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## 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 (Rwandon 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.