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THE AMERICAS THIS YEAR

Brazil: The COVID turmoil spills over into a political one

By D Suba Chandran, 4 April 2021

What happened?

On 30 March, the military leadership heading the three branches – Army, Navy and Airforce resigned following the Bolsonaro replacing the minister of Defence. During mid-March, Bolsonaro also replaced the health minister. On 29 March, Bolsonaro also removed three ministers from the cabinet – foreign minister, defence minister and justice minister.

On 31 March, President Jair Bolsonaro, a former military officer, observed the military coup in 1964. His Vice President, a former General, tweeted: "On this day, 57 years ago, the Brazilian people with the support of the armed forces stopped the international communist movement from sticking its tongs in Brazil." A small crowd gathered in Rio to observe the same.

What is the background?

First, the rising COVID-19 casualties and the public anger against the President. Brazil's casualty rates have been climbing steeply during the recent weeks and have already crossed 310,000. President Bolsonaro has been accused of not paying serious attention to the nature of the threat and taking adequate action to address the pandemic. He refused to impose lockdown or to insist on social distancing. As a result, there is a mounting casualty, which is yet to reach its peak. There is anger against the President – both at the national and provincial levels.

Second, the efforts by President Bolsonaro to shift the blame on the others. Brazil has witnessed four health ministers during the COVID period since January 2019. The present minister - Marcelo Cartaxo Lopes replaced Eduardo Pazuello in March 2021. Eduardo served only for seven months; he replaced Nelson Teich in September 2020. Nelson Teich replaced Luiz Mandetta; the latter served until March 2020, when Bolsonaro disapproved of his

position on social distancing and COVID strategy. Bolsonaro also replaced Brazil's foreign minister, blaming him for failing to secure COVID vaccines for the country.

Third, a political development outside the COVID crisis in Brazil. The former President of Brazil Luiz Lula (2003-2010) is back now after the Supreme Court dismissed the corruption charges against him. This would mean Lula would be contesting in the forthcoming Presidential election in 2022 against Bolsonaro. Given the public anger, Bolsonaro should be deeply worried, and the changes at the top level in the government should be an attempt to deflect criticism against him.

What does it mean?

Bolsonaro's decision to replace the defence minister and the resignations of the three military chiefs should underline the efforts by the President to have a pliable military. Bolsonaro never shied away from applauding the role of the military and even eulogized it. As the opposition against him mounts, and with Lula's return to politics, he is no longer the strong man of Brazil. The question is: Is Bolsonaro trying to get the military on his side and getting ready to engage it if the opposition mounts against him?

Haiti: Political crisis follows the assassination of President Moïse

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 11 July 2021

What happened?

On 7 July, Haiti's President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated at his residence in Port-au-Prince. Hours later, Joseph Claude Joseph took charge as interim Prime Minister and stated: "A group of individuals who have not been identified... attacked the private residence of the President of the Republic and fatally injured the Head of State." He then declared Haiti to be in a state of siege. A statement made by Claude – Ariel Henry, who Moïse suggested as Prime Ministerial replacement highlights the issue of leadership: "It's an exceptional situation. There is a bit of confusion. I am the Prime Minister in office."

On 8 July, amidst suspicions of external involvement, US President Joe Biden said: "We condemn this heinous act, stand ready to assist as we continue to work for a safe and secure Haiti." Also on 8 July, Colombian Defense Minister Diego Molano, on the identity of the perpetrators, stated: "Interpol has officially requested information about the alleged perpetrators of this crime. Initially, the information indicates that they are Colombian citizens, retired members of the National Army."

What is the background?

First, the assassination of President Moïse. A heavily armed commando unit of 26 Colombians and two Haitian Americans is believed to be behind the attack. The motive of the assassination remains unclear. While a section is accusing the outsiders - especially the mercenaries from Colombia, there are other versions also over the reasons behind his assassination.

Second, the post-assassination political crisis. According to the Haitian constitution, if the President abruptly departs, the head of the Supreme Court is to lead the government; but this position remains vacant since the former head's death. In this power vacuum, the National Assembly could select a new leader; but there is no National Assembly since legislative elections are interminably delayed. This leaves Claude in charge, yet the dilemma persists as Moïse had announced that Claude would be replaced by Ariel Henry, a neurosurgeon connected to the opposition. Despite politicians and other stakeholders expressing their displeasure in Claude taking charge, a transition seems unlikely amidst the crisis.

Third, the pre-assassination political crises. Even before the assassination, Haiti was in chaos. The country was battered by protests, economic crises, and the pandemic. The crux of the problem was Moïse's illegitimate rule – him overstaying his mandate garnered strong opposition and subsequent countrywide protests. Limiting judicial review and the creation of an intelligence service that answered only to the President further aggravated the public. Haiti's shaky political situation also increased the

violence by armed gangs across the country. Large parts of the country are now controlled by these gangs, and the police are rendered inefficient. With the spiralling inflation, worsening coronavirus pandemic, and scarcity of food and fuel – the economic and social crisis only worsened the situation.

Fourth, the history of external interference in Haiti. International actors like the US and the UN have failed to stabilize Haitian politics despite their immense influence and long history of intervention. Despite the Biden administration's pledge to assist in the investigation, the US turned down Haiti's request for troops to help maintain security – stating they had no intention of providing military assistance at this juncture. Another matter of Haitian concern is the Colombian involvement – 17 of the 26 assailants involved had retired from the Colombian army. The play of double standards raises questions about foreign collusion.

What does it mean?

The assassination has raised more questions over immediate and long term issues. With the power struggle already in motion – who will lead the country? The political crisis will exacerbate the security situation. Though Haiti would be looking for some international support to maintain order in the immediate future, the US is less likely to get involved.

The deteriorating economic and social situation will only worsen the situation for Haiti.

Elections in Honduras

By Porkkodi Ganeshpandian, 5 December 2021

What happened?

On 28 November, Honduras held its presidential, congressional and local elections. Early counting of the votes indicated the lead of Xiomara Castro, a leftist candidate of the Liberty and Refoundation Party (LIBRE).

On 1 December, the presently ruling conservative National Party's candidate, Nasry Asfura, conceded defeat. This paved the way for the rise of the first female President in Honduras,

Xiomara Castro. This also leads to the return of the left in Honduras after twelve years.

What is the background?

First, the elections. Honduras is known for its low-voter turnouts. The protests following the 2017 elections caused a massive migration of Hondurans. However, the 2021 elections witnessed the highest voter turnout in twenty-four years and a peaceful post-election process. Hernandez is implicated in a narcotic case, under investigation in the US.

Second, the politics of Honduras. The institutions established to battle corruption in Honduras had existed as a mere shadow under the Hernandez administration. Several graft scandals have plagued the ruling National Party for years. Two hurricanes and the covid19 pandemic has led to a nine per cent reduction of Honduras's GDP, resulting in a sharp rise in poverty and unemployment in the region. The campaign promises made by Castro offered to lessen the restrictions that Honduras faced under a conservative rule for twelve years. These include liberal abortion restrictions, support to the UN's fight against corruption, and a major constitutional overhaul.

Third, the campaign promises of Castro. She has promised to institute an anti-corruption commission backed by the United Nations to probe the allegations of corruption under the Hernandez administration. She has also promised to strengthen diplomatic relations with Beijing. This has served to cement her victory as she is seen to be the only leader who can navigate through the economic and political chaos of the past four years. Her rival, Asfura, was less advantaged with his association with Hernandez's party, despite his promise to attempt a tax reduction scheme.

Fourth, the support for the left. Past election trends in Honduran elections since the coup of 2009 indicate a minor difference between the votes secured by the National Party and the LIBRE. However, the 2021 elections broke the tradition. Among the fifty-two per cent of the votes counted, Castro had secured fifty-three per cent whereas her rival had secured only thirty-four per cent of the votes.

What does it mean?

The return of the Left in the Honduran elections establishes no observable pattern in Honduran politics. However, the victory of the Castro could significantly alter Honduran politics in the days to come. First, Honduras is bound to contribute to the emerging divide between the leftist and rightist rulers in the Latin American Region. Second, Honduras is set for stability in domestic politics, given the ambitious and necessary campaign promises of Castro. The aim to fight Honduran corruption has already met with the approval of the United States. This would result in a turbulence in the Honduran foreign policy, especially with Castro's desire to establish friendly relations with Beijing, the rival of the largest trading partner of Honduras. Yet, the 2021 elections in Honduras with the highest voter turnout in twenty-four years has proven that the state is now set to establish a more liberal democracy that would attempt to gradually undo the shortcomings of the past.

Peru: The election is symbolic of the left-right struggle in South America

By Porkkodi Ganeshpandian, 13 June 2021

What happened?

On 6 May, the runoff presidential elections were held in Peru between the top two contenders Pedro Castillo and Keiko Fujimori. On 11 June, with 95 per cent of the vote tallied, Castillo claimed victory by virtue of having a lead of 0.5 per cent over Fujimori, who promptly disputed the results. However, the country's electoral board is yet to certify the elections officially and is reviewing disputed ballots. After Fujimori's allegations, Castillo said: "We call on the Peruvian people to stay alert."

What is the background?

First, the contrasting background of the two candidates. Fujimori is the scion of Peru's powerful political families. Her father Alberto Fujimori ruled Peru in the nineties and is currently in jail for atrocities committed during his rule. Her far-right philosophies contrast with those of Castillo, a Communist school teacher and an outsider who was not even a member of

his Peru Libre party before entering the presidential race.

Second, the anger in Peru over Lima's political elite. Peru is marked by a deep divide between the capital Lima and the interior regions. More than 65 per cent of the country's GDP is concentrated in Lima. The country's statistics bureau estimates that urban poverty is 26 per cent but the number for rural communities is 46 per cent. Rural indigenous voters were not even able to vote until 1979, when suffrage was extended to illiterate voters as well. Castillo's election slogan — no more poor in a rich country — has managed to tap into the sentiment of the rural population who believe that the rural regions were governed for Lima's benefit. Castillo is only the second president in modern Peru's history to come from the country's interior provinces. Eighty per cent of Castillo's support comes from the Ayacucho, Cusco, and Puno, regions where in recent years, the rise of extractive industries have gone hand-in-hand with an increase in poverty.

Third, the upheaval caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Peru has the biggest per-capita death toll from the coronavirus pandemic in the world, with more than 180,000 people dead. A sizeable section of Peru's workforce is informal workers who were particularly hit-hard by the lockdowns and social distancing measures. Multiple reports credited the deep divide in society to the upheaval caused by the pandemic.

Fourth, the battle between right and left in South America. The election in Peru is symbolic of the larger battle between the left and right-wing forces that is characteristic of South American politics. Ever since South American countries established democratic governments after Cold War-era dictatorships, their elections often have been a straight shoot-out between left-wing parties promising social change to the marginalized populace and right-wing politicians seeking to profit off anti-Communist propaganda. The Peruvian elections were no different with Castillo appealing to Peru's rural masses with promises of nationalization of resources but having to fight off allegations of links to the far-left terrorist outfit, the Shining Path. Fujimori, a relatively unpopular candidate,

hit by repeated corruption allegations, only managed to gather just 13 per cent of the vote in the initial elections. She was able to close the gap on Castillo in the runoff, only because of the anti-Communist feat among certain sections.

What does it mean?

The result is likely to continue the chaos in Peruvian politics. Peru has already seen four presidents in the last five years. The uncertain mandate, along with Fujimori's allegations of voter fraud and a hostile parliament, will make Castillo's position precarious. His radical electoral promises of land reforms and a new constitution are likely to be met with significant resistance from the country's conservative forces.

Read alongside victories for the left in Chile and protests against conservative rulers in other South American countries, the result in Peru might be the harbinger of a second pink tide. The coronavirus pandemic has only added impetus to this process by exposing the deep divide between various classes across the continent.

Peru: After month-long political drama, Castillo's election confirmed

By Vishnu Prasad, 25 July 2021

What happened?

On 19 July, Pedro Castillo was confirmed as Peru's president-elect by the country's election authority more than a month after the elections. Castillo, a Marxist school teacher, had led his right-wing rival, Keiko Fujimori, by 44,000 votes before the latter's allegation of voter fraud delayed official certification of results. Castillo will be sworn in on 28 July.

Castillo said: "We are going to work together and bring this country together. We are going to reject anything that goes against democracy." On the same day, Jorge Luis Salas, head of the Jurado Nacional de Elecciones (JNE) elections jury, announced Castillo's victory.

What is the background?

First, Peru's fragile democracy. At one point, the tactics utilized by the Fujimori camp made it look like the verdict of the people would not be respected. Despite multiple officials and organizations certifying the elections as clean, Fujimori had made claims of voter fraud. Clearly the camp with more financial and political power, she had hired an army of lawyers in an attempt to overturn the result. However, the country's election authority had held firm and systematically disposed of all her claims before declaring Castillo the winner. The development comes after a few rough years for Peruvian democracy, with five presidents coming and going in five years. Castillo's rival had contested the results from Peru's rural areas where she had virtually no support and had disputed almost 200,000 ballots. Her camp had filed 760 requests for annulment of polling stations. However, she had furnished little to no evidence to back up her claims.

Second, the rise of the Left in Peruvian politics. Leftist forces had been of little consequence in Peruvian politics, with the country remaining a bastion of neo-liberal forces since Alberto Fujimori's rule in the 1990s. While the rest of the continent had turned towards the left during the pink tide of the early 2000s, Peru had staunchly stayed out. This was especially peculiar considering how unequal wealth distribution was in Peru. Castillo's election finally represents a credible leftist movement in a country that had resisted one for decades.

Third, the influence that the Right still holds. Castillo may have won the election, but that he was only able to do so with a thin margin is telling. The same goes for the Peruvian Parliament where Castillo's Peru Libre, the largest party with 37 seats, still find themselves outflanked by various right-wing parties. Despite all the factors against them, the right in Peru has not been swept away in the wave that had propelled Castillo to power.

What does this mean?

Castillo has some difficult promises to keep. The 51-year-old ran a populist campaign with promises including the nationalization of

resources and heavy spending on welfare activities. Though he has softened on some of his more radical promises, it remains to be seen just how much of his agenda he will be allowed to pursue by Peru's parliament which is still controlled by right-wing parties. Fujimori, after losing the 2016 elections, had used her party's numbers in the parliament to make the country virtually ungovernable. There is every chance that right-wing parties could form a coalition against Castillo's leftist policies and force a repeat of the same.

Castillo's victory also raises the prospect of a second pink tide in Latin America. The past couple of years have seen setbacks to conservative governments. Mexico and Argentina elected presidents with leftist leanings while Chile recently gave right-wing parties just 20 percent of the vote when they elected a constitutional assembly. Colombia's Ivan Duque finds his position precarious after recent turmoil. In Brazil, former president Lula Da Silva is leading opinion polls ahead of next year's elections.

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masses with promises of nationalization of resources but having to fight off allegations of links to the far-left terrorist outfit, the Shining Path. Fujimori, a relatively unpopular candidate, hit by repeated corruption allegations, only managed to gather just 13 per cent of the vote in the initial elections. She was able to close the gap on Castillo in the runoff, only because of the anti-Communist feat among certain sections.

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Read alongside victories for the left in Chile and protests against conservative rulers in other South American countries, the result in Peru might be the harbinger of a second pink tide. The coronavirus pandemic has only added impetus to this process by exposing the deep divide between various classes across the continent.

Canada: Justin Trudeau wins but fails to secure a majority

By Vaishnavi Iyer, 26 September 2021

What happened?

On 20 September, Trudeau's Liberal Party won the snap elections with a minority vote. The party won 158 seats as compared to the 157 seats in the 2019 elections. Despite the conservative party's extremely moderate pitch, the party won 119 seats as compared to the 121 seats in 2019. The bloc won 34 seats, and the NDP won 25 seats. Thus, the new government elected in Canada is again a minority government.

On 21 September, in his victory speech, Trudeau said: "Our government is ready." He also noted:

"You are sending us back to work with a clear mandate to get Canada through this pandemic and to the brighter days ahead, and my friends, that's exactly what we are ready to do." In his short speech, he stated that the moment Canada faces demands real and important change and that the voters have given his government clear direction.

On 21 September, Erin O'Toole, the opposition leader spoke to his supporters on the night of the elections where the Liberals were projected to lead a minority government. He said: "I will never stop serving this great country". He emphasized that Canadian voters did not give Trudeau the majority he desired and that "A few days ago Mr. Trudeau was saying he would hold another election in 18 months if he didn't get what he wants". He called Trudeau's moves a "power grab" and insisted that Canada must heal divides and not risk the nation for selfish gains.

What's the background?

First, the snap elections. The call for the snap elections came on 15 August 2021, just halfway into Trudeau's term. The next round of elections was scheduled for 16 October 2021; however, the Trudeau government insisted that the Parliament was slipping into "dysfunctionalism" along with "obstruction and toxicity" levels, which was of real concern.

Second, the electoral debate. Both parties indulged in aggressive campaigning. Trudeau focused on the management of the pandemic by his government and vaccine passports. He attacked the Opposition for bolstering anti-vaxxers as O'Toole had previously opposed mandatory vaccination. He mentioned his campaign is: "at a crossroads, at a moment where we have to make a really important choice". The Opposition referred to Trudeau's call for snap elections "selfish" amidst the fourth wave of the pandemic. O'Toole said: "Now is the time for Canadians to make a choice. We can choose to settle for second-best - for a party that hardly tries and barely delivers. Or, we can choose to believe in a brighter, better, more united future."

What does this mean?

First, the failure of Trudeau to garner majority. The motive of the snap elections was to generate a majority government. Polls in August reflected a slight rise in the popularity of the Liberal Party. Relying on the conventional wisdom of Canadian voters preferring a majority rule by the incumbent rather than a prolonged minority rule, the snap elections were expected to generate a clear majority. This was not achieved.

Second, the no-change Parliament. Trudeau will have to address the same issues of climate change, opioid abuse, debt and deficit planning in an almost similar parliamentary set-up. The electoral debates revealed the dissatisfaction of the Opposition; this may lead to a slightly more unstable parliament for Trudeau to rejoin. Moreover, the polls revealed that the opposition seats fell by two, indicating that a moderate pitch for conservatives was ineffective.

Greenland: Opposition's electoral victory will affect the rare earth mining

By Harini Madhusudan, 11 April 2021

What happened?

On 6 April, Greenland's main opposition party, a left-leaning Community of the People party, or Inuit Ataqatigiit, secured more than a third of votes in the snap parliamentary elections. In the 31 seats Greenlandic National Assembly, this indigenous, pro-environment, and pro-independence party has secured 12 seats, with a 37 per cent share of the votes. The ruling centre-left Forward or the Siumut Party won 10 seats, with 29 per cent of the votes.

Inuit Ataqatigiit's leader Múte Bourup Egede who campaigned with an anti-uranium stance, stated that "the people have spoken" and revealed that the project would be halted. The head of the Siumut Party, Erik Jensen, admitted that the controversy surrounding the Kvanefjeld mine to be "one of the main reasons" for its defeat.

What is the background?

First, the controversy over the mining project and the collapse of the government. Two issues

dominated the current elections: the people's living conditions and the health and environmental concerns. At the core of the snap elections stood the proposed international mining project by Greenland Minerals - an Australia-based company with Chinese ownership. Greenland Minerals has been seeking a license to operate the Kvanefjeld mine in southern Greenland. Despite the intentions to break away from its economic dependence on Denmark, many concerns have been raised about the potential for radioactive pollution and toxic waste in the farmland surrounding the proposed mine. A strong disagreement over the project within the Parliament led to the collapse of Greenland's government earlier in 2021.

Second, the eco-geopolitics of rare earths and the mining industry. So far, China accounts for more than 90 per cent of the global rare earth production. The Kvanefjeld is near the Ilimaussaq Alkaline Complex in southern Greenland. The project has promised a large-scale, low-cost, long-term supplier of products. The location has year-round direct shipping access and is comfortably situated less than 10 km from tidewater. Uranium estimates show the Kvanefjeld mine could hold the largest deposit of rare-earth metals outside China. The calculation has led to international interest in Greenland's natural resources. While the winning party has announced to halt the project, on 9 April, Greenland Minerals, which has been operating in the region since 2007, revealed that their environmental and social impact assessments would run till 1 June. The company has met the requirements for public consultation and had been accepted by the Greenland government.

Third, the role of rare earths projects in the local economy. Greenland's economy relies on fishing and subsidies from the Danish government for almost half of its budget. Due to the climate impact on the region and the melting ice, mining opportunities increase throughout the lower Arctic region. This is coupled with an increasing sentiment within a part of the Greenland society to move away from their dependence on Denmark. While Kvanefjeld's development strategy is focused on the production of rare

earths, almost 80 per cent of the project revenue is expected to be generated with Uranium, Zinc, and Fluorspar byproducts. Greenland minerals have often asserted that it is focused on the rare earths and not just Uranium. These production strategies of the company have raised strong concerns over the impact on the pristine environment of Greenland. However, it also remains one of the very few sustainable options for the independence of the Greenland economy.

What does it mean?

This election result, marks an end to the Forward Party's almost-continuous reign of the Greenlandic National Parliament since 1979. The increase in popularity of the Inuit Ataqatigiit, and the increase in awareness of the impact of climate change, can be seen in line with the growth of green/ pro-climate/ pro-environment political parties within Europe.

Though the left-leaning party has emerged victorious, an estimated 34 per cent of the voters have not voted for either party, which could mean that the other concerns of the Greenland peoples took a back seat over the mining issue.

The US and Russia: Biden-Putin video conference

By Padmashree Anandhan, 12 December 2021

What happened?

On 7 December, US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin met in a video conference in a diplomatic effort to reduce the building tensions in the eastern border of Ukraine.

The US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said: "President Biden was direct and straightforward with President Putin, as he always is. He reiterated America's support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. He told President Putin directly that if Russia further invades Ukraine, the United States and our European allies would respond with strong economic measures. He also told President Putin

there's another option: de-escalation and diplomacy."

The Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said: "I believe that Ukraine's victory is that the United States has always supported Ukraine, our sovereignty, our independence, and we enjoyed bipartisan support. But, most importantly, we now see that there is a personal, real reaction and role of President Biden in resolving this conflict, the war in the east of our country."

Russian President Putin refused to make a clear statement on the incursion of troops into Ukraine. However, he firmly said that Russia would not sit back while NATO grew stronger.

What is the background?

First, the search for a Russia strategy by the US. The post-2014 US towards Russia began to shift when Trump wanted to strike a balance between sanctions and rapprochement with Putin and Russia. The Biden administration now continues this strategy. On the one hand, Biden held a virtual conference with Putin. On the other hand, Biden is also conducting a democracy summit and calling other democratic nations to defend democracy, with Russia and China in mind.

Second, the China factor. With the rise of China and the growing closeness between Moscow and Beijing, the US is redrafting its foreign policy towards Russia and Putin. The Biden-Putin meeting for the US is a strategy to smoothen relations with Russia. To compete with China and for any UN-based approach, having Russia by its side is an advantage for the US.

Third, Ukraine as a trigger. Ukraine is only a spec in America's agenda, as the US aims to have positive relations and redraft its foreign policy towards Russia. For Ukraine, the meeting is not a breakthrough.

What does this mean?

The virtual meet is timely as Russia assembles tens of thousands of its troops in the Ukrainian borders. For the US, the primary aim is to prevent Russia from joining hands with China, especially when the US might need Russia's support in the UN.

From the US to China: Releasing the strategic oil reserves

By Ashwin Immanuel Dhanabalan, 28 November 2021

What happened?

On 23 November, the US President announced the release of 50 million barrels of oil from the "Strategic Petroleum Reserve" to counter the rising oil prices. India announced to release 5 million barrels of crude oil from its reserves with China, Japan, South Korea and the UK. The US would release 32 million barrels as an exchange over the months, which would eventually return to the reserves. While only 18 million barrels will be sold, this sale was approved by Congress in 2018 under the Bipartisan Budget Act.

On 24 November, China stated that it would release strategic crude oil depending on its actual needs. This would be the second time in two months that China has released its strategic reserves. The UK Government had authorised the release of 1.5 million barrels of strategic reserves to ease pressure on oil prices and mentioned that they would work closely with the US to support the global economy during the pandemic. The OPEC+ coalition, led by Saudi Arabia and Russia, are considering pausing their effort of increased production of "400,000 barrels a day until they hit pre-pandemic levels of production".

What is the background?

First, the strategic oil reserves, and their release in the recent decades. The idea of strategic oil reserves was introduced after 1973 when the OPEC countries had imposed an embargo concerning the US's support of Israel. The US strategically released oil "For Operational sale" for the first time in 1991 during Operation Desert Storm. The second time was in 2005 during Hurricane Katrina and the last time was in 2011 due to the civil war in Libya.

Second, the 2011 and the 2021 releases. The difference between the two periods is how the US releases oil without an immediate emergency. In 2011 there was an urgent need for

countries to step in as Libya was not supplying oil to Europe, its predominant importer of crude oil. So, the US and other countries compensated by releasing their strategic oil reserves to meet the demands. In 2011, the Obama administration's oil reserve release was managed by the International Energy Agency (IEA). While now, it is spearheaded by Biden, who has been coordinating with other countries to reduce the global prices of oil.

Third, the OPEC response. Biden had approached the OPEC countries to rapidly increase their production to bridge the gap in supply and demand. But, the OPEC countries declined, as they were already on a plan to increase production by 400,000 barrels per day till they reached pre-pandemic levels of production. Another reason was the pandemic and the disruptions faced by the OPEC countries in 2020, which led to them downsizing their oil production as the demand fell to an all-time low.

Besides, the 23 nation OPEC+ coalition has planned to meet on 1 and 2 December to decide if they would have to pause their increase in production in January 2022 to tackle the sudden release of strategic oil reserves.

What does it mean?

First, volatile oil prices, as there has been a rapid rise and fall in the price of oil before and after the announcement. Second, the importance of strategic oil reserves during emergencies will be rethought as a medium to counter oil politics globally. Third, the world will reconsider its global shift to cleaner renewable energy sources with the surging demand and not enough time to meet those requirements. Fourth, the upcoming OPEC meeting would be a game-changer as it would either make or break the oil prices.

The US: After getting passed by the Senate, Biden's infrastructure bill is in trouble as the House Democrats differ

By D Suba Chandran, 3 October 2021

What happened?

On 1 October 2021, after meeting the Congress legislators over the voting of his ambitious and historic bill on infrastructure, Biden said: "It doesn't matter whether it's in six minutes, six days or six weeks, we're going to get it done." Biden has also asked the House to delay the voting until there is an agreement within. The bill aims to invest massively in the infrastructure – in terms of building and repairing roads, bridges and related infrastructural projects.

On 30 September, in a statement released by the White House, Jen Psaki, the Press Secretary, said: "While Democrats do have some differences, we share common goals of creating good union jobs, building a clean energy future, cutting taxes for working families and small businesses, helping to give those families breathing room on basic expenses—and doing it without adding to the deficit, by making those at the top pay their fair share." He also said: "A great deal of progress has been made this week, and we are closer to an agreement than ever. But we are not there yet, and so, we will need some additional time to finish the work...."

On 28 September, Rashida Tlaib, one of the Democrats who questions the bill tweeted: "Let me be clear: bringing the so-called bipartisan infrastructure plan to a vote without the #BuildBackBetter Act at the same time is a betrayal... We will hold the line and vote it down."

What is the background?

First, the ambitious infrastructure bill announced by Biden. In his words, it is "a historic investment in the nation's roads and highways, bridges and transit; in our drinking water systems; in broadband, clean energy, environmental clean-up; and making infrastructure more resilient and the climate crisis much more in our minds as to how do we deal with it." On 9 August, the Senate passed the

USD 1.2 trillion package, with a 69-30 majority; this happened after a bipartisan debate that included 19 Republicans voting in favour of the bill. Following the vote by the Senate, the House was to vote this week; however, this could not happen due to differences within.

Second, the divide within the Democrats. While Biden could get the infrastructure bill passed in the Senate, he is facing a challenge in the House, primarily from his party – the Democrats. The party stands divided between the moderate and progressive sections. The progressives, questioning the bill (and Biden) within the Democrats, want a broader social safety net package. They would like to pass the Build Back Better Act, along with the infrastructure bill. According to a White House brief, "the Build Back Better Agenda is an ambitious plan to create jobs, cut taxes, and lower costs for working families – all paid for by making the tax code fairer and making the wealthiest and large corporations pay their fair share." While the infrastructure bill itself is ambitious, the other one is even more, with a budget of over USD 3.5 trillion. A section within the Democrats, including Biden, have decoupled the two and prioritized the infrastructure bill; this is the primary difference between the two groups. The larger difference between the two sections is over whether the focus should be primarily on building infrastructure or on social welfare. While the conservatives within the Democrats look at the former, the other section opposing the infrastructure bill see the larger bill and investment in infrastructure as a part of a strategy. While Biden would agree to both, he will have to calibrate the expenditure that comes with, and the numbers that he has in the Senate.

Third, Biden's recent troubles. The President has been engaged in firefighting since August, diverting his attention. Strong criticism and condemnations over the US exit from Afghanistan, treatment of migrants along the US-Mexico border (especially the Haitians), and the COVID numbers and recovery have placed Biden on a backfoot.

What does this mean?

The good thing over the recent differences within the Democrats on the infrastructure bill is Biden's statement and efforts to build consensus within before passing the same. The challenge for him is to reach there. The divide within the Democrats should be the single largest challenge for Biden – both within and outside. Despite the challenge, Biden is likely to reach a consensus.

Quad: Expanding the areas of cooperation into regional infrastructure, emerging technologies and cyber

By D Suba Chandran, 26 September 2021

What happened?

On 24 September, welcoming the other three leaders of Quad, the US President Biden said: "This group meeting of democratic partners who share a world view and have a common vision for the future, coming together to take on key challenges of our age, from COVID to climate to emerging technologies... When we met six months ago, we made concrete commitments to advance our shared and positive agenda for a free and open Indo-Pacific. Today, I'm proud to say that we're making excellent progress... In sum, we are four major democracies with a long history of cooperation. We know how to get things done, and we are up to the challenge." The other three Prime Ministers echoed the same sentiment in their statements.

On 24 September, the Quad leaders also released a joint statement. The joint statement stressed "shared security and prosperity" and "a free and open Indo-Pacific." The statement recommitted "to promoting the free, open, rules-based order, rooted in international law and undaunted by coercion, to bolster security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and beyond." It also emphasized "the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and territorial integrity of states."

The joint statement also stressed the need for the Quad to work with partners in Southeast Asia and Europe. It said: "We commit to work together and with a range of partners. We

reaffirm our strong support for ASEAN's unity and centrality and for ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, and we underscore our dedication towards working with ASEAN and its member states—the heart of the Indo-Pacific region—in practical and inclusive ways. We also welcome the September 2021 EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific."

The joint statement stressed cooperation in five specific fields – COVID vaccines, climate change and clean energy, emerging technologies, regional infrastructure, and cyberspace. Besides the above five areas, the joint statement also had a special focus on the Indo-Pacific and the role planned for the Quad. Recognizing that the shared futures of the four countries "will be written in the Indo-Pacific," the joint statement has promised redoubling the efforts "to ensure that the Quad is a force for regional peace, stability, security, and prosperity."

What is the background?

First, the Quad reemphasis and broadbasing. Ever since Biden took over as the President, there has been a push to make the Quad effective. Though the idea of Quad emerged in 2004, there was a slow push during the first phase. In recent years, there has been a new push to realize the potential of the four countries in the Quad. With Biden at the helm, there has been an effort to find specific areas that would bring the four countries closer; cooperation in emerging technologies, cyberspace and COVID vaccines – is an attempt to broaden the Quad focus.

Second, Quad as a pillar of the Indo-Pacific push. Obama referred to a US Pivot and later the Indo-Pacific; however, none transformed into an action plan with specific goals and strategies. Under Biden, there is an effort to see the Quad as not an end (in terms of cooperation between the four countries), but a means to achieve a larger objective in the Indo-Pacific.

Third, building a larger partnership along with the Quad. During the last few months, the US has attempted to revisit its Southeast Asia linkages. Vice President Kamala Harris visited Southeast Asia. The recent pact between

Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS) aims to widen the US partnership in the Indo-Pacific. The 24 September Quad statement on North Korea, ASEAN and Europe should be viewed in this backdrop.

Fourth, the China factor. Though the Quad has been careful in not bringing Beijing as a part of its focus or statements, China's absence in the statements makes it more present. All four countries have bilateral issues with China at different levels.

What does it mean?

First, the operationalization of Quad. The recent statement provides a larger space for the Quad to cooperate; from issues of COVID vaccines to emerging technologies, cyber, and regional infrastructure, there is a new critical push. Building regional infrastructure is an essential prerequisite to make the region self-sufficient; as collateral, a regional infrastructure may also provide an alternative to the countries in the region. Currently, China has been the most significant player in the region in supporting the regional infrastructure through its BRI.

Second, Biden taking the Quad mantle. The other three countries, though work closely at a bilateral level, may not lead, given their limited political, economic, and technological capabilities.

Third, China factor in bringing the four countries on a common platform. With the bilateral relations with Beijing strained during recent years, India and Australia are keen to find multilateral frameworks to meet the China challenge. Did China force the Quad countries to come together is a different question; Beijing would see the four countries exploring new avenues to bring them together.

AUKUS: The US-led new security alliance brings UK and Australia onboard but upsets France

By Lokendra Sharma, 19 September 2021

What happened?

On 15 September, the US President Joe Biden, the UK PM Boris Johnson and Australian PM Scott Morrison, in a joint virtual press conference, launched a new security partnership in the Indo-Pacific. AUKUS is an acronym for Australia, the UK and the US. According to the joint statement, the AUKUS "will focus on cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and additional undersea capabilities". However, the main highlight is the pledge by the US and UK to "support Australia in acquiring nuclear-powered submarines for the Royal Australian Navy".

The US President Biden said in a statement: "Today, we're taking another historic step to deepen and formalize cooperation among all three of our nations because we all recognize the imperative of ensuring peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific over the long term". Australia PM Morrison called it a "next-generation partnership" while the UK PM Johnson called it "a new chapter in our friendship". The Chinese Foreign Ministry called the move "extremely irresponsible" and said that the alliance "seriously undermines regional peace and stability and intensifies the arms race and undermined international non-proliferation efforts".

On 16 September, New Zealand's PM reaffirmed her country's decades-old policy of being a nuclear-free zone. She said: "New Zealand's position in relation to the prohibition of nuclear-powered vessels in our waters remains unchanged".

On 17 September, France recalled its ambassadors to the US and Australia over the cancellation of the multi-billion-dollar deal for conventional submarines by Australia in lieu of the new deal for nuclear-powered submarines. The French Foreign Minister called it "unacceptable behaviour between allies and partners".

What is the background?

First, the US efforts to build multiple alliances in the Indo-Pacific. Considering China as the primary security threat and in continuation with the Obama-era pivot, the US has in recent years been shifting its attention to the Indo-Pacific from the Trans-Atlantic and Middle East regions. This has entailed establishing multiple arrangements like Quad (and now the AUKUS), strengthening engagement with regional groupings like ASEAN and repurposing long-standing alliances like Five Eyes.

Second, the centrality of Australia and the deteriorating China-Australia relationship. While Australia was already a part of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance and the Quad, membership in the AUKUS has cemented the centrality of Australia in the Indo-Pacific strategy of the US. It has also pushed the already deteriorating relationship between China and Australia over maritime and trade issues to a point-of-no-return.

Third, the UK's role in the Indo-Pacific. While Australia and the US are part of the Indo-Pacific, the UK is not (except some colonial territories). The UK's assertiveness in the region has increased in recent months, especially after Brexit, to arrest its declining global influence. In July 2021, a British naval strike group led by the country's largest warship HMS Queen Elizabeth sailed through the hotly contested South China Sea and held naval drills with Japan. The UK has also announced its intention to station two patrol ships permanently in the Indo-Pacific with logistical support from Japan, Australia and Singapore. France has also increased the frequency of naval deployment in the Indo-Pacific, including the South China Sea.

What does it mean?

First, the significance of nuclear-powered submarines. While the AUKUS alliance partners have clarified that the submarines would not be armed by nuclear weapons but would only be powered by nuclear energy, it would still give Australia the capability to project power in the maritime region. These submarines are capable of staying underwater for long durations and also are comparatively more silent and harder to

detect. This will be disadvantageous for China, which, despite decades of investment in its navy, still lags in underwater warfare capabilities.

Second, the US move to build a security alliance with the UK and US while sidelining Quad for this purpose implies a realization in the US that India and Japan would be reluctant to give the Quad an explicit security and military character. It appears that the US is moving forward on a two-pronged strategy to contain China in the Indo-Pacific region: a security alliance on the one hand and a larger political alliance on the other. This will also pave the way for further expansion of Quad to include other countries threatened by China. How China reacts to this two-pronged strategy beyond the usual rhetoric has to be closely watched.

Third, while the cancellation of the deal by Australia after years of negotiations has instilled a sense of betrayal in France, it would take considerable diplomatic effort to heal the strained ties between the AUKUS members and France. The divide, however, would be a temporary one.

US: 20 years after 9/11

By D Suba Chandran, 12 September 2021

What happened?

On 11 September 2021, the US remembered the terrorist attacks that took place twenty years ago on the same day. President Biden and two former Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama took part in the ceremony at ground zero in New York, where more than 2700 people lost their lives when those two planes plunged into the twin towers. As had been the case since 2001, the family members of those who had lost their lives in those attacks, came to the venue, read the names and remembered them. President Obama said: “9/11 reminded us how so many Americans give of themselves in extraordinary ways - not just in moments of great crisis, but every single day...Let’s never forget that, and let’s never take them for granted.”

Similar events were held in Shanksville in Pennsylvania, where the United Airlines flight 93 crashed, after the plans of the hijackers’ failed. Former President George Bush took part in the remembrance meeting; President Biden also was there, after being at ground zero in New York. George Bush in his remarks, warned of the “violence that gathers from within” and said: “There is little cultural overlap between violent extremists abroad and violent extremists at home...But in their disdain for pluralism, in their disregard for human life, in their determination to defile national symbols - they are children of the same foul spirit, and it is our continuing duty to confront them.”

Elsewhere in the US, at the Pentagon ceremony, where 184 were killed on the same day in 2001, Gen Mark Milley said: “The people we lost that day are not just names and numbers...We remember them today for not only who they were, but who they could have become.”

On 10 September, President Biden, in a video message, remarked: “To me, that’s the central lesson of Sept. 11th, is that at our most vulnerable - the push and pull of all that makes us human, and the battle for the soul of America - unity is our greatest strength...We find light in the darkness. We find purpose to repair, renew and rebuild. And as my friend told me that September, 20 years ago: We must not be afraid.” He tweeted: “20 years after September 11, 2001, we commemorate the 2,977 lives we lost and honour those who risked and gave their lives. As we saw in the days that followed, unity is our greatest strength. It’s what makes us who we are - and we can’t forget that.”

What is the background?

First, remembering 9/11. Ever since 2001, the Americans have come together on 11 September on the three main locations – Pentagon, Manhattan and Shanksville to remember the lives lost to the terrorist attack perpetrated by al Qaeda. As President Biden remarked in his video message, they would commemorate those whose lives were lost. Biden said: “To the families of the 2,977 people, from more than 90 nations...America and the world commemorate you and your loved ones, the pieces of your

soul... We honor all those who are risked and gave their lives in the minutes, hours, months and years afterwards.”

Second, the global position of the US as a superpower, since 2001. When al Qaeda terrorists attacked the US in 2001, the US was leading a unipolar world. Russia was weak, and China was yet to emerge. Europe was an American ally. Outside the 9/11 attack, that should have been one of the significant moments for the US as a sole superpower in the post-World War II period. In the next twenty years, that moment would slowly. In 2021, as the US commemorate twenty years of 9/11, its global position as a superpower is questioned by the rise of China, resurgent Russia and a troubled relationship with its trans-Atlantic partner – Europe. Afghanistan and Iran, where the US invested substantially in the last two decades are seen as failures.

Third, the US legacy of the War on Terrorism. After 9/11, the US declared a war on terrorism. As Bush said, one is with the US, or against it. From the United Nations to Russia, many went along with the US. Al Qaeda was the primary target then; later, Iraq became the second major target. Today, twenty years later, after the killing of Saddam Hussain and Osama bin Laden, has the US emerged successful? Al Qaeda network has been neutralised; some would argue, it has got dispersed more in the last two decades and have found its place in Africa and Southeast Asia. The last two decades also witnessed the rise of ISIS, another global terror network, deadlier than al Qaeda. While the US mainland has been saved from any further terrorist attacks, there were a series of high profile terror attacks in Europe. Madrid train bombings in 2004, London bombings in 2007, Paris attacks in 2015 and Brussels attacks in 2016 were a few high profile attacks in Europe.

Fourth, the divide within the US, during the last two decades. Former President Bush’s remarks on 11 September 2021, regarding the violence that is gathering “from within” and the “cultural overlap between violent extremists abroad and violent extremists at home” should underline the decline within. The Trump years, the attack on

US Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Texas legislation banning abortion are a few examples of the challenges that the US poses across the spectrum from within covering extremism, racism and gender.

What does it mean?

The challenge for Biden is substantial, as he leads the US into the third decade after 9/11. There are serious fault lines within, besides the above social ones. Post-pandemic economic recovery, industrial resurgence, and infrastructural investments are a few areas, where the US would have to look inwards if it has to play a larger global role. An internally divided and economically weak US would pull Washington down to act as a global player. Externally, the rise of China would pose a challenge; however, it is not insurmountable. The challenge would be to build a coalition with its trans-Atlantic partners and build new ones across the Indo-Pacific.

Biden could either remake the US and ensure that it plays its global role, or break it further, and lead to its further decline. The 2020s should be the most crucial decade for the US, since the end of the Second World War.

The Nord Stream-2: Agreements, disagreements and controversies

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 25 July 2021

What happened?

On 15 July, US President Joe Biden said: "My view on Nord Stream 2 has been known for some time. Good friends can disagree... Russia must not be allowed to use energy as a weapon to coerce or threaten its neighbors."

On 21 July, the US-Germany joint statement released by Biden and German Chancellor Angela Merkel saw Germany promising to implement the Minsk agreements via the Normandy format while condemning Russian aggression. It reiterated how Germany would retaliate – both from the European and national level – if Russia weaponized' energy to achieve

its political agendas. It also promised a 10-year extension of the Moscow-Kyiv gas transit agreement. Energy transitions of Ukraine and other Central and Eastern European countries will also be supported. The establishment of the Green Fund backing Ukraine's energy sector through investments was also announced.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov responded: "Russia has always been and remains a responsible guarantor of energy security on the European continent." The office of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy opposed the deal, saying: "The decision on Nord Stream 2 cannot be taken behind the backs of all those whom the project poses a real threat to."

What is the background?

First, the Nord Stream-2 pipeline. It is a part of the larger Nord Stream offshore natural gas pipeline system running under the Baltic Sea from Russia to Germany. It includes two active pipelines forming the original Nord Stream, and two further pipelines nearing completion termed Nord Stream-2. At a length of 1230 kilometres, Nord Stream-2 runs parallel to the existing Nord Stream pipeline. Its independence from the existing Nord Stream pipelines ensures greater supply security.

Second, the issues and controversy. The pipeline has been the subject of heated debate for years as it affects energy security, the environment, and the economy. The primary opponents – Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic states – consider the project a financial and security threat. They are worried about whether Germany's economic interests outweigh its ability to take a firm stance against Russian aggression. Their economies losing on gas transit fees also concern them. From the security perspective, reduced Russian dependence on gas transit leaves these countries vulnerable to Moscow's malicious activities. Kyiv is particularly worried about this, given the Crimean annexation. Both Ukraine and Poland released a joint statement to express their discontent in which they said that the pipeline poses a threat to them, NATO and the EU. On 22 July, the EU said that the pipeline was "not of common EU interest". Merkel, however, considers the deal a "good one" and

has given Russia the benefit of the doubt. Environmentalists criticize the deal claiming it affects the marine ecosystems and jeopardizes the EU's climate action goals.

Third, the reversal of the US position. Initially, the US had firmly opposed the project. The US sanctions, which stopped the project at 98 per cent, were concerned about the increasing European reliance on Russian energy. Differences persisted even within the US; several lawmakers opposed the agreement, saying it only empowered Russia and betrayed Ukraine. A senior US official justified Biden's move by saying that the US compromised with an important ally against its better judgement while pointing out the ineffectiveness of the sanctions.

Fourth, the Russian response. The Kremlin has consistently denied allegations of weaponizing energy and maintained that Nord Stream-2 is wholly a commercial project. However, Moscow objected to the US-German language, saying it villainized them. Putin is said to have agreed to discussing the extension of the gas transit deal with Ukraine.

What does it mean?

Through this deal, Ukraine has been victimized as real political outweighed principles. The change in the US and EU strategy towards Russia could be attributed to their goal of weakening the Sino-Russian relations as other efforts have proven ineffective.

The US and Russia: The Geneva Summit of Biden and Putin, and an integrated bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 20 June 2021

What happened?

On 16 June, Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin met in Geneva, Switzerland. In the post-summit press conference, Putin said: "The meeting was actually very efficient... It was aimed at achieving results and one of them was pushing back the frontiers of trust." Biden's remarks followed. He said: "The bottom line is I told

President Putin that we need to have some basic rules of the road that we can all abide by."

On the same day, the US-Russia Presidential Joint Statement on Strategic Stability was issued. It said: "The recent extension of the New START Treaty exemplifies our commitment to nuclear arms control. Today, we reaffirm the principle that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought." It also said: "Consistent with these goals, the United States and Russia will embark together on an integrated bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue in the near future that will be deliberate and robust. Through this Dialogue, we seek to lay the groundwork for future arms control and risk reduction measures."

What is the background?

First, the 'return of diplomacy'. The summit was held during one of the lowest points of US-Russia relations. Both sides consciously downplayed expectations, as there were severe differences on crucial issues between the two countries. The Crimean annexation, Ukraine crisis, cyber-attacks and internal human rights violations dominated the headlines before the summit. As a result, the summit had a limited focus on stopping the downward spiral and preferably improving the bilateral relations. It witnessed modest progress with the two leaders stating clear areas of disagreement: explaining their red lines, rules of engagement and areas of weakness.

Second, the issues discussed. Concrete agreements include a new round of nuclear talks and the return of ambassadors to their posts. A joint statement on nuclear proliferation and a renewed bilateral strategic stability dialogue is definitely a positive takeaway. There was more than a hint of détente, despite persisting tensions regarding cyber warfare and human rights. Biden asserted cyber-attacks on US' critical infrastructure structures were off-limits. Biden also warned Putin against militarily resolving the Ukraine and Belarus disputes while cautioning that killing Navalny would lead to devastating consequences. Putin responded that the stance on Navalny would remain unchanged and backed Belarusian President Lukashenko.

Third, a constructive approach. The tone of the dialogue, the leaders said, remained unthreatening yet constructive. Biden's approach was evidently different from his predecessor, Donald Trump. The Biden-Putin dynamic combined mutual respect and mutual scepticism rather than friendliness, which characterized the Trump-Putin meeting. Biden and Putin, in essence, tried to dwell more on the positives than the negatives. However, Putin's press statements saw him exercising whataboutisms on the BLM movement and the Capitol insurrection when questioned on the Russian human rights violations. Biden's visible frustration on questions regarding the basis of his trust on Putin

What does it mean?

For Biden, Russia is a distraction that needs to be addressed, but China is a larger challenge. He is forging an alliance against China, a trend seen throughout his European trip. Biden's emphasis on stable relations provides a renewed opportunity for the US-Russia bilateralism.

Second, Biden's statement – 'proof of the pudding is in the eating' implies that it would take months before considering the summit a success. The ambassadors' return is a welcome outcome and will help further negotiations on the table.

G7 Summit: Biden brings the US back to Europe

By Dhanushaa P, 20 June 2021

What happened?

On 13 June, during his visit to Europe to take part in the G7 and NATO summits, the US President declared, "America is back at the table."

On 16 June, in Geneva, Biden remarked: "They're glad America is back, and they acted that way. And then, when we went to NATO, I think it was the same thing. We had really good meetings there and real response, as well as the EU. I didn't get one single person — not one of the world leaders said to us anything other than

thanking me for arranging a meeting with Putin. And I thought, quite frankly, I was in a much better position to represent the West, after the previous three meetings with Putin, that — knowing that the rest of the West was behind us."

What is the background?

First, Biden's approach towards Europe vis-à-vis Trump's. Biden has promised to bring an end to the pandemic and address climate change, which Trump did not. During his visits, Biden emphasized joint cooperation in security and defence, against Trump's idea of making America great again by withdrawing. Through his engagements with Europe in various areas of trade and technology, he is proving that Europe is back at the stage of global diplomacy. He has also managed to address the three important issues: China, COVID and climate change.

Second, Biden's coalition on China. The US, along with the G7 countries is planning to counter China's BRI project with the idea of 'build back better world' and global infrastructure partnership. During his visit to Europe, Biden got the consensus of G7 also on addressing China's military assertiveness.

Third, improving the lines of communication between Russia and US. A constructive consultation on cybersecurity and the return of the ambassadors to their diplomatic posts were a positive outcome. Both Biden and Putin have agreed to replace the START treaty.

What does it mean?

Through the G7 and NATO summits, Biden has built a consensus of the West on Russia and China. With Russia, his meeting with Putin should be seen as a breakthrough to prevent the downward spiralling of the US-Russia bilateral relations. While Biden's Europe tour has consolidated the trans-Atlantic partnership, it has also addressed the recent negativity in the bilateral relations with Russia.

The US: President Biden bans American investments in Chinese companies

By Keerthana Rajesh Nambiar, 6 June 2021

What happened?

On 3 June, US President Joe Biden signed an executive order sanctioning investments in Chinese companies with alleged ties to defence and surveillance technology firms. In this order, the US government expressed concerns over Chinese technology companies both inside and outside China facilitating "repression or serious human rights abuses" and "unusual and extraordinary threats" - of religious and ethnic minorities. Biden prohibited US investors from investing in 59 Chinese companies, originally 31 in former President Donald Trump's list.

On 4 June, at a press briefing, China strictly opposed Washington's move and declared the US had 'unscrupulously suppressed' and restricted Chinese companies. The ban will take effect from 2 August 2021, giving investors one year to withdraw.

What is the background?

First, the case of sanctions against Chinese entities. The trade restrictions were initiated under the Trump administration, wherein the US investors were banned from buying or selling publicly traded securities from those companies. Trump's sanction prohibited the leading smartphone maker, Huawei, and Hikvision, a major manufacturer and supplier of facial-recognition technology, both of which have been retained in the new order. TikTok was initially issued with a set of restrictions after both Democrats and Republicans in Congress claimed that the app posed a national security threat and US federal employees should elude from using it on government-owned devices.

Biden's new executive order includes major Chinese firms that were on the previous executive order list like Huawei, Hangzhou Hikvision Digital Technology, and Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corp (SMIC). SMIC has enhanced China's domestic chip sector. TikTok was eluded from the new list; the Biden administration has not

taken any steps to neither accept nor deny that the Chinese government could be hoarding sensitive data of Americans. Xiaomi was also excluded from the list after successfully lobbying against its inclusion on the Trump-era list and dismissing claims that they were tied to the Chinese military as groundless.

Second, Biden following Trump's China footsteps. Biden's policies have always been reversing Trump's from the day he took over the office. From successfully withdrawing the army in Afghanistan to resuming warm relations with Europe, rejoining the Paris climate agreement, returning to the Iran nuclear deal, eliminating tariffs on European goods, and so on. But Biden seems to be following in the footsteps of Trump when it comes to China. It is the broadest executive order targeting Chinese tech entities after the issue of re-investigating the origins of Covid-19.

Third, the Chinese resistance. China is the US' largest trading partner, and it is proven that the economies of China and the US are inseparable. Wang Wenbin, the spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, remarks that this order compromises the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese companies and the interests of global investors, including the US. The US will quickly be losing its resources amid increasingly sour relations between the world's two most powerful countries.

What does it mean?

First, the new order is one of the most aggressive moves against China that the Biden administration has adopted. It advances many of the tactics used by the Trump administration in its efforts to stay competitive with China.

Second, this order takes the world a step closer to strategic decoupling with significant implications in the global financial sector.

Third, political clashes have already soured tensions between the two countries. American financial firms are going to face difficulties while they sort out the ties to these Chinese firms in the coming future.

The US: Biden extends support towards the global COVAX Program

By Vibha Venugopal, 6 June 2021

What happened?

On 3 June, US President Joe Biden issued a statement on the Global Vaccine Distribution, published by the White House. He said: "My administration supports attempts to temporarily waive intellectual property rights for COVID-19 vaccines because, over time, other firms will be needed to produce life-saving doses of proven vaccines that are distributed fairly."

He further provided details about the allocation of the first 25 million doses of the vaccines that look at global coverage and the needs of the most vulnerable countries. At least 75 per cent of these doses—nearly 19 million—will be distributed through COVAX, with about 6 million doses going to Latin America and the Caribbean, 7 million to South and Southeast Asia, and 5 million to Africa. The remaining doses, totalling little over 6 million, will be distributed directly to countries suffering surges, those in crisis, as well as other allies and neighbours such as Canada, Mexico, India, and the Republic of Korea.

What is the background?

First, The status of COVID across the globe. Developed countries like the US, Europe, and China in the early 2020s were the first to be struck by the severity of the pandemic. The surge in cases resulted from their global interconnectedness, which involved large-scale travel and tourism. But with their timely public health interventions, they were able to prove effective and have relatively since then been able to prevent to an extent the overwhelming surge of COVID – 19 cases and relatively stabilize the situation. The lack of equipment required to care for COVID-19 patients, such as personal protective equipment, oxygen supply, pulse oximeters, ventilators, ICU beds, has harmed many healthcare and public health systems. In developing countries, the situation has worsened.

Second, the status of vaccination. It's no easy effort to vaccinate the entire world against COVID-19 and keep it immunized. An estimated 70 per cent of any given population must have been vaccinated or should generate antibodies to the virus to establish adequate immunity. The world has undoubtedly agreed to end the pandemic by vaccinating everyone. Still, the pros and cons can be seen in terms of the operationalization of the plan or the extent to support it. Only 14 per cent of the Latin American population, 4.8 per cent population in Asia, and just 1.2 per cent in Africa have been vaccinated. These underfunded vaccine efforts will surely put countries to reimagine their vaccination efforts.

Third, the WHO statement on the Global Vaccine Initiative. The idea of the WHO stands on a new commitment on Vaccine Equity and Defeating the Pandemic. On 2 June, Director-General of WHO in his speech at the G7 Global Vaccine Confidence Summit, said: "To put an end to the pandemic, we need to eliminate and vaccine inequities want everyone to get immunized everywhere. This would require increased funding for equitable global vaccine distribution and sharing technology and know-how."

Fourth, the charge of hoarding. Since the early days of the pandemic, when the first batch of vaccinations was approved for emergency use across, many countries like the UK, EU, and Canada started hoarding. They started negotiating with manufacturers before the clinical trials were finished, in some cases even before the trials were completed. It can be said that these countries were forced to release these vaccines over criticism for not assisting the massive rise in cases in developing countries.

What does it mean?

Biden's administration has surely put across something on the table by initiating this program but is it too late, or too little for them to do so? However, it falls well short of meeting the entire world's immunization requirements. Rather than risking the world's health at the mercy of the coronavirus's mutant whims, more countries must step forward to ensure equal access.

US: Another investigation into COVID origin

By Sukanya Bali, 30 May 2021

What happened?

On 26 May, the US President ordered intelligence agencies to investigate the origin of COVID-19. President Biden said: "I have now asked the intelligence community to redouble their efforts to collect and analyze information that could bring us closer to a definitive conclusion and report back to me in 90 days." On the same day, the New York Times reported a statement by the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson when asked about the WHO's further investigation in the country. He said: "the authoritative study report with many significant conclusions had already been issued."

On 23 May, Wall Street Journal reported: "Three researchers from Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) became sick enough in November 2019 and they sought hospital care." White House Press Secretary said: "We don't have enough information to draw a conclusion about the origins." She also said: "There is a need to look into a range of options. We need data, we need an independent investigation, and that's exactly what we've been calling for."

What is the background?

First, the US insistence to trace the origin of the virus. The Trump administration blamed China for the pandemic. Trump also referred to COVID-19 as the "China virus" or the "Wuhan virus." The administration also floated the idea without providing evidence that the virus may have accidentally escaped a lab in China. Before leaving office, Mike Pompeo also released a fact sheet over the origin of the virus. The document stated: "The US government had reason to believe that several researchers inside the WIV became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both Covid-19 and common seasonal illnesses." After the WHO investigation

failed to draw definitive insights, earlier this month, health officials in the Biden administration renewed their request for a stringent inquiry. On 13 May, 18 scientists revealed in the 'Science' journal that they didn't have enough evidence to indicate a "natural or accidental laboratory leak" origin. The health experts began suggesting that "accidental release from a lab and zoonotic spillover both remain viable theories."

Second, international responses outside the US on the origin question. Amid the pandemic, Australia, the UK, and Japan also have demanded a more transparent and international investigation. These countries expressed concern over the WHO's report and highlighted that the investigation team was not given timely access to relevant data.

Third, the failure of WHO's China mission to effectively address the origin question. On 30 March, WHO released a joint report with China, which dismissed the lab leak theory, calling it an "extremely unlikely" situation. Later authorities also refused to share raw data on early covid cases to perform analysis. The report was highly criticized for not being transparent. WHO Director-General also said: "I do not believe that this assessment was extensive enough" and demanded further investigation for the lab-leak theory.

Fourth, China's response so far. Since the beginning, Beijing has been dismissive about the lab leak hypothesis and has pushed a theory that the virus was manufactured in an American lab or was brought into Wuhan through cold chain products. China had halted the visit of experts to Wuhan and has demanded investigation outside China.

Fifth, the research on coronavirus at Wuhan lab. The WIV, a biosafety level 4 lab, had been doing research on bat coronavirus for several years. Wall Street Journal reported, Dr Shi Zhengli, WIV's leading bat coronavirus expert, "has publicly described doing experiments, including in 2018 and 2019, to see if various bat coronaviruses could use a certain spike protein on their surfaces to bind to an enzyme in human

cells known as ACE2. That is how both the SARS virus and SARS-CoV-2 infect humans."

What does it mean?

Biden's robust intervention in analyzing the COVID-19 origin, due to an increase in pressure from the civil and political society, is likely to receive support across the political spectrum. China still remains non-transparent over the question of the virus origin, to the dismay of the international community amid rising demand over the issue of origin.

The US: Ransomware attack on Colonial Pipeline sparks fuel shortages in the east coast

By Lokendra Sharma, 16 May 2021

What happened?

On 12 May, Colonial Pipeline restarted operations after being shut for five days due to a ransomware attack on 7 May. Colonial said in a statement: "Following this restart, it will take several days for the product delivery supply chain to return to normal." Bloomberg and the New York Times reported that the company paid USD 5 million (about 75 Bitcoin) as ransom to DarkSide, the hacking group responsible for the attack.

On 10 May, when asked about the attack in a press meet, President Biden said: "So far there is no evidence-based on, from our intelligence people, that Russia is involved, though there is evidence that the actors, ransomware, is in Russia. They have some responsibility to deal with this." On the same day, the FBI released a statement on Twitter holding the group DarkSide responsible for the attack.

On 10 May, CNBC reported the following statement issued by DarkSide on the attack: "We are apolitical, we do not participate in geopolitics, do not need to tie us with a defined government and look for our motives. Our goal is to make money, and not creating problems for society. From today we introduce moderation and check each company that our partners want

to encrypt to avoid social consequences in the future."

What is the background?

First, the increasing intensity and frequency of ransomware attacks on the US. The victims include the US government agencies, private companies, police departments and even schools and colleges. According to the New York Times, this year alone has seen so far 26 government agencies being recipients of ransomware attacks. According to cybersecurity firm Emsisoft, in 2019, ransomware attacks cost the US about USD 7.5 billion.

Second, the geographic focus of cyber-attacks. The ransomware attacks of the preceding decade reveal a geographical division: while most attacks, whether state-backed or non-state, emanate from Russia (or countries part of the former Soviet Union) and China, the recipient countries are the affluent countries of Europe, North America as well as Japan, Australia and New Zealand. In fact, this week has seen two more ransomware attacks: one on Ireland's health care system and another on Toshiba corporation.

Third, the nature of ransomware attacks. A type of cyber-attack, ransomware involves infecting the victims' system with malware that encrypts the data. The hackers then demand a ransom for releasing the encryption key that the victims can use to get back their data. As organizations have started keeping back-ups of their data, the ransomware attacks increasingly feature not just encryption but also stealing of data accompanied by a threat to leak it if the ransom is not paid. The US government maintains a position that organizations should not pay the ransom and encourage hackers. However, this may turn out to be more costly than the ransom amount itself. Lastly, all the payments are demanded in cryptocurrencies to avoid traceability of transactions.

Fourth, the attack and its fallouts. Colonial Pipeline, which runs for 8,850 km, supplies gasoline, diesel and jet fuel to meet 45 per cent of the US' east coast requirement. Due to the attack on 7 May, the closure of the pipeline was followed by fuel shortages across the States on

the east coast. Four States - North Carolina, Virginia, Florida and Georgia - declared a state of emergency. As panic buying surged, the prices of gasoline soared to USD 3 per gallon, for the first time since 2014.

What does it mean?

First, the attack on Colonial Pipelines is part of a larger trend of increasing attacks on the US-based organizations. However, with one difference: while the past attacks have only had localized impacts, the one on Colonial Pipeline demonstrates that not just a powerful state actor with deep cyber capabilities but also small non-state hacker groups can pose a danger to critical infrastructure.

Second, as conventional deterrence fails in the case of cyberattacks because of the problem of attribution and the role of non-state actors, retaliation by the US will only serve limited purposes. In such a case, building strong cyber defense systems may be more fruitful.

The US: Hundred days of President Biden

By D Suba Chandran, 2 May 2021

What happened?

On 29 April 2021, Joseph R Biden completes 100 days in office as the US president. He was sworn in as the 46th President on 20 January 2021, after a difficult campaign. Earlier, on 28 April, he addressed the US Congress for the first time, as the President. In his address, he said: "America is moving. Moving forward. And we can't stop now... We're in a great inflection point in history. We have to do more than just build back. We have to build back better."

What is the background?

First, the focus on hundred days. Though many would consider 100 days as a short period to analyze/critique the achievements/challenges of any government, this has been a tradition in the US. Since the days of Franklin D Roosevelt, the US has always been analyzing the performance of the new President in terms of focus, number

of bills passed and its effectiveness, who was appointed as a part of the President's team, their background and their utility, and what has been the primary international focus. Each President had their own immediate priorities to focus on – internal and external – ranging from the domestic economy to foreign policy challenges. For Biden, there was an additional challenge – COVID 19 and its fallouts on the US.

Second, Biden's scorecard in the first hundred days as the President. Internally, Biden had to first deal with the legal and political challenges emanating from Trump's refusal to accept the 2019 election result and the latter's poisonous narrative that the election was stolen. Besides, Biden had to address the economic decline, coupled with COVID-19 fallouts. He announced the bill immediately after becoming the President and succeeded in pushing the ambitious bill with USD 1.9 trillion to pass in the US Congress. The bill, now a law, aims to provide benefits for the jobless, direct payments to Americans, infuse funds for the state and local governments, and importantly, address the COVID-19 pandemic. Later in March, he has introduced another plan for USD two trillion to boost the US infrastructure, create jobs, and provide home care. While the first one was aimed at being a rescue plan, the second one is a long term strategy to strengthen the American economy. Finally, within the US, Biden also had to deal with the racial divide; it was an unfortunate coincidence. His first hundred days also witnessed the George Floyd murder trial, and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Fortunately, the murder trial resulted in the jury finding police officer Derek Chauvin guilty, and Biden made a few positive statements aimed at healing the racial divide.

Third, Biden, the builder vs Trump, the destroyer at the international level. The first thing that Biden did immediately after entering the office is to get the US back into climate change negotiations. President Trump announced in 2017 to withdraw from the Paris agreement; however, Biden made climate change his priority, announced the US' return, and made John Kerry the US Special Envoy on Climate Change. He also hosted the Climate

action conference in April 2021. Besides the climate change agreement, the Biden administration is also looking towards engaging with Iran on the JCPOA. On Indo-Pacific and in building trans-Atlantic partnership, initial statements from Biden has been positive so far.

Fourth, the challenges – immediate and long term, while discussing the first hundred days. China and Russia pose two big challenges to Biden; his first hundred days have not given a clear road map on how he is likely to pursue these two relationships. On Afghanistan, he has made a bold statement on the complete withdrawal of the American troops before 11 September 2021. In the Middle East, from Syria to Yemen, the regional situation is not easy for Biden to address.

What does it mean?

First the intent, irrespective of the challenges. Biden's first hundred days provide a positive intent – both internally and externally. It may still be early to make a finite argument, but the intent should hint at a positive momentum for the US under Biden.

Second, his initial responses so far, hint at the return of the US to take the global leadership and fulfil its responsibility, as against Trump's withdrawal plans to make the US great again. The US: Biden brings back the Climate change agenda

The US: Biden brings back the Climate change agenda

By Akriti Sharma, 25 April 2021

What happened?

On 22 April, President Joe Biden hosted online a two-day "Leaders Summit on Climate." The summit aimed at addressing the climate crisis, resilience and adaptation, reduction in emissions, innovation, finance, and job creation. The summit was attended by 40 world leaders along with business leaders around the globe.

"Time is short, but I believe we can do this," Biden said in his opening remarks. "We will do

this." He also said: "As we transition to a clean energy future, we must ensure workers who have thrived in yesterday's and today's industries have as bright a tomorrow in the new industries as well as in the places where they live."

What is the background?

First, the return of the US to climate action. Earlier, on 1 June 2017, Trump announced the US withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement. On the first day as the President, Biden announced that the US would rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement. The Biden administration also appointed a Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, John Kerry, to look into the US climate and energy policy. By hosting the summit, Biden has brought the agenda of climate change back to the US. He has also attempted to bring climate change back on the global agenda.

Second, the revised targets. During the summit, the US, Canada, Japan announced revised emission targets way ahead of the UN Climate Change Conference set to take place later in 2021. Biden announced that the US would cut its greenhouse gas emissions by 50-52 per cent by 2030 below 2005 levels. He further announced that the US would double its annual financing commitments to developing countries by 2024. Canadian PM Justin Trudeau announced a cut of 40 per cent to 45 per cent by 2030 below 2005 levels. Japanese PM Yoshihide Suga announced a cut by 46 per cent by 2030 below 2013 levels, nearly doubling the previous target. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro announced that Brazil would reach emissions neutrality by 2050, ten years ahead of the previous goal. The summit has enabled the countries to take a leadership role and announce the revised targets ahead of the Glasgow Climate Change Conference. However, India and China reiterated their previous targets.

Third, the presence of the key countries. The summit was attended by the world's largest emitters, the EU, China, Russia, and India, which account for most greenhouse emissions. Twenty out of forty countries in the summit account for 80 per cent of the global emissions. The summit was attended by countries

representing all regions: Asia (including India, China, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, Israel, UAE, and Saudi Arabia), Africa (including Kenya, Congo, Nigeria, and Gabon), Latin America (including Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina). Island states, including Antigua and Barbuda, Jamaica, and the Marshall Islands that are heavily impacted by climate change also attended the summit. This highlights the inclusivity of the summit.

What does it mean?

First, the US leadership. During the pandemic, climate action has taken a back seat as the world is grappled with the socio-economic impact of COVID-19. The US has taken the responsibility of bringing back the climate change agenda to focus. By announcing the revised targets, Biden seems to be ahead of Obama in attempting to institutionalize climate action globally.

Second, the US engaging with the rivals. Biden is using soft power to deal with rival states like China and Russia to achieve its climate targets. The presence of the world's largest emitters, including China and the EU, further makes it significant to achieve the targets that cannot be achieved unilaterally by any country.

Third, setting up the pace for the upcoming UN Climate Change Conference. Countries like the US, Canada, and Japan have set up an example by releasing the targets way ahead of the COP26. The summit has promoted more meaningful interactions for the upcoming conference in Glasgow.

US: Climate envoy John Kerry visits China

By Mallika Devi, 18 April 2021

What happened?

On 15 April, US climate envoy John Kerry and other delegates reached Shanghai and Taipei ahead of the first virtual climate summit. President Biden has invited 40 leaders of the world for the summit, which shall be organized

on 22-23 April. Kerry is in China to formally invite President Xi Jinping for the summit. President Xi Jinping is yet to confirm his presence at the meeting. The objective of the virtual summit is to convince leaders of the world to raise their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to achieve the goals set in the Paris Climate Agreement ahead of COP26.

What is the background?

First, the US return to climate change. Within hours of being sworn in as the President of America, President Joe Biden rejoined the Paris Climate Agreement, from which former President Trump had withdrawn in 2017. Climate crises have been re-accorded high priority-second only behind the Covid pandemic. This is further reflected in the appointment of John Kerry as a special presidential envoy for climate change who had played a key role in negotiating the Paris Agreement while serving as secretary of state under Obama. President Biden also proposed to give USD 1.2 billion to the UN-backed Green Climate Fund.

Second, the importance of China in the climate agreement. Being the largest emitter of carbon dioxide globally, China plans to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060, but that seems impossible by the modest short-term goals. China, in its 14th Five-Year plans, has not significantly raised its NDCs. Besides, China's signature project of the century, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aims to build coal plants in other countries. If China plans to export coal emissions through BRI, it becomes problematic. One of the coal projects in Bangladesh got cancelled because of pollution concerns. Despite holding the status as the world's largest coal consumer and largest renewable-energy producer, China's investment in renewable energy (solar, wind, hydropower) accounted for the majority of its overseas energy investment for the first time in 2020.

Third, the importance of US-China negotiations on climate change. On 7 March, state councillor Wang Yi said: "China would be willing to discuss and deepen cooperation with the US with open mind" on crucial issues like climate change while taking a hard stance on Taiwan.

US-China climate negotiations are taking place as the Alaska talks continue. US-China bilateral relations are mired by issues of human rights violation in Xinjiang, imposing curbs on democracy in Hong Kong, and trade deficit. The attempt is to keep climate change as a stand-alone issue and endeavour to forge cooperation on the issue.

What does it mean?

First, talks on climate change open up room for negotiations for both countries to keep communicating their differences and agreements. Climate change can, therefore, act as the foundation for negotiations on other issues. US-China bilateral relations may be at their nadir during the Trump years, but climate change offers an opportunity to build back trust.

Second, Climate change is again back as an agenda on the international stage with President Biden, which had lost steam under the former President. The US is going to push countries across the world to meet their NDCs and adopt greener and cleaner energy resources.

The US: Sanctions imposed on Russia for involvement in 2020 elections

By Chetna Vinay Bhora, 18 April 2021

What happened?

On 16 April, Russia imposed sanctions on eight senior US administration officers, including FBI Director Christopher Wray and Director of National intelligence Avril Haines. Russia is also set to expel 10 US diplomats and establish new limits on the diplomats and their outposts, curbing the US non-profit groups' activities in the region and rethinking 'agonizing' measures against US businesses in vengeance for the vindictive actions by the US administration. These developments came after the US announced the sanctions on Russia. The Kremlin has directed the US ambassador to Russia to return to Washington in order to hold "serious" and "detailed" consultation.

On 15 April, US President Joe Biden issued sanctions inimical to Moscow with regards to the intrusion of 2020 presidential elections and a cyber-attack among a plethora of transgressions. The sanctions focused on eliminating 16 entities and 16 individuals who attempted to influence the presidential elections, five individuals and three entities connected to the Crimean annexation, and 10 Russian diplomats were expelled from the US. Washington has also sanctioned the newly issued Russian sovereign debt, which has caused a slight ripple in the Russian Ruble and sovereign bonds market.

What is the background?

First, the meddling in the 2016 US presidential elections. According to the 2017 US intelligence report, the Russian government had used the state-funded media channels to disable Hilary Clinton's presidential campaign. Russia had also used its hacking prowess in flooding social media outlets like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to influence the Americans in their electoral systems and vilify Clinton. Between 2015 to 2017, Facebook connected nearly 80,000 publications to the Russian company, Internet Research Agency. Over 470 accounts and 50,258 Twitter accounts were associated with Russian bots and fake accounts programmed to disseminate false information during the 2016 election. These bots were accountable for nearly 3.8 million tweets; approximately 19 per cent of the total tweets were associated with the 2016 US presidential election. The attacks were linked to the 2011 intervention of Clinton in supporting the protests and interfering in the electoral process of Russia.

Second, the cybersecurity attacks. Orion, a network management offshoot of the SolarWinds company hosting over 300,000 customers worldwide, was hacked by the Russian intelligence known as the SVR. Slipping in through Orion's back door, updates compromising data and networks of the civilians were accessed in an attempt to embezzle national security, defence and related information. Researchers have named the hack as 'Sunburn' and claimed that it would take several years to comprehend the attack fully. For nearly three decades, hackers connected to

Moscow are believed to have tried to steal US secrets online.

Third, the change of power in the US and its stand. In Biden's first speech in February 2021, he assured to stand up to Russia. He has openly criticized Russia's offensive actions in Ukraine, unlike his predecessor. In 2014, the Obama-Biden administration was accused of standing by Russia while Crimea was annexed.

What does it mean?

The US is looking to impose costs for a plethora of misconduct from Moscow and deter its future acts. The US actions indicate that it will pursue a stronger frontier than the Trump era and strive for a stable relationship with Russia. The response they have is "resolute but proportionate." The US intelligence has published numerous reports about the cybersecurity attacks and Russian intelligence ventures into US companies. The sanctions imposed by the US may pose obstacles for Russia but considering past experiences, it is unlikely that these sanctions would deter the Kremlin.

The exchange of diplomatic expulsions is an indicator of the fact that the sanctions do not dissuade Moscow. The tensions that have risen after the flaring exchanges could amount to another cold war like situation.

QUAD: Biden's first multilateral dialogue on the Indo-Pacific

By Akriti Sharma, 14 March 2021

What happened?

On 12 March, US President Joe Biden hosted the first virtual summit of the QUAD, which was attended by the Prime Ministers of India, Japan and Australia. The leaders reaffirmed their commitment to promote free and open Indo-Pacific, pledged to respond to the impact of COVID-19, and address shared challenges including climate change, technology, and disaster relief.s

During the summit, President Biden said: "We're renewing our commitment to ensure that

our region is governed by international law, committed to upholding universal values, and free from coercion.” The US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan during a press briefing said: “The four leaders did discuss the challenge posed by China, and they made clear that none of them has any illusions about China. But today was not fundamentally about China. Much of the focus was on pressing global crises, including the climate crisis and COVID-19.”

On the same day, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said: “We hope relevant countries will follow the principles of openness, inclusiveness and win-win results, refrain from forming closed and exclusive ‘cliques’ and act in a way that is conducive to regional peace, stability and prosperity.”

On 13 March, the Washington Post published an opinion by the four QUAD leaders; according to it, "we have agreed to partner to address the challenges presented by new technologies and collaborate to set the norms and standards that govern the innovations of the future. It is clear that climate change is both a strategic priority and an urgent global challenge, including for the Indo-Pacific region. That’s why we will work together and with others to strengthen the Paris agreement and enhance the climate actions of all nations. And with an unwavering commitment to the health and safety of our people, we are determined to end the covid-19 pandemic because no country will be safe so long as the pandemic continues."

What is the background?

First, Biden’s approach towards the Indo-Pacific. Biden has continued Trump’s policy on the Indo-Pacific to contain China in the region. On 3 March, the Biden administration released the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance. It stresses building deeper connections with the Indo-Pacific region through a robust presence in the region. Convening the QUAD summit reiterates Biden’s strong position on Indo-Pacific. Second, the widening scope of QUAD. On 20 March 2020, a QUAD Plus meeting was conducted that included Vietnam, South Korea, and New Zealand apart from the QUAD countries to discuss the COVID-19 spread.

QUAD has been broadening its scope by partnering with countries over shared interests. Moreover, there is a widening of areas of cooperation. Vaccine diplomacy and climate change widen the scope for cooperation among the QUAD countries.

Third, worsening relations with China. The hardening of ties with China is a common challenge that the QUAD countries are facing. India is in a boundary dispute with China over LAC in the Galwan Valley. Australia is in a trade dispute with China on exports. Japan is in a dispute with China in the East China Sea over the Senkaku Islands. Deteriorating relations have encouraged the countries to actively engage in QUAD.

What does it mean?

First, the reiteration of the significance of QUAD and Indo-Pacific. Biden's rigorous but nuanced approach will have greater implications for the Indo-Pacific region.

Second, widening areas of cooperation will increase the scope for other countries in the region to establish a partnership with QUAD countries and work towards promoting free and open Indo-Pacific, contain Chinese aggression, and work on areas of shared regional and global concern.

The US: Weather anomalies suggest a fast-approaching climate change

By Avishka Ashok, 21 February 2021

What happened?

On 15 February, The United States issued an alert regarding a winter storm that affected Southern and Central American states. The State of Texas is one of the worst affected regions with as many as five million people suffering from power outages for consecutive days. On 18 February, the White House reported that the sudden winter storm is the type of event that could be triggered by climate change.

On 17 February, parts of Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Israel were also hit by a

winter storm that covered the cities in 10-15 centimetres of snow. It snowed for the first time in Southern Lebanon and Northeast Libya. The sudden downpour in many areas and snow was brought by the Gale Winds, an unusual and rare occurrence.

On 18 February, the NASA Earth Observatory reported that the mid-February dust storm that crosses over Southern and Central Europe from the Sahara had materialized earlier than usual with increased intensity.

On 20 February, the Federal Emergency Management Agency announced that President Biden approved a major disaster declaration for Texas and 77 counties.

What is the background?

First, the numerous weather anomalies. The recent winter storm is not the only proof that indicates the ever-changing global temperatures. The United States has been experiencing extreme hot winds and temperatures, leading to annual forest fires that continue to burn for months in the state of California. California has warmed by 3 degrees Fahrenheit in the last century, causing the ecosystem to burn more rapidly. The changing ocean temperatures also affect the formation and behaviour of tropical cyclones. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change observes that cyclones will become more powerful in the coming years, gathering high speeds and heavier rains.

Second, the weather changes across the globe - from the US to Australian, in the recent period. Strong and persistent winds from the Sahara covered the snow in parts of Europe in early February. The sight, although mesmerizing to look at, is a cause for concern. The rare phenomenon led to a degradation of the air quality in Europe and accelerated the advancing global warming. The Amazon Rainforest that burns every consecutive year, destroyed an area as large as Israel in 2020. Between 2019 and 2020, over 18 million hectares were destroyed in the Australian bushfires, endangering the entire Koala population. Increasing temperatures have also caused rapid melting of glaciers resulting in flash floods in Uttarakhand and an upward trend

in the frequency of cyclones in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal.

Third, linking winter storms to climate change. While many consider warming of the earth's atmosphere, melting snow and rise and sea levels as the only side-effect of climate change, rapid change in weather patterns such as snowstorms are also related to the problem. The duration and severity of such storms are key factors that depict a shift in weather conditions. The winter storms that hit America and the Middle East this week are becoming more frequent and occur for a longer duration at a given time. Research suggests that the primary cause of the winter storm is the rise in temperature in the Arctic, affecting the jet stream that controls weather patterns around the world.

What does it mean?

The issue of climate change crosses political and geographical boundaries. The issue cannot be resolved by individual countries acting in isolation and thus requires international cooperation and coordination.

President Joe Biden, upon entering the White House, took major steps to address the issue of climate change, unlike his predecessor. US returned to the Paris Agreement and suspended various projects like the Keystone XL pipeline. Despite the debate against green energy which failed to deliver during the winter storm, Biden Administration will most likely hasten its efforts in negotiating climate change at a global level and push for a shift towards non-conventional sources of generating energy.

The US: Biden calls for the return of America and diplomacy, as he unveils the US foreign policy priorities

By D Suba Chandran, 7 February 2021

What happened?

On 4 February, in a speech at the US Department of State, the new President Biden outlined his foreign policy priorities. The message he wanted the world to hear is:

"America is back. Diplomacy is back at the center of our foreign policy."

As a general outlook on the American alliances, leadership, China and Russia, he said: "We will repair our alliances and engage with the world once again, not to meet yesterday's challenges, but today's and tomorrow's. American leadership must meet this new moment of advancing authoritarianism, including the growing ambitions of China to rival the United States and the determination of Russia to damage and disrupt our democracy."

In terms of principles that the US would like to follow in conducting foreign policy, he said: "we must start with diplomacy rooted in America's most cherished democratic values: defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law, and treating every person with dignity."

He considered climate change as an existential threat, as he wants to build global cooperation to address the same.

What is the background?

First, the US reengaging the world, as against the retreat strategy pursued by Trump. As soon as he assumed the office, President Biden decided to rejoin the Paris Climate agreement on day one. He also announced the US decision to reengage with the WHO. He has also announced to extend the START treaty with Russia.

Second, Biden's approach to rebuilding alliances. During Trump, the trans-Atlantic partnership suffered a setback. Biden's emphasis on rebuilding alliances and retaining the US troops in Europe means that the US would go back to pre-Trump US-Europe relationship. He has announced troops withdrawal from Germany, which was one of Trump's destructive unilateral announcement vis-à-vis the American engagement in Europe. Not only Europe but also with other American partners – Canada, Japan, South Korea and Australia; during Trump's period, there was a strain in the US relationship with most of the above traditional partners.

Third, emphasis on human rights and the rule of law. Though there was an extra focus on Yemen,

as a part of this, he also covered the same issue vis-a-vis Russia and China in detail. He has announced a US special envoy for Yemen, underlining a new American approach and leadership towards Yemen. On 5 February, the US State Department separately announced that it would lift the Houthis' designation as a terror organization.

Fourth, a balanced relationship with Russia and China. While he has announced the extension of the new START, in his 4 February speech, Biden also stressed that he would "very different from (his) predecessor, that the days of the United States rolling over in the face of Russia's aggressive actions - interfering with (the US) elections, cyberattacks, poisoning its citizens - are over." He also said, that the US would "not hesitate to raise the cost on Russia and defend our vital interests and our people." On China, he has stated: "We'll confront China's economic abuses; counter its aggressive, coercive action; to push back on China's attack on human rights, intellectual property, and global governance."

What does it mean?

As Biden underlined in his 4 February speech, the above would mean that the US is back and would use diplomacy and alliances to reengage the world. This would be crucial and much needed, given the four disastrous years of American foreign policy of disengaging the world and breaking the alliances. Biden's big challenge would be to fill the gap that Trump has yielded and fill it fast. 2021 is not 2016; there have been numerous changes in the last five years. Biden will have to be proactive.

The emphasis on human rights should be another significant relief. Starting from Yemen, there are numerous conflict spots, that need a rightful engagement of the US. On this issue as well, there are enormous challenges – starting from Russia, Middle East, Africa, Afghanistan, Myanmar and the list would be a long one. Biden will have to prioritize.

The US returns to the Paris Agreement, and India reengages the region through a Vaccine diplomacy

By D Suba Chandran, 23 January 2021

What happened?

On 20 January 2021, as a part of the first day actions, the new American President issued a series of directives, including rejoining the Paris agreement on climate change, focussing on global warming. He has appointed John Kerry, former Secretary of State (during Obama's period), as the US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate. Kerry made an immediate announcement on the wasted years of climate change.

On the same day, Biden has also revoked the permit for the Keystone XL pipeline, thereby impacting the expansion of the pipeline that would bring the Canadian crude oil to the US Gulf Coast.

On the same day, the administration also announced a 60 days freeze, to any new drills on federal lands and waters.

What is the background?

First, the US and the Paris agreement. Signed in 2015, the Paris agreement has around 200 members, from the developed and developing worlds agreeing to reduce fossil fuels' use. Each country has committed to reducing the use of fossil fuels, addressing carbon neutrality and thereby to bring down the global temperature. Obama, then the US President made the US a part of the agreement, and also made pledges to reduce carbon emissions. According to a New York Times report, "Under the accord, the United States had pledged to cut its greenhouse gas emissions 26 to 28 per cent below 2005 levels by 2025 and commit up to \$3 billion in aid for poorer countries by 2020." In early June 2017, President Trump announced the US withdrawal from the Paris agreement, as a part of his "American first" push; according to Trump, the Paris agreement would undermine the American economy and place the US at a disadvantageous position. Though he also stated that he would like to renegotiate a better deal for the US, leading States in Europe said, that the

Paris agreement is irreversible. Biden has now reversed the Trump's withdrawal from the Paris agreement, and announced the US' re-entry. Second, the controversial Keystone energy project. Though the idea of a gas pipeline from Canada to the US transporting crude originated in 2008, there have been multiple objections to expanding this project over the years. Besides the climate change activists within the US, who opposed the project on larger climate change issues, there have also been protests from the local communities and Native Americans over the pipeline routes, as the pipelines expanded. According to a Wall Street Journal report, "farmers, ranchers and Native American groups along the proposed route also opposed the pipeline, because it would have traversed ecologically sensitive areas and aquifers important as sources of drinking water and irrigation supplies."

Third, the support for Trump's policies. While Biden has taken a bold step to re-enter the Paris agreement and revoke the Keystone pipeline extension permit, he would face opposition to implement them. From the US Congress to industrialists and business communities, a section within the US supported Trump's policies to withdraw from the Paris agreement and go ahead with the Keystone pipeline expansion to boost the American economy.

What does it mean?

Biden's reversal of Trump's inward-looking and disastrous climate change policies are much needed to take the Paris agreement forward. The decision taken on the first day shows Biden's urgency and also underlines a plan on how the US would approach the climate change issue.

From a global perspective, the return of the US to Paris agreement is much wanted. John Kerry's appointment as the Climate Envoy should give a new push to the climate change debate and actions globally. One should also welcome Kerry's initial statement on the subject, as he underlined the wasted years. Now with Biden at the White House, US and rest of the world have to take the process forward, as the climate clock is ticking.