forming the original Nord Stream, and two further pipelines nearing completion termed Nord Stream-2. At a length of 1230 kilometres, Nord Stream-2 runs parallel to the existing Nord Stream pipeline. Its independence from the existing Nord Stream pipelines ensures greater supply security.

Second, the issues and controversy. The pipeline has been the subject of heated debate for years as it affects energy security, the environment, and the economy. The primary opponents – Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic states – consider the project a financial and security threat. They are worried about whether Germany's economic interests outweigh its ability to take a firm stance against Russian aggression. Their economies losing on gas transit fees also concern them. From the security perspective, reduced Russian dependence on gas transit leaves these countries vulnerable to Moscow's malicious activities. Kyiv is particularly worried about this, given the Crimean annexation. Both Ukraine and Poland released a joint statement to express their discontent in which they said that the pipeline poses a threat to them, NATO and the EU. On 22 July, the EU said that the pipeline was "not of common EU interest". Merkel, however, considers the deal a "good one" and

has given Russia the benefit of the doubt. Environmentalists criticize the deal claiming it affects the marine ecosystems and jeopardizes the EU's climate action goals.

Third, the reversal of the US position. Initially, the US had firmly opposed the project. The US sanctions, which stopped the project at 98 per cent, were concerned about the increasing European reliance on Russian energy. Differences persisted even within the US; several lawmakers opposed the agreement, saying it only empowered Russia and betrayed Ukraine. A senior US official justified Biden's move by saying that the US compromised with an important ally against its better judgement while pointing out the ineffectiveness of the sanctions.

Fourth, the Russian response. The Kremlin has consistently denied allegations of weaponizing energy and maintained that Nord Stream-2 is wholly a commercial project. However, Moscow objected to the US-German language, saying it villainized them. Putin is said to have agreed to discussing the extension of the gas transit deal with Ukraine.

What does it mean?

Through this deal, Ukraine has been victimized as real political outweighed principles. The change in the US and EU strategy towards Russia could be attributed to their goal of weakening the Sino-Russian relations as other efforts have proven ineffective.

The US and Russia: The Geneva Summit of Biden and Putin, and an integrated bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 20 June 2021

What happened?

On 16 June, Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin met in Geneva, Switzerland. In the post-summit press conference, Putin said: "The meeting was actually very efficient... It was aimed at achieving results and one of them was pushing back the frontiers of trust." Biden's remarks followed. He said: "The bottom line is I told

President Putin that we need to have some basic rules of the road that we can all abide by."

On the same day, the US-Russia Presidential Joint Statement on Strategic Stability was issued. It said: "The recent extension of the New START Treaty exemplifies our commitment to nuclear arms control. Today, we reaffirm the principle that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought." It also said: "Consistent with these goals, the United States and Russia will embark together on an integrated bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue in the near future that will be deliberate and robust. Through this Dialogue, we seek to lay the groundwork for future arms control and risk reduction measures."

What is the background?

First, the 'return of diplomacy'. The summit was held during one of the lowest points of US-Russia relations. Both sides consciously downplayed expectations, as there were severe differences on crucial issues between the two countries. The Crimean annexation, Ukraine crisis, cyber-attacks and internal human rights violations dominated the headlines before the summit. As a result, the summit had a limited focus on stopping the downward spiral and preferably improving the bilateral relations. It witnessed modest progress with the two leaders stating clear areas of disagreement: explaining their red lines, rules of engagement and areas of weakness.

Second, the issues discussed. Concrete agreements include a new round of nuclear talks and the return of ambassadors to their posts. A joint statement on nuclear proliferation and a renewed bilateral strategic stability dialogue is definitely a positive takeaway. There was more than a hint of détente, despite persisting tensions regarding cyber warfare and human rights. Biden asserted cyber-attacks on US' critical infrastructure structures were off-limits. Biden also warned Putin against militarily resolving the Ukraine and Belarus disputes while cautioning that killing Navalny would lead to devastating consequences. Putin responded that the stance on Navalny would remain unchanged and backed Belarusian President Lukashenko.

Third, a constructive approach. The tone of the dialogue, the leaders said, remained unthreatening yet constructive. Biden's approach was evidently different from his predecessor, Donald Trump. The Biden-Putin dynamic combined mutual respect and mutual scepticism rather than friendliness, which characterized the Trump-Putin meeting. Biden and Putin, in essence, tried to dwell more on the positives than the negatives. However, Putin's press statements saw him exercising whataboutisms on the BLM movement and the Capitol insurrection when questioned on the Russian human rights violations. Biden's visible frustration on questions regarding the basis of his trust on Putin

What does it mean?

For Biden, Russia is a distraction that needs to be addressed, but China is a larger challenge. He is forging an alliance against China, a trend seen throughout his European trip. Biden's emphasis on stable relations provides a renewed opportunity for the US-Russia bilateralism.

Second, Biden's statement – 'proof of the pudding is in the eating' implies that it would take months before considering the summit a success. The ambassadors' return is a welcome outcome and will help further negotiations on the table.

G7 Summit: Biden brings the US back to Europe

By Dhanushaa P, 20 June 2021

What happened?

On 13 June, during his visit to Europe to take part in the G7 and NATO summits, the US President declared, "America is back at the table."

On 16 June, in Geneva, Biden remarked: "They're glad America is back, and they acted that way. And then, when we went to NATO, I think it was the same thing. We had really good meetings there and real response, as well as the EU. I didn't get one single person — not one of the world leaders said to us anything other than thanking me for arranging a meeting with Putin.

And I thought, quite frankly, I was in a much better position to represent the West, after the previous three meetings with Putin, that — knowing that the rest of the West was behind us."

What is the background?

First, Biden's approach towards Europe vis-à-vis Trump's. Biden has promised to bring an end to the pandemic and address climate change, which Trump did not. During his visits, Biden emphasized joint cooperation in security and defence, against Trump's idea of making America great again by withdrawing. Through his engagements with Europe in various areas of trade and technology, he is proving that Europe is back at the stage of global diplomacy. He has also managed to address the three important issues: China, COVID and climate change.

Second, Biden's coalition on China. The US, along with the G7 countries is planning to counter China's BRI project with the idea of 'build back better world' and global infrastructure partnership. During his visit to Europe, Biden got the consensus of G7 also on addressing China's military assertiveness.

Third, improving the lines of communication between Russia and US. A constructive consultation on cybersecurity and the return of the ambassadors to their diplomatic posts were a positive outcome. Both Biden and Putin have agreed to replace the START treaty.

What does it mean?

Through the G7 and NATO summits, Biden has built a consensus of the West on Russia and China. With Russia, his meeting with Putin should be seen as a breakthrough to prevent the downward spiralling of the US-Russia bilateral relations. While Biden's Europe tour has consolidated the trans-Atlantic partnership, it has also addressed the recent negativity in the bilateral relations with Russia.

The US: President Biden bans American investments in Chinese companies

By Keerthana Rajesh Nambiar, 6 June 2021

What happened?

On 3 June, US President Joe Biden signed an executive order sanctioning investments in Chinese companies with alleged ties to defence and surveillance technology firms. In this order, the US government expressed concerns over Chinese technology companies both inside and outside China facilitating "repression or serious human rights abuses" and "unusual and extraordinary threats" - of religious and ethnic minorities. Biden prohibited US investors from investing in 59 Chinese companies, originally 31 in former President Donald Trump's list.

On 4 June, at a press briefing, China strictly opposed Washington's move and declared the US had 'unscrupulously suppressed' and restricted Chinese companies. The ban will take effect from 2 August 2021, giving investors one year to withdraw.

What is the background?

First, the case of sanctions against Chinese entities. The trade restrictions were initiated under the Trump administration, wherein the US investors were banned from buying or selling publicly traded securities from those companies. Trump's sanction prohibited the leading smartphone maker, Huawei, and Hikvision, a major manufacturer and supplier of facial-recognition technology, both of which have been retained in the new order. TikTok was initially issued with a set of restrictions after both Democrats and Republicans in Congress claimed that the app posed a national security threat and US federal employees should elude from using it on government-owned devices.

Biden's new executive order includes major Chinese firms that were on the previous executive order list like Huawei, Hangzhou Hikvision Digital Technology, and Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corp (SMIC). SMIC has enhanced China's domestic chip sector. TikTok was eluded from the new list; the Biden administration has not

taken any steps to neither accept nor deny that the Chinese government could be hoarding sensitive data of Americans. Xiaomi was also excluded from the list after successfully lobbying against its inclusion on the Trump-era list and dismissing claims that they were tied to the Chinese military as groundless.

Second, Biden following Trump's China footsteps. Biden's policies have always been reversing Trump's from the day he took over the office. From successfully withdrawing the army in Afghanistan to resuming warm relations with Europe, rejoining the Paris climate agreement, returning to the Iran nuclear deal, eliminating tariffs on European goods, and so on. But Biden seems to be following in the footsteps of Trump when it comes to China. It is the broadest executive order targeting Chinese tech entities after the issue of re-investigating the origins of Covid-19.

Third, the Chinese resistance. China is the US' largest trading partner, and it is proven that the economies of China and the US are inseparable. Wang Wenbin, the spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, remarks that this order compromises the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese companies and the interests of global investors, including the US. The US will quickly be losing its resources amid increasingly sour relations between the world's two most powerful countries.

What does it mean?

First, the new order is one of the most aggressive moves against China that the Biden administration has adopted. It advances many of the tactics used by the Trump administration in its efforts to stay competitive with China.

Second, this order takes the world a step closer to strategic decoupling with significant implications in the global financial sector.

Third, political clashes have already soured tensions between the two countries. American financial firms are going to face difficulties while they sort out the ties to these Chinese firms in the coming future.

The US: Biden extends support towards the global COVAX Program

By Vibha Venugopal, 6 June 2021

What happened?

On 3 June, US President Joe Biden issued a statement on the Global Vaccine Distribution, published by the White House. He said: "My administration supports attempts to temporarily waive intellectual property rights for COVID-19 vaccines because, over time, other firms will be needed to produce life-saving doses of proven vaccines that are distributed fairly."

He further provided details about the allocation of the first 25 million doses of the vaccines that look at global coverage and the needs of the most vulnerable countries. At least 75 per cent of these doses—nearly 19 million—will be distributed through COVAX, with about 6 million doses going to Latin America and the Caribbean, 7 million to South and Southeast Asia, and 5 million to Africa. The remaining doses, totalling little over 6 million, will be distributed directly to countries suffering surges, those in crisis, as well as other allies and neighbours such as Canada, Mexico, India, and the Republic of Korea.

What is the background?

First, The status of COVID across the globe. Developed countries like the US, Europe, and China in the early 2020s were the first to be struck by the severity of the pandemic. The surge in cases resulted from their global interconnectedness, which involved large-scale travel and tourism. But with their timely public health interventions, they were able to prove effective and have relatively since then been able to prevent to an extent the overwhelming surge of COVID – 19 cases and relatively stabilize the situation. The lack of equipment required to care for COVID-19 patients, such as personal protective equipment, oxygen supply, pulse oximeters, ventilators, ICU beds, has harmed many healthcare and public health systems. In developing countries, the situation has worsened.

Second, the status of vaccination. It's no easy effort to vaccinate the entire world against COVID-19 and keep it immunized. An estimated 70 per cent of any given population must have been vaccinated or should generate antibodies to the virus to establish adequate immunity. The world has undoubtedly agreed to end the pandemic by vaccinating everyone. Still, the pros and cons can be seen in terms of the operationalization of the plan or the extent to support it. Only 14 per cent of the Latin American population, 4.8 per cent population in Asia, and just 1.2 per cent in Africa have been vaccinated. These underfunded vaccine efforts will surely put countries to reimagine their vaccination efforts.

Third, the WHO statement on the Global Vaccine Initiative. The idea of the WHO stands on a new commitment on Vaccine Equity and Defeating the Pandemic. On 2 June, Director-General of WHO in his speech at the G7 Global Vaccine Confidence Summit, said: "To put an end to the pandemic, we need to eliminate and vaccine inequities want everyone to get immunized everywhere. This would require increased funding for equitable global vaccine distribution and sharing technology and know-how."

Fourth, the charge of hoarding. Since the early days of the pandemic, when the first batch of vaccinations was approved for emergency use across, many countries like the UK, EU, and Canada started hoarding. They started negotiating with manufacturers before the clinical trials were finished, in some cases even before the trials were completed. It can be said that these countries were forced to release these vaccines over criticism for not assisting the massive rise in cases in developing countries.

What does it mean?

Biden's administration has surely put across something on the table by initiating this program but is it too late, or too little for them to do so? However, it falls well short of meeting the entire world's immunization requirements. Rather than risking the world's health at the mercy of the coronavirus's mutant whims, more countries must step forward to ensure equal access.

US: Another investigation into COVID origin

By Sukanya Bali, 30 May 2021

What happened?

On 26 May, the US President ordered intelligence agencies to investigate the origin of COVID-19. President Biden said: "I have now asked the intelligence community to redouble their efforts to collect and analyze information that could bring us closer to a definitive conclusion and report back to me in 90 days." On the same day, the New York Times reported a statement by the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson when asked about the WHO's further investigation in the country. He said: "the authoritative study report with many significant conclusions had already been issued."

On 23 May, Wall Street Journal reported: "Three researchers from Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) became sick enough in November 2019 and they sought hospital care." White House Press Secretary said: "We don't have enough information to draw a conclusion about the origins." She also said: "There is a need to look into a range of options. We need data, we need an independent investigation, and that's exactly what we've been calling for."

What is the background?

First, the US insistence to trace the origin of the virus. The Trump administration blamed China for the pandemic. Trump also referred to COVID-19 as the "China virus" or the "Wuhan virus." The administration also floated the idea without providing evidence that the virus may have accidentally escaped a lab in China. Before leaving office, Mike Pompeo also released a fact sheet over the origin of the virus. The document stated: "The US government had reason to believe that several researchers inside the WIV became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both Covid-19 and common seasonal illnesses." After the WHO investigation failed to draw definitive insights, earlier this month, health officials in the Biden

administration renewed their request for a stringent inquiry. On 13 May, 18 scientists revealed in the 'Science' journal that they didn't have enough evidence to indicate a "natural or accidental laboratory leak" origin. The health experts began suggesting that "accidental release from a lab and zoonotic spillover both remain viable theories."

Second, international responses outside the US on the origin question. Amid the pandemic, Australia, the UK, and Japan also have demanded a more transparent and international investigation. These countries expressed concern over the WHO's report and highlighted that the investigation team was not given timely access to relevant data.

Third, the failure of WHO's China mission to effectively address the origin question. On 30 March, WHO released a joint report with China, which dismissed the lab leak theory, calling it an "extremely unlikely" situation. Later authorities also refused to share raw data on early covid cases to perform analysis. The report was highly criticized for not being transparent. WHO Director-General also said: "I do not believe that this assessment was extensive enough" and demanded further investigation for the lab-leak theory.

Fourth, China's response so far. Since the beginning, Beijing has been dismissive about the lab leak hypothesis and has pushed a theory that the virus was manufactured in an American lab or was brought into Wuhan through cold chain products. China had halted the visit of experts to Wuhan and has demanded investigation outside China.

Fifth, the research on coronavirus at Wuhan lab. The WIV, a biosafety level 4 lab, had been doing research on bat coronavirus for several years. Wall Street Journal reported, Dr Shi Zhengli, WIV's leading bat coronavirus expert, "has publicly described doing experiments, including in 2018 and 2019, to see if various bat coronaviruses could use a certain spike protein on their surfaces to bind to an enzyme in human cells known as ACE2. That is how both the SARS virus and SARS-CoV-2 infect humans."

What does it mean?

Biden's robust intervention in analyzing the COVID-19 origin, due to an increase in pressure from the civil and political society, is likely to receive support across the political spectrum. China still remains non-transparent over the question of the virus origin, to the dismay of the international community amid rising demand over the issue of origin.

The US: Ransomware attack on Colonial Pipeline sparks fuel shortages in the east coast

By Lokendra Sharma, 16 May 2021

What happened?

On 12 May, Colonial Pipeline restarted operations after being shut for five days due to a ransomware attack on 7 May. Colonial said in a statement: "Following this restart, it will take several days for the product delivery supply chain to return to normal." Bloomberg and the New York Times reported that the company paid USD 5 million (about 75 Bitcoin) as ransom to DarkSide, the hacking group responsible for the attack.

On 10 May, when asked about the attack in a press meet, President Biden said: "So far there is no evidence-based on, from our intelligence people, that Russia is involved, though there is evidence that the actors, ransomware, is in Russia. They have some responsibility to deal with this." On the same day, the FBI released a statement on Twitter holding the group DarkSide responsible for the attack.

On 10 May, CNBC reported the following statement issued by DarkSide on the attack: "We are apolitical, we do not participate in geopolitics, do not need to tie us with a defined government and look for our motives. Our goal is to make money, and not creating problems for society. From today we introduce moderation and check each company that our partners want to encrypt to avoid social consequences in the future."

What is the background?

First, the increasing intensity and frequency of ransomware attacks on the US. The victims include the US government agencies, private companies, police departments and even schools and colleges. According to the New York Times, this year alone has seen so far 26 government agencies being recipients of ransomware attacks. According to cybersecurity firm Emsisoft, in 2019, ransomware attacks cost the US about USD 7.5 billion.

Second, the geographic focus of cyber-attacks. The ransomware attacks of the preceding decade reveal a geographical division: while most attacks, whether state-backed or non-state, emanate from Russia (or countries part of the former Soviet Union) and China, the recipient countries are the affluent countries of Europe, North America as well as Japan, Australia and New Zealand. In fact, this week has seen two more ransomware attacks: one on Ireland's health care system and another on Toshiba corporation.

Third, the nature of ransomware attacks. A type of cyber-attack, ransomware involves infecting the victims' system with malware that encrypts the data. The hackers then demand a ransom for releasing the encryption key that the victims can use to get back their data. As organizations have started keeping back-ups of their data, the ransomware attacks increasingly feature not just encryption but also stealing of data accompanied by a threat to leak it if the ransom is not paid. The US government maintains a position that organizations should not pay the ransom and encourage hackers. However, this may turn out to be more costly than the ransom amount itself. Lastly, all the payments are demanded in cryptocurrencies to avoid traceability of transactions.

Fourth, the attack and its fallouts. Colonial Pipeline, which runs for 8,850 km, supplies gasoline, diesel and jet fuel to meet 45 per cent of the US' east coast requirement. Due to the attack on 7 May, the closure of the pipeline was followed by fuel shortages across the States on the east coast. Four States - North Carolina, Virginia, Florida and Georgia - declared a state

of emergency. As panic buying surged, the prices of gasoline soared to USD 3 per gallon, for the first time since 2014.

What does it mean?

First, the attack on Colonial Pipelines is part of a larger trend of increasing attacks on the US-based organizations. However, with one difference: while the past attacks have only had localized impacts, the one on Colonial Pipeline demonstrates that not just a powerful state actor with deep cyber capabilities but also small non-state hacker groups can pose a danger to critical infrastructure.

Second, as conventional deterrence fails in the case of cyberattacks because of the problem of attribution and the role of non-state actors, retaliation by the US will only serve limited purposes. In such a case, building strong cyber defense systems may be more fruitful.

The US: Hundred days of President Biden

By D Suba Chandran, 2 May 2021

What happened?

On 29 April 2021, Joseph R Biden completes 100 days in office as the US president. He was sworn in as the 46th President on 20 January 2021, after a difficult campaign.

Earlier, on 28 April, he addressed the US Congress for the first time, as the President. In his address, he said: "America is moving. Moving forward. And we can't stop now... We're in a great inflection point in history. We have to do more than just build back. We have to build back better."

What is the background?

First, the focus on hundred days. Though many would consider 100 days as a short period to analyze/critique the achievements/challenges of any government, this has been a tradition in the US. Since the days of Franklin D Roosevelt, the US has always been analyzing the performance of the new President in terms of focus, number of bills passed and its effectiveness, who was appointed as a part of the President's team, their background and their utility, and what has been

the primary international focus. Each President had their own immediate priorities to focus on – internal and external – ranging from the domestic economy to foreign policy challenges. For Biden, there was an additional challenge – COVID 19 and its fallouts on the US.

Second, Biden's scorecard in the first hundred days as the President. Internally, Biden had to first deal with the legal and political challenges emanating from Trump's refusal to accept the 2019 election result and the latter's poisonous narrative that the election was stolen. Besides, Biden had to address the economic decline, coupled with COVID-19 fallouts. He announced the bill immediately after becoming the President and succeeded in pushing the ambitious bill with USD 1.9 trillion to pass in the US Congress. The bill, now a law, aims to provide benefits for the jobless, direct payments to Americans, infuse funds for the state and local governments, and importantly, address the COVID-19 pandemic. Later in March, he has introduced another plan for USD two trillion to boost the US infrastructure, create jobs, and provide home care. While the first one was aimed at being a rescue plan, the second one is a long term strategy to strengthen the American economy. Finally, within the US, Biden also had to deal with the racial divide; it was an unfortunate coincidence. His first hundred days also witnessed the George Floyd murder trial, and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Fortunately, the murder trial resulted in the jury finding police officer Derek Chauvin guilty, and Biden made a few positive statements aimed at healing the racial divide.

Third, Biden, the builder vs Trump, the destroyer at the international level. The first thing that Biden did immediately after entering the office is to get the US back into climate change negotiations. President Trump announced in 2017 to withdraw from the Paris agreement; however, Biden made climate change his priority, announced the US' return, and made John Kerry the US Special Envoy on Climate Change. He also hosted the Climate action conference in April 2021. Besides the climate change agreement, the Biden administration is also looking towards engaging

with Iran on the JCPOA. On Indo-Pacific and in building trans-Atlantic partnership, initial statements from Biden has been positive so far.

Fourth, the challenges – immediate and long term, while discussing the first hundred days. China and Russia pose two big challenges to Biden; his first hundred days have not given a clear road map on how he is likely to pursue these two relationships. On Afghanistan, he has made a bold statement on the complete withdrawal of the American troops before 11 September 2021. In the Middle East, from Syria to Yemen, the regional situation is not easy for Biden to address.

What does it mean?

First the intent, irrespective of the challenges. Biden's first hundred days provide a positive intent – both internally and externally. It may still be early to make a finite argument, but the intent should hint at a positive momentum for the US under Biden.

Second, his initial responses so far, hint at the return of the US to take the global leadership and fulfil its responsibility, as against Trump's withdrawal plans to make the US great again. The US: Biden brings back the Climate change agenda

The US: Biden brings back the Climate change agenda

By Akriti Sharma, 25 April 2021

What happened?

On 22 April, President Joe Biden hosted online a two-day "Leaders Summit on Climate." The summit aimed at addressing the climate crisis, resilience and adaptation, reduction in emissions, innovation, finance, and job creation. The summit was attended by 40 world leaders along with business leaders around the globe.

"Time is short, but I believe we can do this," Biden said in his opening remarks. "We will do this." He also said: "As we transition to a clean energy future, we must ensure workers who have thrived in yesterday's and today's industries

have as bright a tomorrow in the new industries as well as in the places where they live."

What is the background?

First, the return of the US to climate action. Earlier, on 1 June 2017, Trump announced the US withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement. On the first day as the President, Biden announced that the US would rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement. The Biden administration also appointed a Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, John Kerry, to look into the US climate and energy policy. By hosting the summit, Biden has brought the agenda of climate change back to the US. He has also attempted to bring climate change back on the global agenda.

Second, the revised targets. During the summit, the US, Canada, Japan announced revised emission targets way ahead of the UN Climate Change Conference set to take place later in 2021. Biden announced that the US would cut its greenhouse gas emissions by 50-52 per cent by 2030 below 2005 levels. He further announced that the US would double its annual financing commitments to developing countries by 2024. Canadian PM Justin Trudeau announced a cut of 40 per cent to 45 per cent by 2030 below 2005 levels. Japanese PM Yoshihide Suga announced a cut by 46 per cent by 2030 below 2013 levels, nearly doubling the previous target. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro announced that Brazil would reach emissions neutrality by 2050, ten years ahead of the previous goal. The summit has enabled the countries to take a leadership role and announce the revised targets ahead of the Glasgow Climate Change Conference. However, India and China reiterated their previous targets.

Third, the presence of the key countries. The summit was attended by the world's largest emitters, the EU, China, Russia, and India, which account for most greenhouse emissions. Twenty out of forty countries in the summit account for 80 per cent of the global emissions. The summit was attended by countries representing all regions: Asia (including India, China, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, Israel, UAE, and

Saudi Arabia), Africa (including Kenya, Congo, Nigeria, and Gabon), Latin America (including Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina). Island states, including Antigua and Barbuda, Jamaica, and the Marshall Islands that are heavily impacted by climate change also attended the summit. This highlights the inclusivity of the summit.

What does it mean?

First, the US leadership. During the pandemic, climate action has taken a back seat as the world is grappled with the socio-economic impact of COVID-19. The US has taken the responsibility of bringing back the climate change agenda to focus. By announcing the revised targets, Biden seems to be ahead of Obama in attempting to institutionalize climate action globally.

Second, the US engaging with the rivals. Biden is using soft power to deal with rival states like China and Russia to achieve its climate targets. The presence of the world's largest emitters, including China and the EU, further makes it significant to achieve the targets that cannot be achieved unilaterally by any country.

Third, setting up the pace for the upcoming UN Climate Change Conference. Countries like the US, Canada, and Japan have set up an example by releasing the targets way ahead of the COP26. The summit has promoted more meaningful interactions for the upcoming conference in Glasgow.

US: Climate envoy John Kerry visits China

By Mallika Devi, 18 April 2021

What happened?

On 15 April, US climate envoy John Kerry and other delegates reached Shanghai and Taipei ahead of the first virtual climate summit. President Biden has invited 40 leaders of the world for the summit, which shall be organized on 22-23 April. Kerry is in China to formally invite President Xi Jinping for the summit. President Xi Jinping is yet to confirm his presence at the meeting. The objective of the virtual summit is to convince leaders of the

world to raise their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to achieve the goals set in the Paris Climate Agreement ahead of COP26.

What is the background?

First, the US return to climate change. Within hours of being sworn in as the President of America, President Joe Biden rejoined the Paris Climate Agreement, from which former President Trump had withdrawn in 2017. Climate crises have been re-accorded high priority-second only behind the Covid pandemic. This is further reflected in the appointment of John Kerry as a special presidential envoy for climate change who had played a key role in negotiating the Paris Agreement while serving as secretary of state under Obama. President Biden also proposed to give USD 1.2 billion to the UN-backed Green Climate Fund.

Second, the importance of China in the climate agreement. Being the largest emitter of carbon dioxide globally, China plans to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060, but that seems impossible by the modest short-term goals. China, in its 14th Five-Year plans, has not significantly raised its NDCs. Besides, China's signature project of the century, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aims to build coal plants in other countries. If China plans to export coal emissions through BRI, it becomes problematic. One of the coal projects in Bangladesh got cancelled because of pollution concerns. Despite holding the status as the world's largest coal consumer and largest renewable-energy producer, China's investment in renewable energy (solar, wind, hydropower) accounted for the majority of its overseas energy investment for the first time in 2020.

Third, the importance of US-China negotiations on climate change. On 7 March, state councillor Wang Yi said: "China would be willing to discuss and deepen cooperation with the US with open mind" on crucial issues like climate change while taking a hard stance on Taiwan. US-China climate negotiations are taking place as the Alaska talks continue. US-China bilateral relations are mired by issues of human rights violation in Xinjiang, imposing curbs on democracy in Hong Kong, and trade deficit. The

attempt is to keep climate change as a stand-alone issue and endeavour to forge cooperation on the issue.

What does it mean?

First, talks on climate change open up room for negotiations for both countries to keep communicating their differences and agreements. Climate change can, therefore, act as the foundation for negotiations on other issues. US-China bilateral relations may be at their nadir during the Trump years, but climate change offers an opportunity to build back trust.

Second, Climate change is again back as an agenda on the international stage with President Biden, which had lost steam under the former President. The US is going to push countries across the world to meet their NDCs and adopt greener and cleaner energy resources.

The US: Sanctions imposed on Russia for involvement in 2020 elections

By Chetna Vinay Bhora, 18 April 2021

What happened?

On 16 April, Russia imposed sanctions on eight senior US administration officers, including FBI Director Christopher Wray and Director of National intelligence Avril Haines. Russia is also set to expel 10 US diplomats and establish new limits on the diplomats and their outposts, curbing the US non-profit groups' activities in the region and rethinking 'agonizing' measures against US businesses in vengeance for the vindictive actions by the US administration. These developments came after the US announced the sanctions on Russia. The Kremlin has directed the US ambassador to Russia to return to Washington in order to hold "serious" and "detailed" consultation.

On 15 April, US President Joe Biden issued sanctions inimical to Moscow with regards to the intrusion of 2020 presidential elections and a cyber-attack among a plethora of transgressions. The sanctions focused on eliminating 16 entities and 16 individuals who attempted to influence the presidential elections, five individuals and three entities connected to the Crimean

annexation, and 10 Russian diplomats were expelled from the US. Washington has also sanctioned the newly issued Russian sovereign debt, which has caused a slight ripple in the Russian Ruble and sovereign bonds market.

What is the background?

First, the meddling in the 2016 US presidential elections. According to the 2017 US intelligence report, the Russian government had used the state-funded media channels to disable Hilary Clinton's presidential campaign. Russia had also used its hacking prowess in flooding social media outlets like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to influence the Americans in their electoral systems and vilify Clinton. Between 2015 to 2017, Facebook connected nearly 80,000 publications to the Russian company, Internet Research Agency. Over 470 accounts and 50,258 Twitter accounts were associated with Russian bots and fake accounts programmed to disseminate false information during the 2016 election. These bots were accountable for nearly 3.8 million tweets; approximately 19 per cent of the total tweets were associated with the 2016 US presidential election. The attacks were linked to the 2011 intervention of Clinton in supporting the protests and interfering in the electoral process of Russia.

Second, the cybersecurity attacks. Orion, a network management offshoot of the SolarWinds company hosting over 300,000 customers worldwide, was hacked by the Russian intelligence known as the SVR. Slipping in through Orion's back door, updates compromising data and networks of the civilians were accessed in an attempt to embezzle national security, defence and related information. Researchers have named the hack as 'Sunburn' and claimed that it would take several years to comprehend the attack fully. For nearly three decades, hackers connected to Moscow are believed to have tried to steal US secrets online.

Third, the change of power in the US and its stand. In Biden's first speech in February 2021, he assured to stand up to Russia. He has openly criticized Russia's offensive actions in Ukraine, unlike his predecessor. In 2014, the Obama-

Biden administration was accused of standing by Russia while Crimea was annexed.

What does it mean?

The US is looking to impose costs for a plethora of misconduct from Moscow and deter its future acts. The US actions indicate that it will pursue a stronger frontier than the Trump era and strive for a stable relationship with Russia. The response they have is "resolute but proportionate." The US intelligence has published numerous reports about the cybersecurity attacks and Russian intelligence ventures into US companies. The sanctions imposed by the US may pose obstacles for Russia but considering past experiences, it is unlikely that these sanctions would deter the Kremlin.

The exchange of diplomatic expulsions is an indicator of the fact that the sanctions do not dissuade Moscow. The tensions that have risen after the flaring exchanges could amount to another cold war like situation.

QUAD: Biden's first multilateral dialogue on the Indo-Pacific

By Akriti Sharma, 14 March 2021

What happened?

On 12 March, US President Joe Biden hosted the first virtual summit of the QUAD, which was attended by the Prime Ministers of India, Japan and Australia. The leaders reaffirmed their commitment to promote free and open Indo-Pacific, pledged to respond to the impact of COVID-19, and address shared challenges including climate change, technology, and disaster relief.

During the summit, President Biden said: "We're renewing our commitment to ensure that our region is governed by international law, committed to upholding universal values, and free from coercion." The US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan during a press briefing said: "The four leaders did discuss the challenge posed by China, and they made clear that none of them has any illusions about China. But today was not fundamentally about China. Much of the focus was on pressing global crises, including the climate crisis and COVID-19."

On the same day, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said: “We hope relevant countries will follow the principles of openness, inclusiveness and win-win results, refrain from forming closed and exclusive ‘cliques’ and act in a way that is conducive to regional peace, stability and prosperity.”

On 13 March, the Washington Post published an opinion by the four QUAD leaders; according to it, "we have agreed to partner to address the challenges presented by new technologies and collaborate to set the norms and standards that govern the innovations of the future. It is clear that climate change is both a strategic priority and an urgent global challenge, including for the Indo-Pacific region. That’s why we will work together and with others to strengthen the Paris agreement and enhance the climate actions of all nations. And with an unwavering commitment to the health and safety of our people, we are determined to end the covid-19 pandemic because no country will be safe so long as the pandemic continues."

What is the background?

First, Biden’s approach towards the Indo-Pacific. Biden has continued Trump’s policy on the Indo-Pacific to contain China in the region. On 3 March, the Biden administration released the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance. It stresses building deeper connections with the Indo-Pacific region through a robust presence in the region. Convening the QUAD summit reiterates Biden’s strong position on Indo-Pacific.

Second, the widening scope of QUAD. On 20 March 2020, a QUAD Plus meeting was conducted that included Vietnam, South Korea, and New Zealand apart from the QUAD countries to discuss the COVID-19 spread. QUAD has been broadening its scope by partnering with countries over shared interests. Moreover, there is a widening of areas of cooperation. Vaccine diplomacy and climate change widen the scope for cooperation among the QUAD countries.

Third, worsening relations with China. The hardening of ties with China is a common challenge that the QUAD countries are facing. India is in a boundary dispute with China over

LAC in the Galwan Valley. Australia is in a trade dispute with China on exports. Japan is in a dispute with China in the East China Sea over the Senkaku Islands. Deteriorating relations have encouraged the countries to actively engage in QUAD.

What does it mean?

First, the reiteration of the significance of QUAD and Indo-Pacific. Biden's rigorous but nuanced approach will have greater implications for the Indo-Pacific region.

Second, widening areas of cooperation will increase the scope for other countries in the region to establish a partnership with QUAD countries and work towards promoting free and open Indo-Pacific, contain Chinese aggression, and work on areas of shared regional and global concern.

The US: Weather anomalies suggest a fast-approaching climate change

By Avishka Ashok, 21 February 2021

What happened?

On 15 February, The United States issued an alert regarding a winter storm that affected Southern and Central American states. The State of Texas is one of the worst affected regions with as many as five million people suffering from power outages for consecutive days. On 18 February, the White House reported that the sudden winter storm is the type of event that could be triggered by climate change.

On 17 February, parts of Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Israel were also hit by a winter storm that covered the cities in 10-15 centimetres of snow. It snowed for the first time in Southern Lebanon and Northeast Libya. The sudden downpour in many areas and snow was brought by the Gale Winds, an unusual and rare occurrence.

On 18 February, the NASA Earth Observatory reported that the mid-February dust storm that crosses over Southern and Central Europe from

the Sahara had materialized earlier than usual with increased intensity.

On 20 February, the Federal Emergency Management Agency announced that President Biden approved a major disaster declaration for Texas and 77 counties.

What is the background?

First, the numerous weather anomalies. The recent winter storm is not the only proof that indicates the ever-changing global temperatures. The United States has been experiencing extreme hot winds and temperatures, leading to annual forest fires that continue to burn for months in the state of California. California has warmed by 3 degrees Fahrenheit in the last century, causing the ecosystem to burn more rapidly. The changing ocean temperatures also affect the formation and behaviour of tropical cyclones. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change observes that cyclones will become more powerful in the coming years, gathering high speeds and heavier rains.

Second, the weather changes across the globe - from the US to Australian, in the recent period. Strong and persistent winds from the Sahara covered the snow in parts of Europe in early February. The sight, although mesmerizing to look at, is a cause for concern. The rare phenomenon led to a degradation of the air quality in Europe and accelerated the advancing global warming. The Amazon Rainforest that burns every consecutive year, destroyed an area as large as Israel in 2020. Between 2019 and 2020, over 18 million hectares were destroyed in the Australian bushfires, endangering the entire Koala population. Increasing temperatures have also caused rapid melting of glaciers resulting in flash floods in Uttarakhand and an upward trend in the frequency of cyclones in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal.

Third, linking winter storms to climate change. While many consider warming of the earth's atmosphere, melting snow and rise and sea levels as the only side-effect of climate change, rapid change in weather patterns such as snowstorms are also related to the problem. The duration and severity of such storms are key factors that depict a shift in weather conditions.

The winter storms that hit America and the Middle East this week are becoming more frequent and occur for a longer duration at a given time. Research suggests that the primary cause of the winter storm is the rise in temperature in the Arctic, affecting the jet stream that controls weather patterns around the world.

What does it mean?

The issue of climate change crosses political and geographical boundaries. The issue cannot be resolved by individual countries acting in isolation and thus requires international cooperation and coordination.

President Joe Biden, upon entering the White House, took major steps to address the issue of climate change, unlike his predecessor. US returned to the Paris Agreement and suspended various projects like the Keystone XL pipeline. Despite the debate against green energy which failed to deliver during the winter storm, Biden Administration will most likely hasten its efforts in negotiating climate change at a global level and push for a shift towards non-conventional sources of generating energy.

The US: Biden calls for the return of America and diplomacy, as he unveils the US foreign policy priorities

By D Suba Chandran, 7 February 2021

What happened?

On 4 February, in a speech at the US Department of State, the new President Biden outlined his foreign policy priorities. The message he wanted the world to hear is: "America is back. Diplomacy is back at the center of our foreign policy."

As a general outlook on the American alliances, leadership, China and Russia, he said: "We will repair our alliances and engage with the world once again, not to meet yesterday's challenges, but today's and tomorrow's. American leadership must meet this new moment of advancing authoritarianism, including the growing ambitions of China to rival the United States and

the determination of Russia to damage and disrupt our democracy."

In terms of principles that the US would like to follow in conducting foreign policy, he said: "we must start with diplomacy rooted in America's most cherished democratic values: defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law, and treating every person with dignity."

He considered climate change as an existential threat, as he wants to build global cooperation to address the same.

What is the background?

First, the US reengaging the world, as against the retreat strategy pursued by Trump. As soon as he assumed the office, President Biden decided to rejoin the Paris Climate agreement on day one. He also announced the US decision to reengage with the WHO. He has also announced to extend the START treaty with Russia.

Second, Biden's approach to rebuilding alliances. During Trump, the trans-Atlantic partnership suffered a setback. Biden's emphasis on rebuilding alliances and retaining the US troops in Europe means that the US would go back to pre-Trump US-Europe relationship. He has announced troops withdrawal from Germany, which was one of Trump's destructive unilateral announcement vis-à-vis the American engagement in Europe. Not only Europe but also with other American partners – Canada, Japan, South Korea and Australia; during Trump's period, there was a strain in the US relationship with most of the above traditional partners.

Third, emphasis on human rights and the rule of law. Though there was an extra focus on Yemen, as a part of this, he also covered the same issue vis-a-vis Russia and China in detail. He has announced a US special envoy for Yemen, underlining a new American approach and leadership towards Yemen. On 5 February, the US State Department separately announced that it would lift the Houthis' designation as a terror organization.

Fourth, a balanced relationship with Russia and China. While he has announced the extension of

the new START, in his 4 February speech, Biden also stressed that he would "very different from (his) predecessor, that the days of the United States rolling over in the face of Russia's aggressive actions - interfering with (the US) elections, cyberattacks, poisoning its citizens - are over." He also said, that the US would "not hesitate to raise the cost on Russia and defend our vital interests and our people." On China, he has stated: "We'll confront China's economic abuses; counter its aggressive, coercive action; to push back on China's attack on human rights, intellectual property, and global governance."

What does it mean?

As Biden underlined in his 4 February speech, the above would mean that the US is back and would use diplomacy and alliances to reengage the world. This would be crucial and much needed, given the four disastrous years of American foreign policy of disengaging the world and breaking the alliances. Biden's big challenge would be to fill the gap that Trump has yielded and fill it fast. 2021 is not 2016; there have been numerous changes in the last five years. Biden will have to be proactive.

The emphasis on human rights should be another significant relief. Starting from Yemen, there are numerous conflict spots, that need a rightful engagement of the US. On this issue as well, there are enormous challenges – starting from Russia, Middle East, Africa, Afghanistan, Myanmar and the list would be a long one. Biden will have to prioritize.

The US returns to the Paris Agreement, and India reengages the region through a Vaccine diplomacy

By D Suba Chandran, 23 January 2021

What happened?

On 20 January 2021, as a part of the first day actions, the new American President issued a series of directives, including rejoining the Paris agreement on climate change, focussing on global warming. He has appointed John Kerry, former Secretary of State (during Obama's

period), as the US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate. Kerry made an immediate announcement on the wasted years of climate change.

On the same day, Biden has also revoked the permit for the Keystone XL pipeline, thereby impacting the expansion of the pipeline that would bring the Canadian crude oil to the US Gulf Coast.

On the same day, the administration also announced a 60 days freeze, to any new drills on federal lands and waters.

What is the background?

First, the US and the Paris agreement. Signed in 2015, the Paris agreement has around 200 members, from the developed and developing worlds agreeing to reduce fossil fuels' use. Each country has committed to reducing the use of fossil fuels, addressing carbon neutrality and thereby to bring down the global temperature. Obama, then the US President made the US a part of the agreement, and also made pledges to reduce carbon emissions. According to a New York Times report, "Under the accord, the United States had pledged to cut its greenhouse gas emissions 26 to 28 per cent below 2005 levels by 2025 and commit up to \$3 billion in aid for poorer countries by 2020." In early June 2017, President Trump announced the US withdrawal from the Paris agreement, as a part of his "American first" push; according to Trump, the Paris agreement would undermine the American economy and place the US at a disadvantageous position. Though he also stated that he would like to renegotiate a better deal for the US, leading States in Europe said, that the Paris agreement is irreversible. Biden has now reversed the Trump's withdrawal from the Paris agreement, and announced the US' re-entry.

Second, the controversial Keystone energy project. Though the idea of a gas pipeline from Canada to the US transporting crude originated in 2008, there have been multiple objections to expanding this project over the years. Besides the climate change activists within the US, who opposed the project on larger climate change issues, there have also been protests from the local communities and Native Americans over the pipeline routes, as the pipelines expanded.

According to a Wall Street Journal report, "farmers, ranchers and Native American groups along the proposed route also opposed the pipeline, because it would have traversed ecologically sensitive areas and aquifers important as sources of drinking water and irrigation supplies."

Third, the support for Trump's policies. While Biden has taken a bold step to re-enter the Paris agreement and revoke the Keystone pipeline extension permit, he would face opposition to implement them. From the US Congress to industrialists and business communities, a section within the US supported Trump's policies to withdraw from the Paris agreement and go ahead with the Keystone pipeline expansion to boost the American economy.

What does it mean?

Biden's reversal of Trump's inward-looking and disastrous climate change policies are much needed to take the Paris agreement forward. The decision taken on the first day shows Biden's urgency and also underlines a plan on how the US would approach the climate change issue.

From a global perspective, the return of the US to Paris agreement is much wanted. John Kerry's appointment as the Climate Envoy should give a new push to the climate change debate and actions globally. One should also welcome Kerry's initial statement on the subject, as he underlined the wasted years. Now with Biden at the White House, US and rest of the world have to take the process forward, as the climate clock is ticking.

ISSUES

UN: The General Assembly discussions focus on multilateralism, climate change, migration and COVID

Keerthana Nambiar, 26 September 2021

What happened?

On 21 September, General Secretary Antonio Guterres addressed the United Nations General Assembly outlining the six "Great Divides" that must be bridged. "With humanity on the edge of an abyss, and moving in the wrong direction, the world must wake up", quoted the Secretary-General. He called in for greater actions on Covid-19 and vaccine inequalities, bold steps towards gender equality, digital technology dangers, and closing the generational gap. "This is our time. A moment for transformation. An era to re-ignite multilateralism. An age of possibilities," the Secretary-General informed the world leaders and ambassadors.

More than 100 leaders attended the meeting. The US President Joe Biden declared a "new era" of US diplomacy, as the world stands at an "inflection point in history." Chinese President, Xi Jinping expressed the need to improve global governance and practice true multilateralism, including the "need to be handled through dialogue and cooperation". The UK Prime Minister warned that it was time for humanity to "grow up". President Tayyip Erdogan said, "We plan to present the Paris climate agreement to our parliament's approval next month in line with constructive steps that will be taken."

What is the background?

First, Covid 19 and the vaccine inequalities. The UN statements and discussions focused on reversing the global failure to tackle Covid-19 and vaccinate 70 per cent of the world population by the first half of 2022. While some countries have vaccines widely available, some struggled to get supplies.

Second, the focus on multilateralism. Recently, there has been a refocus on multilateralism. With Trump gone, along with his unilateral actions whether within the UN or outside it, there has been a renewed focus on multilateral actions to deal with issues ranging from COVID vaccination to climate change.

Third, the end of War on Terrorism. Ever since the 9/11 attacks, terrorism has remained a primary concern in the General Assembly. Afghanistan has been a significant part of the discussion. The rise of radical groups in Iraq, Syria and Africa made terrorism a primary theme for discussions at the UN.

Fourth, the chaos of migration and climate change commitments. The regional conflicts loom over the General Assembly meeting accompanying the migration crisis. Europe-bound migrants, crisis in the US-Mexico border, violence in the Tigray crisis, and the terror in Afghanistan have been the source of migration. Thousands of people desperately trying to cross the borders for a chance at a better life. Migration has become another focus of the UN discussions. On Climate Change, the leaders have pledged concrete commitments before the COP26 and UN Climate Change Conference.

What does this mean?

First, the UN has been trying to stimulate the idea of multilateralism for years now. Wherein, the world might be able to face the pressing issues from the pandemic to the migration crisis working together. In this meeting, the world leaders seem to be acknowledging the gravity of issues and planning for the future accordingly.

Second, the 76th UN General Assembly 2021 unlike the earlier meetings has proved to be successful and engaging with the realistic approach with a tinge of idealism. The lingering question is if the UN can deliver up to the goals and expectations, or is it just transitioning for mere survival.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Global Spread of Delta Variant: Mutation Uncertainties, and the Vaccination Drives

Harini Madhusudan, 15 August 2021

What happened?

On 13 August, China reported a delta variant-related resurgence in the country, with more than 1,200 new cases in 48 cities in 18 provinces. On 12 August, Japan and the US reported more than 18,000 and 138,000 new infections. The delta variant is contributing to the rapid rise in infections around the world and has spread to about 130 countries. The Delta and Lambda variants are pushing a resurgence of cases even in countries that have vaccinated large numbers. This increase raises a concerning alarm for the regions with low vaccination rates and strained healthcare infrastructures.

According to the WHO, the Delta variant is the most transmissible variant of the virus. In early August 2021, the world recorded a total of 200 million cases. While the first 100 million took a year to reach, the next 100 million were reported in about six months.

What is the background?

First, the global spread and the mutation. Scientists have revealed that the new mutations would continue over the subsequent few cycles of the Sars-CoV-2. Existing variants include - Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Lambda; they have emerged from the virus' adaptability to the local environments and have developed independently. The Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta variants have been reported from 178, 123, 75 and 130 countries, respectively. Of these four, the Delta is known to be 50 per cent more transmissible than the Alpha variant.

Second, the efficiency of vaccination drives, distribution imbalance and public reluctance. On 14 August 2021, according to Bloomberg's vaccine tracker, 4.64 billion doses have been

administered across the globe. With a vaccination rate of 38,345,129 doses per day, estimates say that it would take another six months to cover 75 per cent of the population. Countries with higher incomes are getting vaccinations at a 20 times faster rate than those with the lowest incomes, highlighting an imbalance in the distribution. Also, there has been a public reluctance. While some regions have observed protests against lockdowns, others have seen wastage of vaccines due to fewer takers. States have incentivized vaccination and pushing vaccination campaigns amongst the anti-vaxxers and deniers to multiple beliefs.

Third, early lifting of restrictions. In recent months, countries have eased lockdown restrictions for two reasons - to deal with the economic recovery and a declining rate of virus transmission/ death. After its success with controlling the spread, China was one of the first countries to ease restrictions. Sweden and South Korea did not impose lockdown restrictions until it was unbearable. However, the delta variant has shaken the system; and imposing a heavy burden on the health sector.

What does it mean?

With herd immunity far, vaccination drives and boosters remain the only immediate solution. Second, more data is expected in the coming months on the efficiency rates of vaccinations with the emerging variants. Regions that have reported a high vaccination rate would remain an important observation ground to map the responses between vaccines and the new variants. Studies have emerged which show a correlation between the vaccinations and the spread of variants, which say that the Delta variant has spread through vaccinated people. Finally, the challenge for the governments is to juggle economic recovery, public demands, and the safety of the collective society.

COVID-19: The WHO releases report, but the question of origin remain unanswered

Sukanya Bali, 4 April 2021

What happened?

On 30 March, the much-expected report of the WHO on COVID-19 was released. According to the report, the transmission to humans through an intermediate host animal, is the most likely scenario; the spread through "cold-chain" food products is unlikely; and the role of the Hunan animal market remains unclear. As per the report, 28 per cent of confirmed cases had links with the market, 23 per cent with the other markets of Wuhan and 24 per cent had no sign of any market exposure. The report dismisses the lab leak theory, calling it an "extremely unlikely" situation.

Tedros Adhanom, WHO's Director-General, demanded further research for a "more robust conclusion." He also said he is ready to deploy more experts to do so. China's foreign ministry spokesperson said, "Beijing had fully demonstrated its openness, transparency and responsible attitude" for the research.

What is the background?

First, the WHO investigation and the report. After several months of delay, the team of 15 experts reached China. The team visited hospitals, animal markets, government laboratories, interviewed many locals and scientists to obtain data on the origin of the virus. The team was also taken to a museum and exhibition, showing CPC's success in the handling of the coronavirus outbreak. The investigation was strictly supervised by the Chinese government. The international experts were presented with the conclusions drawn by Chinese scientists and were denied direct access to raw data of early covid patients. The report was drafted by a 34-member team of international experts and Chinese scientists.

Second, the politicization, accusation and counter-accusation over the origin. Amid the pandemic, the US and Australia blamed China for the virus's outbreak and called for an international investigation. The former US President Donald Trump called it a Chinese Virus. The US also accused the WHO of being pro-China and pushed for withdrawing from the health agency. In response, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson accused the US military of bringing coronavirus to Wuhan. China imposed trade barriers on Australian goods after Australia pushed for an investigation.

Third, China's reluctance. For several months, China stalled the visit of international experts to Wuhan, where the initial outbreak. The experts faced visa delays, quarantine restrictions, and political stonewalling in China. In 2020 February and July, a small team of experts visited China but were forced to investigate from a distance.

What does it mean?

There was so much anticipation of the report; there was an expectation that the report would identify where the COVID-19 virus originated and how it spread. Unfortunately, the report is unable to provide a clear answer to the question over origin. After a year, around 2.8 million people have died, but several questions with the origin remain unanswered. The findings have raised more scepticism than clarity into the source of the virus. Second, China might resist a further investigation over the origin of the virus. The Biden administration may push for an extensive investigation and demand for more transparency into its data pool of early patients.

CLIMATE CHANGE

The Glasgow Compromise on Coal: Phasing down, instead of phasing out

Rashmi Ramesh, 14 November 2021

What happened?

On 13 November, COP-26 culminated with the Glasgow Climate Pact to keep global warming at

1.5 degrees Celsius. Around 197 countries signed the agreement, which provides for 'phase-down' of coal, rather than a 'phase-out.' The text of the pact now reads- "...including accelerating efforts towards the phase-down of unabated coal power and inefficient fossil fuel subsidies, recognizing the need for support towards a just transition." The last-minute change in the language hinted at a compromised deal, falling short of expectations.

The agreement also calls the big polluting countries to come back and submit more substantial pledges for reducing emissions by the end of 2022 and has addressed the long-standing issue of carbon trading that prevented the complete implementation of the Paris Agreement. However, there was no mention of setting up a 'loss and damage facility,' a formal body that would be at the helm of paying reparations for the poorest and climate-vulnerable countries. The wealthier nations led by the US and EU expressed their resistance, fearing an additional expenditure. Instead, the deal promises further negotiations on this issue and urged the richer nations to pay USD 100 billion that was promised a decade ago.

The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expressed his disappointment at the outcome of the conference and said that "Our fragile planet is hanging by a thread. We are still knocking at the door of climate catastrophe. The approved texts are a compromise. They reflect the interests, the conditions and contradictions and the state of political will in the world today. They take important steps. But unfortunately, the collective political will was not enough to overcome some deep contradictions." Talking about the pact and India and China's role in the change of language on coal, the US climate envoy John Kerry said that "if we had not done that, we would not have had an agreement." However, Switzerland, Mexico, and small island countries voiced strong opinions against the outcomes of the summit. The Swiss representative remarked: "...we do not need a

phase down coal but to phase out coal. This will not bring us closer to 1.5C but make it more difficult to reach it." COP-26 President Alok Sharma "apologized for the way this process has unfolded." Climate activist Greta Thunberg dismissed the summit and the pact saying "The #COP26 is over. Here's a brief summary: Blah, blah, blah. But the real work continues outside these halls. And we will never give up, ever."

What is the background?

First, the expectations from Glasgow summit. Prior to the summit, the UN had stated the three-point criteria for assessing the outcome of the talks- pledges to cut the carbon emissions in half by 2030, USD 100 billion as financial aid to the poorer nations fighting climate change, and ensure the use of the fund for adaptation and coping with the worst effects of climate change. These key points, though discussed, did not see the light.

Second, the achievements in Glasgow. The COP-26 witnessed important deals and agreements being signed, including Global Methane Pledge, Global Coal to Clean Power Transition Statement, and Declaration on Forests and Land Use. The GFANZ, a grouping of private players committed to the provisions of the Paris Agreement. The conference was also marked by protests from the youth and citizen groups against the meek commitments to fight climate change.

Third, the dilution in Glasgow. In the final leg of the COP-26, while discussing the Pact, India and China proposed a significantly weaker wording in the clause talking about coal. The last-minute blitzkrieg by India and countries with similar thoughts forced a compromised agreement, much to the dismay of others.

Fourth, the resistance in Glasgow. Prime emitters like India, China, US and Australia, the major producer of coal was not amongst the 45 countries who signed the statement on clean energy. China, Japan and India were also not with the 20 countries which committed to halt

funding for fossil fuel projects abroad. These countries did once again show strong resistance to climate action.

What does it mean?

First, the continuing narrative of CBDR. Much to the disappointment of other countries, India intervened and watered down the language in the draft concerning phasing out coal. While doing so, the main argument put across, was the historical errors by the developed world and the need for development in the developing world. Small island countries like Maldives and Tuvalu, who are the least contributors and the most affected due to climate change, demanded actions and funds for adaptation from the richer countries. The long-standing argument of common but differentiated responsibilities continues to dominate climate dialogues, often acting as an obstacle to reaching satisfactory agreements.

Second, a bold step towards coal. Glasgow Climate Pact is the first agreement that explicitly states the need to reduce coal to contain greenhouse gas emissions. The message from COP-26 was clear- the coal powered era will gradually come to an end. Glasgow talk is a positive step towards this target.

COP26: Focus on Deforestation, Methane, and Coal

Rashmi Ramesh, 7 November 2021

What happened?

On 31 October, COP 26- the UN Climate Change Conference began Glasgow, United Kingdom. It is being hosted by the UK in partnership with Italy and will culminate on 12 November. The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres remarked: "We face a stark choice: either we stop it- or it stops us. It is time to say enough."

On 2 November, Global Methane Pledge was signed by 103 countries; it aims to reduce human-induced methane emissions by at least 30

percent. On the same day, around 110 countries committed to the UK-led Declaration on Forests and Land Use, which aims to halt and reverse deforestation and land degradation by 2030.

On 3 November, the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero or GFANZ (created jointly by the UN and COP26 presidency in April 2021), pledged to commit to the Paris Agreement's provisions. The alliance of more than 450 banks, insurance companies, and asset managers has committed to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050.

On 4 November, the Global Coal to Clean Power Transition Statement was announced. It calls for phasing out coal power by 2030 in the case of major economies and by 2040 for poorer countries. Over 45 countries have signed the Statement to date. Twenty countries, including Canada and the US, committed to halting financing of fossil fuel projects abroad.

On 4 November, the UNEP released the sixth edition of the "UNEP Adaptation Gap Report: The Gathering Storm." It talks about the glaring gaps between the Global South and North in terms of the cost of climate adaptation. Inger Andersen, Executive Director of the UNEP commented: "...those in poorer countries are going to suffer the most, so ensuring that there is a degree of equity and a degree of global solidarity for adaptation finance is critical."

What is the background?

First, the importance of the conference and its timing. The planet faces an impending climate crisis while it deals with intense disasters year after year. Frequency, intensity, and compounding of disasters are crucial concerns. The recent IPCC report released in August shows that many changes that the planet has undergone due to the GHG emissions are irreversible. This is particularly applicable to the changes in oceans, ice sheets, and global sea level.

Second, the importance of methane. Methane is a GHG that is more powerful than carbon dioxide, though it is short-lived in the atmosphere. While methane is emitted naturally, human activities are responsible for about 60 percent of the emissions. The GHG is also responsible for global warming since industrialization (The Hindu). The Global Methane Pledge that was initially announced in September by the US and European Union has now become a part of the COP26 commitments.

Third, the deforestation pledge. Loss of green cover is a major concern, as the planet loses approximately 27 football fields of forest every minute (The WWF). The Declaration on Forests and Land Use builds on the New York Declaration of Forests- 2014, which directs the governments, business houses, and civil society to halve deforestation in tropical areas by 50 percent and halt it by 2030.

Fourth, the controversy of carbon credits and offset. This has been a bone of contention since the Kyoto Protocol and remains unresolved to a large extent. The GFANZ is being criticized for encouraging offsets to reach the set target, which in reality allows them to continue to pollute. Additionally, the Alliance does not prevent financial institutions from funding fossil fuel-based projects.

Fifth, awareness and activism. Leaders, pledges, and their actions are increasingly accountable to civil society. Children and youth have become proactive and are pressurizing the actors to undertake stringent measures. The COP26 is one such example, where activists are holding rallies and demonstrations, criticizing the leaders for faulty policies and promises.

What does it mean?

First, the silence of major economies on key sectors. The 45 countries that signed the statement on phasing out coal, did not include the major coal consumers and producers- Australia, India, China, and the US. China,

Japan, and India were also not among the 20 countries committed to halting funding for fossil fuel projects abroad. Asian countries are major funders of such projects.

Second, high targets. Setting high targets can demotivate an actor and also provoke it to stay away from such agreements in its interest. The pledge on deforestation is unrealistic, given the already existing inequalities in terms of development and climate finance. While development is not necessarily anti-thetical to environment protection, it may not be fair to demand a complete halt of deforestation and reversal, by the developing world. Indonesia's take on the Declaration represents this perspective.

Third, finding a middle ground. The Paris Agreement pushed for maintaining 1.5 degrees Celsius of global warming. The recent IPCC report stated that at the present rate, the world was on track to become warmer by 2.7 degrees Celsius. COP26 tries to find a balance between the two. There was a larger opinion in the conference that restricting global warming to 1.8 degrees Celsius is still within reach. According to the International Energy Agency, the 1.8 degrees limit is achievable, given stringent and timely implementation of the COP26 commitments. Meeting this middle ground will go far in combating anthropogenic climate change.

The Arctic Council ministerial meeting: Adopting the Strategic Plan 2021-30

By Rashmi Ramesh, 23 May 2021

What happened?

On 20 May 2021, the Senior Arctic Officials and foreign ministers of eight Arctic countries met in Reykjavík. The meeting marked the conclusion of the Icelandic Chairmanship (2019-21) and the beginning of the Russian (2021-23).

The Ministerial meeting adopted the "Arctic Council Strategic Plan 2021 to 2030", the first of its kind for the region, which will be the long-term framework guiding the Council's work till 2030. It also approved and adopted the "Reykjavík Declaration 2021".

What is the background?

First, the international importance of the Arctic. While climate change is a crucial challenge affecting every part of the globe, the Arctic faces a disproportionate impact. The pace of warming in the region is three times faster than the global average. Changes happening in the Arctic do not remain within the confines of the Arctic Circle. Instead, they have significant effects outside. In recent years, the international attention on the Arctic has been increasing due to climate change, the potential resources- both renewable and non-renewable, the presence of Asian countries, particularly China, increased militarization and other security issues.

Second, the Arctic Council's performance. At the Ministerial meeting, Finland noted that the Council's achievements had exceeded the expectations. After 25 years of its establishment, it remains the primary forum for discussing Arctic issues. While there are significant geopolitical concerns, the Arctic Council has successfully kept the diplomatic channels open, to the extent that the tensions between the US-Western Europe and Russia in 2014 failed to impact the Arctic cooperation negatively. It has successfully brought three legally binding treaties on central themes. The Council has numerous challenges, including the militarization of the region, climate adaptation, connectivity, the growing global attention, food and energy security.

Third, the Council's success under Iceland's chairmanship. Iceland focused extensively on ocean issues, especially on marine litter. It was successful in continuing the Council's work during the pandemic, holding the joint meeting between the Arctic Council and the Arctic Economic Council, negotiating and bringing the Arctic Council Strategic Plan, and adopting the Reykjavík Declaration. The Finnish Chairmanship ended without a declaration,

mainly due to the Trump administration's stance on climate change and Paris Agreement. The changed stance under Joe Biden has contributed to adopting a stronger language for climate change and environmental protection through the Reykjavík Declaration. The key takeaway from Iceland's chairmanship was the implementation of projects.

Fourth, the politicization of the Arctic. In recent years, the region is facing increasing militarization and dormant geopolitical concerns. Though the Arctic is practically free of any land/maritime dispute, the chances of new disputes arising cannot be ignored. With China's foray into the North, speculations of more politicization and militarization of the Arctic are rife.

What does it mean?

First, the necessity for a long-term plan. The Strategic Plan adopted at the Ministerial is a welcome step. A long-term plan ought to be in place to ensure continuity of the work when the chairmanship rotates between the eight countries. The Plan has listed seven goals under three categories- Environmental Protection, Sustainable Development and Strengthening the Arctic Council. It is expected to guide the priorities of the upcoming Chairmanships.

Second, the need for Russia's balancing act. At the Ministerial, Iceland and the US particularly emphasized that the Arctic is a zone of peace and there are pertinent matters beyond competition and conflict. The views can be attributed to the speculations about Russian chairmanship. Russia prioritizes its economic needs and sovereignty in the North and harbours interests to revive pre-1991 Soviet interests in the region. Balancing between its national interests and regional interests, the Council's larger goals and the perceptions of other countries can be a major challenge for Moscow for the next two years.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Inspiration4: SpaceX captures new heights, with a three-day mission in space

Harini Madhusudan, 19 September 2021

What happened?

On 15 September, SpaceX launched their first private orbital spaceflight with four all-civilian crew and no professional astronauts. The mission included a billionaire sponsor Jared Isaacman, a healthcare worker, and two contest winners. This mission marks the beginning of SpaceX's venture into the Space Tourism market.

On 18 September, the four civilian astronauts returned to earth, with their capsule landing off the Florida coast Florida after a three-day mission. Extending his encouragement from the International Space Station, French astronaut Thomas Pesquet on Twitter said, "No matter if you're a professional or not, when you get strapped to a rocket and launch into space, we have something in common. All the very best from, well, space."

What is the background?

First, the mission. The three-day orbital mission included four all civilian crew members. Jared Isaacman is the primary donor and is now the third billionaire to launch a tourist mission to Outer Space during July-September 2021. The crew included a 29-year-old bone cancer survivor who works as a physician assistant. The other two crew members are winners of sweepstakes - a 42-year-old data engineer, and a 51-year-old community college educator. The mission used a recycled Falcon Rocket, launched from the Kennedy Space Center Pad, which was previously used by three of SpaceX's astronaut flights for NASA. This time, the Dragon Capsule aimed for an altitude of 575 kilometres, which is 160 kilometres higher than the International Space Station.

Second, the significance of the mission. The Inspiration4 mission marks the third space tourism mission and the first orbital tourism mission. The mission took an all-civilian crew for a period of three days, longer than the earlier two initiatives. The mission portrays three important issues; diverse crew with minimal training; clever strategy to raise funds; sustainable use of technology in outer space by launching a reused rocket and capsule.

Third, the emergence of the private space industry and space tourism. Three American space-based companies are leading the industry. They are likely to initiate several alternative modes of space tourism. After successfully displaying their capability, these private companies can be expected to begin tourism services from 2022. SpaceX has already announced its next trip with a crew of three wealthy businessmen and a retired NASA astronaut in early 2022. Other countries are expected to join the tourism market. The Russians have also announced that they would be launching an actress, film director, and a Japanese tycoon to the Space Station in the following months.

What does it mean?

2021 should be seen as the year of the steady expansion of space tourism. The activities of the Inspiration4 crew would be released as a Netflix documentary and are known to be conducting scientific experiments. This would confirm that outer space is accessible to all kinds of civilians and also promise to offer a relatively sustainable travel experience. Though tourism capabilities have been shown, every participant would still need a few months of training before they are launched to outer space. Also, other issues need to be addressed: legal clarity on the liability, insurance, and monitoring measures to ensure the safety of investments.

Cryptocurrency: The recent crash indicates a lack of maturity of the crypto market

Vishnu Prasad, 23 May 2021

What happened?

On 18 May, China prohibited its financial institutions from providing cryptocurrency-related services. Earlier this month, on 13 May, Elon Musk stated, that Tesla will stop accepting bitcoin as payment. He tweeted: "We are concerned about rapidly increasing use of fossil fuels for Bitcoin mining and transactions, especially coal, which has the worst emissions of any fuel. Cryptocurrency is a good idea... but this cannot come at great cost to the environment."

The same day, the US officials revealed that it was investigating Binance, as the world's largest cryptocurrency exchange, for tax fraud and money laundering.

What is the background?

First, the remarkable rise of cryptocurrencies. Since the release of bitcoin in 2009, cryptocurrencies have evolved into the market, which is now worth trillions of dollars. The exchange CoinMarketCap estimates the total value of the cryptocurrency market at USD 1.58 trillion. Part of the reason for the rise is the perception that cryptocurrencies are indeed currencies of the future. The blockchain technology on which it is based places emphasis on decentralization and privacy features that appeal to consumers wary of government interference and monitoring of the market.

Second, the lack of maturity of the market. This is evident by the influence that a few individuals have on it. Despite its huge market cap, the fact remains that the cryptocurrency market is only just over a decade old. Unlike conventional stock, the art of investing in the cryptocurrency market is something that most people are still trying to understand, which would explain them relying on what certain influential voices have to

say. A case in point is Musk, who managed to single-handedly drive up the value of the crypto DogeCoin by a factor of thousands, relentlessly promoting it on social media. Musk had also contributed to the rapid rise of Bitcoin by revealing that Tesla had bought billions of dollars' worth of the crypto and has now contributed to its crash.

Third, the antagonistic attitude of the State against cryptocurrencies. Chinese and US officials' stances this week are just the latest in a long line of antagonistic measures that world governments have taken against cryptocurrencies. These governments are motivated by multiple factors. Prime among them is that the decentralized nature of cryptocurrencies takes control away from their hands. The emphasis on privacy also makes it difficult to monitor, as evidenced by hacker groups these days, demanding their ransom in Bitcoin.

Fourth, the rise of "memecoins" giving cryptocurrencies a bad name. While the lack of regulation adds to the appeal of the cryptocurrency markets for many, the fact that anyone can float and promote their own currencies has led to buyers being victims of scams. Many experts point to the rise of memecoins like Doge as a potential red flag. Unlike before Cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin and Ethereum, where the users are either investing in a real-world use or a potential application, memecoins have no intrinsic value apart from the fact that others too are buying it on the hype. Many point out that this is essentially a pyramid scheme — a crash is inevitable the day the hype stops and the early investors will make a profit at the cost of later investors.

What does it mean?

The recent volatility and the rise of coins with virtually no value have led experts to ponder whether a cryptocurrency will ever replace conventional currency. Stability is one of the most important hallmarks of a currency, and cryptocurrencies have so far lacked that. The crash has also raised questions about whether the rapid rise of cryptocurrencies in recent years has been a bubble that has now burst.

