

# Conflict Weekly

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*A brief review of conflict and peace processes across the world*

## Special Issue

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## Conflicts in 2021: Through Regional Prisms



State of Peace and Conflict in 2021

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## State of Peace and Conflict in 2021

In 2021, the world, amid bearing the brunt of the COVID-19, the world witnessed several conflicts which took precedent over the pandemic. Several conflicts, from Southeast Asia to the Americas, were shaped by anti-State sentiments. Military coups seemed a norm in Africa; the youth took up the responsibility on themselves to push for democracy in Hong Kong, Thailand, and Eswatini; abortion laws sparked protests in the United States, Poland, and Honduras. Meanwhile, in the Western world, citizens placed importance on individual rights over collective good and demonstrations were held against COVID-19 restrictions in Australia, France, Germany, and other European countries.

Among all developments, a common thread bound them all, a need for individual freedoms and a sense of security. As Conflict Weekly releases its 100th issue, the editorial team hopes for a better world and hopes to cover more peace than conflict in the forthcoming volumes.

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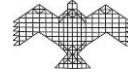
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NIAS-IPRI Brief

# State of Peace and Conflict in China in 2021

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*China in 2021 started with relative calm in retrospect of the tumultuous initial months of 2020 due to Covid-19's alarming and disastrous first wave arising from the country. The various socio-economic and political dimensions which play an important role in determining the state of peace and conflict in China have been considered for this assessment.*

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## Introduction

The year 2021 in China started with relative calm in retrospect of the tumultuous initial months of 2020 due to Covid-19's alarming and disastrous first wave arising from the country. China's external security environment saw some improvement, with the bellicose Donald Trump administration in the USA on the way out, and replaced by a more moderate sounding Joe Biden administration. China's standoff with India also started easing, with bilateral talks gathering pace. Moreover, China has gained quite some confidence through its successful "Zero Covid" strategy, as it appeared to evade any major waves of Covid-19 after the initial one which started off the pandemic. China has also turned more inwards to avoid the growing external risks. Nevertheless, there have been some events which have raised the domestic security risks in China, ranging from geopolitical developments to internal social movements. This brief attempts to explore these current developments in 2021 and reflect on their impact on the future of peace and conflict in China, with a focus on 2022. The developments at the frontiers as well as at the domestic front has been evaluated critically to assess the growing challenges to the maintenance of peace within China in a very important year. The various socio-economic and political dimensions which play an important role in determining the state of peace and conflict in China have been considered for this assessment.

## Major Developments in 2021

China witnessed the sustained development of tensions along its borders, especially along its Southwestern continental and Southeastern maritime frontiers. Unlike the previous year, 2021 saw more of force posturing and negotiations from India and China over the borders, avoiding any further violent clashes. Meanwhile, China dealt bilaterally with Bhutan and got the country, which depends militarily on India, to sign an agreement towards resolving their border dispute. (Wang) China has also subtly been tightening its grip east of Bhutan by creating new border villages along the claim lines with India to further reinforce China's territorial claims without using military force. (The Times of India) This strategy is very much in line with the Land Border Law it has passed in October 2021, which will come into effect in 2022. The law seems to be a significant step forward to bring in more legitimacy and irreversibility to the territorial expansion imperatives of China. (Luo)

On the other hand, it is the Taiwan Strait which has emerged as the most volatile flashpoint in 2021. The war of words across the Taiwan Strait has certainly escalated in 2021, and along with that has been the muscle flexing of China. Chinese fighter jets have conducted a record number of violations of the Air Defence Identification Zone established by Taiwan, leading the latter to scramble its fighters in response. (Davidson) This renewed aggression by China has led to US and its allies voicing support towards the defence of Taiwan in case of an eventuality. (Blanchard) Consequently, China's threat perceptions and the volatility of the cross-strait front have risen.

At its peripheral areas, China has enhanced its iron grip. The year 2019 witnessed massive anti-Beijing demonstrations in Hong Kong, as a result of which China introduced its National Security Law in Hong Kong. By 2021, China has solidified its control over Hong Kong affairs. The cancelling of the annual "Tiananmen Vigil", as well as the shutting down of the popular and liberal newspaper "Apple Daily", among other developments in 2021, are emblematic of the rapidly transforming political dynamic of Hong Kong. (Toru) At a more substantial level, the elections for the Legislative Council of the territory have been made "patriots only" by Beijing to prevent anti-Beijing candidates running and winning seats. Consequently, only a third of the citizens turned out to vote, in a process which gave overwhelming victory to pro-Beijing candidates. (Tan)

At the domestic political sphere, the year 2021 is extremely important from the standpoint of the Communist Party of China (CPC) as it celebrates its centenary. Coincidentally, 2021 is also when the sixth plenary meeting of the CPC's Central Committee was held, which reflects on politico-ideological affairs. The 2021 meet was supposed to officially show the green light from the Party for Xi's indefinite rule over CPC and China. However, it has been observed that the sixth plenum did not match Xi's expectations. More importantly, it is seen that the "historic resolution" which was supposed to come out of the meeting was not revealed; instead, what came out was a communique which reinforces the established Party view since 2018. (Xinhua News Agency) This apparently reflects on a lack of consensus on the final draft of the resolution, and thereby, the ongoing resistance within the Party against Xi's political ambitions and direction. (Kondapalli)

The events of prominence in the political calendar of the CPC and China are usually dealt by Chinese authorities with a high degree of caution and meticulousness. On the eve of important events like the National Party Congress, The Two Sessions, Annual Plenums of the CPC, etc., a high degree of preparation is made to ensure that the events are held smoothly and without any glitches. However, during two such occasions of importance, events occurred which could have created massive distractions at the national level, even though they took place at local levels. The first one occurred in late February, in the buildup to the Two Sessions of 2021. At this juncture, very close to the Zhongnanhai, the CPC's leadership compound in Beijing, an explosion happened. (Chinascope) The second one was a series of events of similar scale which happened across China. (Chinascope) The details of the events are given in Figure 1. The frequency, distribution and scale of the explosions which went during the span of a

week, leading up to the Sixth Plenum, raises some very important questions about the socio-political stability in China.

**Figure 1. Screenshot of News Brief about the Ten Explosions of October 2021**

## Ten Explosions in One Week in China

Recently the Chinese media reported that ten explosions occurred in China in the period from October 21 to 27.

1. October 21: Shenyang City, Liaoning Province had an explosion that impacted 2,000 households in the neighborhood. (See [Chinascope briefing: A Huge Explosion in Shenyang](#))
2. October 22: A chemical plant in the Alashan League High-Tech Industrial Development Zone, Inner Mongolia, exploded in the middle of the night.
3. October 24: There was an explosion on the top floor of a residential building in Dalian City, Liaoning Province.
4. October 24: A lab at the Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Jiangsu Province, had an explosion.
5. October 25: An explosion occurred on the food vendor street outside the Huangdao Campus of Shandong University of Science and Technology, Qiaodao, Shandong Province. The whole street was burned out.
6. October 26: An explosion occurred at Shandong Ding Ding Chemical Technology Co. in Zibo City, Shandong Province.
7. October 26: An explosion occurred in a residential building in Nanchang City, Jiangxi Province.
8. October 26: Nine fishing boats caught on fire in Zhuhai City, Guangdong Province.
9. October 27: A building under construction in Tianjin City was caught on fire.
10. October 27: A fire broke out at a factory building and the hotel next to it in Zhongshan City, Guangdong Province.

Political commentators expressed the thought that it was abnormal to see so many explosions or even the intensified reporting on the explosions, as the Chinese Communist Party tends to filter out negative news to portray a “stable” society.

Source: *Epoch Times*, October 31, 2021

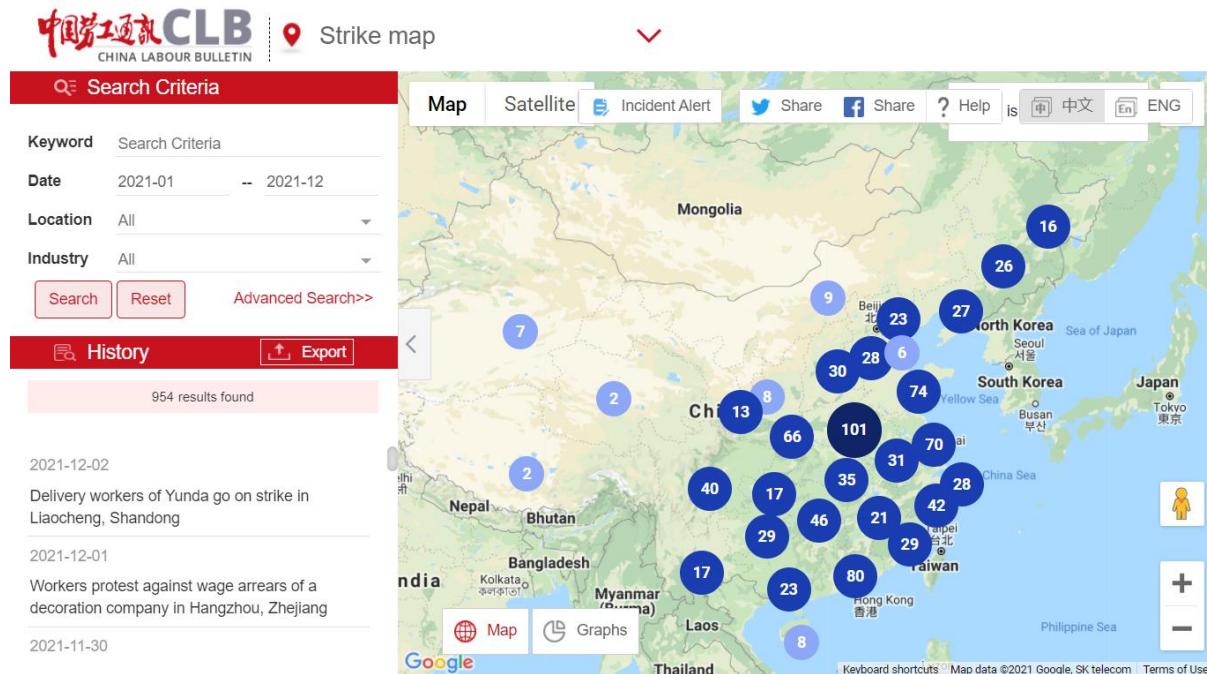
Source: *Chinascope* (<http://chinascope.org/archives/28161>)

In addition to possible kinetic measures of creating unrest, there are already more silent and peaceful movements of resistance within China. The ancient Chinese philosophical tradition of Daoism is known for its focus on “non-effort”. Remnants of such thinking seems to have surfaced in China of 2021, with the rise of what is known as “lying flat” movement. This movement is a decentralized one led by employed youth who have become disillusioned with China’s “996” culture of overtime, also known as “involution”. The “lying flat” movement focusses on the skilled youth of the country to perform just the bare minimum to earn a basic living, and without indulging in consumerist excesses which facilitate less of needs and wants. (Meng)

There are also other similar movements in China such as “Workers Life Matter” rhyming with and possibly inspired by the “Black Lives Matter” movement in USA. With the

rising economy, worker's wages have been kept low to sustain the cheap costs which justify manufacturing in China. (Law) However, the costs are also simultaneously rising with the economy and therefore there is growing demand from the working class to raise their pay as well as working and living conditions. China has of late stopped providing information regarding the number of protests which happen across the country, which usually amount to tens of thousands every year. However, some organizations based outside the mainland disseminate information on protests within China. Their numbers suggest that the protests have not stopped despite them not being reported. One such set of data is graphically represented in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Map of Labour Unrest in China in 2021**

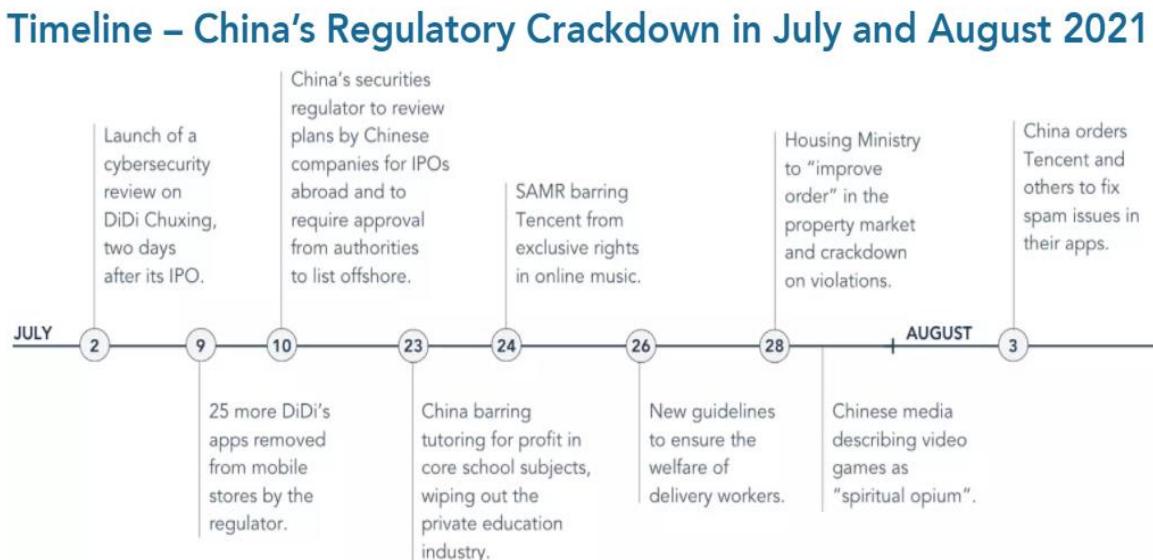


Source: China Labour Bulletin (<https://maps.clb.org.hk/>)

China's economy is still on the rise; however, it has been slowing down during the past decade. China has not been able to sustain the break-neck momentum of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth which it has been used to during the turn of the millennium. In fact, some suggest that China has already entered into a middle-income trap which it has been trying to dodge, as it may become too old before it gets rich. That China's population is set to decline in the near future was a fact which got the official stamp as the People's Republic of China (PRC) released its decennial census in 2021. China's One Child Policy driven culture of single children has further created a situation where even its relaxation may not work to reset the population back to a trajectory of growth. This will have a huge negative impact on China's economic prospects. In addition to this, Xi has come up with his grandiose concept of "Common Prosperity" in 2021, now that China has supposedly freed itself from absolute poverty in 2020 as per its goals. The concept suggests that China's economy will be dictated by the imperative to deliver equitable growth. (Xinhua News Agency) The immediate casualty of this development was the crackdown on private firms in the services sector. China's Big Tech firms like Alibaba, Tencent, Meituan, etc. which emerged as startups have ended up as corporate multinationals which could expose China to international risk, turn monopolistic, and heighten the domestic economic inequality. What if they grow so

powerful that they may challenge the CPC establishment itself? – this strategic thinking has led to the PRC adopting stringent measures to limit their ability to attract Western capital, as well as curtail their domestic power and influence. (McGreggor) The timeline of the crackdown is given in Figure 3. These measures have disrupted the peace in China's economic ecosystem, starting with plunging stock markets, as well as growth of fear in the minds of private corporate firms which may have sought to ride the state aided wave of the Fourth Industrial Revolution to gain massive profits. All major industries of the services sector – fintech, real estate, online tutoring and even cab hailing can be seen as facing the effects of this massive disruption underway in China's economic landscape since 2021.

**Figure 3: The Economic Crackdown in China in 2021**



Source: Eric Sturdza Investments (<https://ericsturdza.com/insights/china-regulatory-crackdown/>)

In addition to this premeditated use of economic force was the inevitable fall from grace of the Evergrande real estate company in 2021, which has led to yet another set of shockwaves, within and outside China's economic sector. The possible collapse of Evergrande has been compared widely to that of the Lehmann Brothers which led to the Global Financial Crisis out of which the world is yet to fully recover. A side-effect of this disruption in the economic sector has been rising protests by the public who have invested in Evergrande or will have to face wipeouts of their savings as the economic effects flow downstream. (Agence France Press) Meanwhile, on the financial front, China is attempting to tighten its grip by its 2021 ban on cryptocurrency, while at the same time working on establishing its own digital currency. (Amy and Ephrat)

In the age of social media, negative news about the regime can spread faster and farther than ever before. Therefore, China in 2021 has taken additional steps to ensure that the control of information and the flow of data is tightly regulated by the state/CPC. The PRC's high handed control over information was demonstrated globally in the recent Peng Shuai scandal. (Schuman) The Party is also on an ideological offensive to pre-empt rebellious thinking against its centrality in Chinese society. Xi Jinping thought, which has been established as the current paradigm within the CPC ideological framework has

been propagated throughout the Chinese society. Xi Jinping thought is part of the school curriculum starting from the primary level itself. (Global Times).

Recent regulations involving restrictions of private entities in the generation and propagation of original news content, restrictions on livestreaming, as well as limiting the hours of gaming for children demonstrate stringent social control through information controls. (CNN) There have also been regulations for the media to curb the wave of portrayal of men in an effeminate manner. (The Associate Press) This could be read along with the state media coverage of the Peng Shuai case as well as the sexual assault of a female employee at Alibaba which surfaced in 2021 (Global Times) reflecting on the regime's insecurities even on the media coverage of gender issues.

### **Trends and Issues in 2021**

China has utilized its extensive state power to keep the peace in China during 2021. Though the domestic dimensions of China did have an appearance of peace and order, some of its border areas and peripheral regions remain tense. To make more sense of the developments which happened in 2021, they need to be contextualized and put in perspective of the emerging trends in China.

### **Border Areas/Contested Territories/Peripheral Regions**

Though India and China had a brief border clash in 2020, the situation has remained without incident in 2021, with the buildup of militaries continuing. Meanwhile, 2021 has seen China pivoting more towards its neighbourhood in the maritime East, than focusing on its Southern and Western continental borders. Ever since the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has come to power in Taiwan, the island has made consistent efforts towards cutting its links with the PRC. It is the CPC's ambition to complete the reunification of China, a precondition to reviving the PRC's status as the most significant power in the international system. In 2021, therefore, China has shifted from its apparent distraction towards India to focus more on the most fundamental of steps in its path to superpowerdom – retaking Taiwan. Even though China may not succeed in its goal, there is a high possibility of China attempting to militarily take over the island, as it is deemed an essential task to be completed at least before the middle of this century.

The city's importance to China before the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as an island of freedom attractive to Western finance no longer holds today. A number of cities in the mainland have now overshadowed the once dominant stature of Hong Kong. A Greater Bay Area is being developed by China, integrating the big cities at the mouth of the Pearl River, including Hong Kong, into a large urban conglomeration. (Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau of the Government of Hong Kong) Hong Kong is being integrated into China much ahead of schedule, and it is getting mainlandized, and perhaps irreversibly so. The transition period between the city's transfer to China from UK and its full integration into China was supposed to take half a century. However, China's patience has run thin in light of a decade of intensifying protests against mainland rule of Hong Kong. Since 2019, the political tide in the Special Administrative Region has seen a sudden shift towards Beijing. China enacted its National Security Law in Hong Kong in 2020, and acted swiftly in using the law for cracking down on democratic political groups which are against the CPC/mainland forces controlling Hong Kong affairs. Hong Kong, which until recently was seen as a symbol of democracy

and liberal resistance in an increasingly totalitarian PRC, has been witnessing virtually the end of the “One Country, Two Systems” which gave it a politico-economic identity totally different from yet attached to the mainland.

### **Regime Security and Public Order**

At a more domestic level, the unchallenged dominance of the CPC in China is a fact that the country’s ruling regime wants to sustain for the foreseeable future. The changes in all aspects of life in China – political, economic, military, legal, social, cultural, environmental – are all monitored by the CPC with extreme caution. Though the Biden administration’s assertion in 2021 of its unwillingness to pursue a fundamental transformation of China’s political system, (Zakaria) it can never be taken at face value. Ever since Xi Jinping’s rise to the commanding heights of the CPC in 2012, he has been systematically transforming the Party, the State, the Military and even the society to accommodate his worldview as well as his need to stay in power indefinitely. This has been witnessed in the anti-corruption movement which he initiated to get rid of the Party of corruption, and through the process restoring its legitimacy and more importantly perhaps, eliminating his rivals. Xi has imprinted himself on the Party’s constitution itself in 2018, while taking out the two-year term limit for the post of China’s President which he holds. However, there seems to be currently a growing opposition towards Xi’s rule. (Lam)

In this context, there have been speculations that the series of explosions in China discussed earlier have been timed to coincide with key CPC meetings. (Chinascope) Though the sources of these explosions are not established, the fact that a large number of similar types of explosions can happen at such a crucial period of the Chinese political calendar could be seen as an indicator of the nature of socio-political stability in China. Even if these events can be seen as coincidence, which could have been exploited for propaganda by forces opposed to the regime, it does indicate that there are pockets of resistance which have created and/or utilized these events for political purposes. Even if such forces could be discounted, it still remains demonstrative of the emerging inability of China’s public security mechanism known for tight societal control to deliver peace and stability at critical times. Moreover, China’s quick cover-up of the news also illustrates its glaring insecurities in the front of domestic order.

### **Socio-Economic Stability**

Meanwhile, China, faced by an increasingly adverse international situation after Trump’s imposition of a “Trade War”, and further followed by international criticism in the wake of Covid-19’s transformation as a pandemic emanating from the country, is pivoting back to its domestic economy. China feels that the current trends in international politics and economy are getting unfavourable for the country as economies try to decouple from China and diversify supply chains away from the country in a post-Covid world. Therefore, from 2020 onwards, China has officially set itself on the course of economic rebalancing by pivoting to the domestic market by rebranding the concept of “dual circulation”. (Herrero) It implies that the Chinese economy will continue to be driven by both foreign and domestic economic engines, but the focus will shift towards the domestic. It is in this context that the “Common Prosperity” slogan and the associated corporate crackdowns can be seen as economically significant – the need to raise the domestic market and its purchasing power by cutting down on towering inequalities.

In addition to this imperative, the PRC government under Xi Jinping has demonstrated a high degree of insecurity as far as the flow of data and information is concerned. This is especially important in light of the demonstrating dissatisfaction at the culture of overwork and sexual exploitation, which is also a reflection of a growing trend of domestic response at the Chinese model of governance and development itself. The securitization of data is part of an ongoing trend in the past few years, and this has strengthened substantively through strong controls by the state of the internet and the cyberspace. The PRC administration certainly wants to enculture the youth and the armed forces in Xi Jinping thought – a stark reminder of the Cultural Revolution era.

## **Forecast for 2022**

The year 2022 will be extremely crucial for the status of peace and stability in China, primarily because the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CPC is supposed to be held next year. The Congress is supposed to give Xi one more chance to establish his dominance within the Party for the period until 2035. Clearly, the imperative of the state would be to conduct an “orderly extension of leadership” during this vital year. There is high probability that it might happen, given the current level of control Xi is exerting over the Party. However, the possibility of disruptive acts getting orchestrated by forces opposing Xi’s continued leadership of the organization cannot be ruled out, if trends in 2021 are to be considered. There might be attempts to discredit Xi’s political stature through subversive actions, so as to impress upon the Party elders that the organization is going on a self-destructive path under Xi. The elders will be meeting in the secretive annual Beidaihe summit next year to decide the fate of the next five/ten years of the Party’s leadership.

The volatile situation in the borders may continue as the stalemate is persisting and buildup from India and China is progressing. Except for an inadvertent crisis, the possibility of a deliberate conflict getting initiated is low due to the abovementioned political significance of 2022 for Xi. On a conservative estimate, a fourth Taiwan Strait crisis might be brewing, which may play out in the immediate term, if not in 2022. With the Legislative Council of Hong Kong also becoming completely pro-Beijing in 2021, the next year may certainly see a strengthening of stability at the surface level. The same can be said about Xinjiang, especially considering the fact that the new Taliban regime in Afghanistan, traditionally a supporter of Uyghur insurgency, is currently beholden to China.

The socio-economic sector perhaps pose a credible threat to the peace in China in 2022. The bursting of debt bubbles, and its ramifications are hard to predict, but the likelihood of disruptive events of this front cannot be ruled out. If it happens, it will have massive downstream effects on societal stability. At a more societal level, the Party’s ingress into people’s daily lives could see a consistent growth, and may also witness a subsequent pushback. The year 2022 may see innovative ways in which citizens may demonstrate their resistance to an increasingly intrusive state. As the effort to maintain domestic order and security intensifies in China, they may turn out to be counter-productive, the signs of which are already visible and may get increasingly obvious in the coming years.

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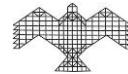
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NIAS-IPRI Brief

# State of Peace and Conflict in East Asia in 2021

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*The region of East Asia remained one of the important spaces of contest and cooperation in 2021. China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea and Mongolia along with the US remained active in shaping up the regional equations but no substantial change in their approaches towards one another was visible.*

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## Introduction

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

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

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

## Major Developments during 2021

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Trends and issues in 2021**

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

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

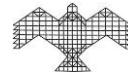
political stability. Six, North Korea has further consolidated its nuclear and missile capabilities in 2021 and wants to put pressure on South Korea, Japan as well as the US to give concessions and talk to it on its own term. North Korea seems not ready to give up its weapons programme.

### **Brief forecast for 2022**

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

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

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



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NIAS-IPRI Brief

# Quixotic 'Ripeness': Peace and Conflict in Southeast Asia in 2021

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*The region of Southeast Asia in 2021 witnessed multiple minor terror attacks and foiled plots, no major progress was noticed either with regard to establishing durable peace in the regions affected by decades-long insurgency or terrorism.*

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## Introduction

Reasons for the outbreak and continuation of conflicts are multiple. However, the impetus for initiating peace efforts and driving them to their logical conclusion are provided by what William Zartman described as conditions of 'ripeness' and 'mutually hurting stalemate' (MHS), which make continuing the conflict unviable. Absence of such conditions are responsible for a mutual disinterest in working towards peace by conflicting parties. In such circumstances, fleeting successes are measured essentially by the effectiveness of hostile and retributive measures by both parties. The cycle of violence, may or may not be marked by temporary phases of peace. This brief tests this framework of analysis while assessing developments with regard to peace and conflict in Southeast Asia (SEA) in 2021.

In 2021, rate of success achieved by the SEA governments to establish peace and order in their respective countries remained at best, modest. Marked by multiple minor terror attacks and foiled plots, no major progress was noticed either with regard to establishing durable peace in the regions affected by decades-long insurgency or terrorism. Most states remained politically stable and the regimes firmly in the seat of power, although a coup orchestrated by the military in Myanmar in February gave rise to a country-wide upheaval, with ramifications on the security and stability of its neighbours.

## Major Developments

There are no fixed ways to categorise the multiple sources conflict in the SEA region in 2021. These can be divided region wise, according to the issues they are organised around, in terms of their longevity, or through the prism of key internal as well as external participants. However, this paper clubs them into two broad categories, in terms of their extreme or moderate impact on state stability. Such categorization offers twin advantages of assessing the links between (i) conflict and state fragility, as well as (ii) the impact of peace processes or their absence with conflict persistence, escalation, or resolution.

**(i) Extreme Impact:** The coup orchestrated by the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw), on the morning of 1 February, undermined the overwhelming electoral success achieved by the National League for Democracy (NLD) in the November 2020 elections. It pushed the continuing project for establishing a functional democracy in the country into oblivion and reinforced the military's primacy, granted to it by the 2008 constitution. Tatmadaw's coup makers, with an objective of asserting its dominance over Myanmar's body polity, had hoped for a resistance-less pass over of power. However, the opposition organised by the NLD attracted spontaneous support from the different walks of life including small sections within the security establishment. While the military did and continues to persecute peaceful protesters, rise of the People's Defence Force (PDF), an urban insurgency, consisting of armed pro-democracy activists, who have allegedly been trained by some of the ethnic insurgencies, has been an unexpected fallout of the episode. The new alliance between the pro-democracy activists and some of the ethnic armies has been another outcome of the coup.

The clash between the two groups, although heavily tilted in favour of the military, largely due to its access and unrestrained proclivity to use extreme violence against its opposition, has been a source of complete chaos and instability in the country for much of 2021. Not only the country's economy has nearly collapsed, amid a raging pandemic as well as the pull out of many multinational companies from the country, the military's inability to control sporadic violence either in the country's periphery or in the heartlands, makes Myanmar appear like a country at war with itself. The peace process between the Central government and the ethnic armies had not progressed much during the previous tenure of the NLD government. However, even that fragile process has been completely abandoned. The relocation issue of the nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh into Myanmar too has become uncertain. Internal displacement as well as distressed migration of civilian population into neighbouring countries continue to create complexities between Myanmar and the individual countries.

Neighbouring Thailand has been a witness to a similar development since 2014. Although protests demanding restoration of democracy has turned into a movement for reforming the monarchy in 2020, the military junta-led National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) government continues to assume sweeping powers and grant itself general amnesty. Opposition to this dominance of military in Thai political life oscillates between muted and whispering phases consisting of mostly night protests. But the prevailing peace and stability in Thailand remains extremely fragile.

**(ii) Moderate impact:** Weakening of global jihadist terror groups like al Qaeda and the Islamic State appear to have brought a semblance of order to the SEA region. It has put a halt to the migration of individuals into other conflict theatres and has also drastically reduced the spate of incidents associated with radicalization in several countries in the past years. However, self-radicalisation as well as continued activities of the local Islamist groups, some of whom had served as local alliance partners or franchises of al Qaeda or the Islamic State, continue to be sources of threat to state stability. In Indonesia and Philippines, groups like Jemaah Islamiyah and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) respectively continue to operate and plan to execute terror attacks. In Indonesia's Sulawesi island, a church was bombed in March by the Islamic State-inspired Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD). The same month, a young female university dropout walked

into the Indonesian National Police Headquarters in Jakarta brandishing an air gun, before being [shot dead](#) by police officers.

Multiple terror plots were foiled, which included a plan to carry out attacks on the Indonesian Independence Day in August. The JI and the JAD members are suspected to be present across multiple islands of the country. The former is comparatively more active and is reportedly seeking to establish a political front. In November, arrests of two persons revealed the existence of a newly established JI political front, an addition to its traditional fronts of dakwah (religious outreach) and armed jihad (military struggle). They include of Farid Ahmad Okbah, a member of JI's consultative council, who is also the chairman of Indonesia's People Dakwah Party (Partai Dakwah Rakyat Indonesia/PDRI), and Ahmad Zain An-Najah, a member of the fatwa commission of Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), or Indonesia Ulema Council, the nation's top Islamic clerical body.

The restive Papua province in eastern Indonesia has also been marked by an ongoing low-scale secessionist insurgency. The head of the province's intelligence unit was killed in an ambush in April by cadres belonging to the West Papua Liberation Army (WPLA), the military wing of the Free Papua Organization. The WPLA has been responsible for sporadic violent attacks and the escalated conflict, marked by human rights violations by Indonesian soldiers, shows [no sign of resolution](#).

The weakened ASG, based primarily in Basilan in southern Philippines has managed to [carry out odd attacks](#) against the army personnel, even while losing cadres and bomb makers, who form a central part of the group's operations. The Islamic State's Filipino branch, reportedly with only a handful of cadres, carried out two bus bombings in southern Cotabato city in early 2021, killing three people. However, there are indications that multiple Islamist splinter groups who operate in Mindanao could be regrouping. Amid continuing military operations, some of these groups have [reportedly succeeded](#) in recruiting young fighters to replenish their ranks, especially children of the dead fighters.

In southern Thailand, the Patani Muslim insurgency seeking independence continue to indulge in low-scale attacks on police personnel. This conflict appears almost invisible, to the outside world, but has claimed over 7000 lives since 2004.

While group-based terrorism continues to dominate the violence landscape in the SEA region, in June, Singapore's Internal Security Department underlined that 'self-radicalised actors influenced by extremist materials online are the main domestic terrorism threat' facing the country. In one of the rare instances of far-right extremism, a 16-year old Protestant Christian [was arrested](#) for allegedly plotting to kill Muslims in two mosques, on the anniversary of the Christchurch attacks in New Zealand.

## Trends

From the conflict related developments in the SEA region in 2021, the following seven trends can be gleaned. Some of them are inter-connected and highlight different facets of the ongoing conflicts.

**(i) Weakening of global and reinforcement of the local:** On the eve of the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, the SITE intelligence groups alerted the Southeast Asian states of possible terror attacks by groups affiliated to the Islamic State. However, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand described the warning as 'routine', rather than a substantive intelligence input. There is a near consensus among the security establishments of the region regarding the weakened influence of the global jihadists on SEA. Although a handful of specialists argue that the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August may boost al Qaeda's prospects in SEA, such claims appear to be exaggerated. What is mostly being witnessed in the region are attempts by the local groups like the JI, JAD, and the ASG to revisit their strategy for reorganization and plan mostly solo or lone-wolf operations, without external assistance.

**(ii) Augmented CT capacity:** Countries of the region continue to strengthen their counter-terrorism (CT) efforts by making substantial amount of resources available for their police and army in their budget or have been able to secure external assistance for the same. The US, for instance, launched a multi-million-dollar programme in 2017 to back Philippines's counter-extremist activities, which is continuing. Security establishments in the region appear convinced that they have an upper hand vis-à-vis the terror groups. This is partly to do with their achievements in neutralising terror plots and large-scale arrest of terror suspects. The acting chief of the Islamic State's Filipino branch was killed along with his wife in October. A total of [206 ASG members have surrendered](#) to the military in 2021 (till November). In Indonesia, between January and mid-November 2021, security forces [arrested 339 people](#) and killed 18 terrorist suspects, marking a 56 percent increase from 2020. This is the second-highest number of annual terrorist arrests in Indonesia in the last five years. In Singapore, 54 people have been dealt with under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for terrorism-related conduct since 2015. Of these, 44 were self-radicalised. In Malaysia, [558 people have been detained](#) over terrorism links, 51 of them are women.

**(iii) Persistent challenges posed by splinters and remnants:** The state security establishments in the SEA region tend to present a picture of success and optimism versus terrorism and insurgency in their respective states. However, the splinters and weakened remnants of the armed groups, both local as well as those who share linkages with the Islamic State and al Qaeda, have managed to survive and attempt consolidation. This is true, especially in the case of Philippines and Indonesia. In August 2020, the U.S. Pentagon's report had summed up that in spite of suffering a series of setbacks, the Islamic State-linked groups have hardly eroded in southern Philippines. The same state of affairs has prevailed in 2021. Odd attacks carried out by radicalised individuals in as well as consolidation of the JI and JAD point at the same trend in Indonesia.

**(iv) State as a source of instability:** While the state and its constituents are generally understood to be stability inducing agents, some countries in SEA region have remained either oblivious to endemic conflicts or have themselves become sources of conflict. The coup in Myanmar, which has been the source of chaos and instability in the country, is an example of this trend. The Thai military's retrenchment and its reluctance to pave way for the return of democracy in any time in near future is another. Similarly, the Papua insurgency remains an essentially state-created conflict for decades.

**(v) Stalled peace-making efforts:** Considering the fact that peace making processes are products of the conditions 'ripeness' and 'mutual hurting stalemate', conclusion of peace processes should be considered durable. However, in the case of Philippines, formation of splinter groups, emerging out of a parent group, which negotiated peace with the government, continue to be sources of instability. For instance, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), which split from the larger Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 2011 when the latter sought peace with the Philippine government and later won autonomy in the Muslim-majority south, vowed on to carry out fighting. Over the years, the BIFF too has split into multiple factions, thereby widening the area under conflict. Whether 'ripeness' had been achieved when the MILF peace deal was concluded, therefore, remains a key question.

**(vi) Social media as a force enabler:** Internet penetration has increased rapidly in the SEA region in the past decades. Available to over 50 percent of the population, it remains the least, but sizeable in Myanmar. Social media, therefore, has emerged as an effective tool in the hands of anti-state as well as anti-government actors for legitimization, mobilization and alliance seeking or networking activities. This is apparent in the context of the pro-democracy movements in Myanmar and Thailand, but also for radicalisation projects of the Islamist groups in Indonesia, Malaysia and Philippines. Even the 16-year old who was arrested for allegedly plotting to kill Muslims in two mosques in Singapore had self-radicalised himself on the web.

**(vii) Varying scales of external Intervention:** Neoliberalism or liberal institutionalism holds that international cooperation between states is feasible and sustainable, and that such cooperation can reduce conflict and competition. However, the SEA region in 2021 witnessed very little inter-state cooperation to address conflicts. Barring the ASEAN's delayed pressure tactic on the Tatmadaw in Myanmar, global powers demonstrated significant reluctance to go all out to reverse the slide of democracy in the country. On the other hand, China, Russia and to an extent India played a significant role in preserving the post-coup status quo in Myanmar. The experience in Thailand is similar.

**(viii) Conflict precipitating impact of the Pandemic:** Literature on organised crime in SEA have underlined the linkages between youth bulge, unemployment and flourishing of illegal trade. The ongoing pandemic has shrunk national economies, thereby leading to resource as well as capability crunch and resource diversion in many of the SEA countries. At the same time, states have also used the pandemic to empower themselves in multiple ways. The rise in the state's punitive power coupled with the impact of the Pandemic on the economy as a precipitating factor in conflicts remains an under-researched subject in the region. However, history of the growth of organised crime and terrorism in the region in the 1990s corresponds to phases of economic distress and state insensitivity. The same phenomenon could be repeating itself.

The end result of this is the prevalence of a state of quixotic ripeness,

## Forecast for 2022

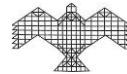
Each of the conflicts in their respective states have been varying sources of instability. Myanmar is probably the hardest hit. The authority of the military has been significantly challenged by the armed insurgency in the periphery as well as the armed pro-

democracy activists at the centre. In a way, that precipitates violence, eliciting hard counter measures from the military. Lack of external intervention and ineffectiveness of the international sanctions helps the military not only to stay in power, but silence the opposition in order to legitimize its hold. While this is likely to continue in 2021, it may not be without significant bloodshed. In the [annual report of the US-based Early Warning Project](#), Myanmar has been ranked 17 with a 5.3 percent chance of mass killings taking place. Thailand is only two places behind at 19, with a 4.5 percent or approximately 1 in 22, chance of a new mass killing in 2021 or 2022.

It can be argued that none of the insurgencies or terrorist groups, have reached points of ripeness or MHS, which explains their continuity. However, such conflicts in Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia do not essentially challenge the state authority in a significant manner. In Philippines and Thailand, insurgencies have been confined to the periphery. Indonesia and Malaysia, with a long history and expertise in battling Islamist radicalization are likely to prevent a major surge in extremism. Hence, a regime change or significant deterioration in the security scene is not an expected scenario in 2021.

At the same time, however, two factors appear to be acting in favour of extremism in Southeast Asia and may aid in leading to a phase of extremist resurgence. These are, (i) a sufficiently long history and entrenchment of extremism in the affected areas, and (ii) the states' incapacity and disinclination to address the core factors that breed and facilitate extremism. These combine to create an enabling environment for extremism to thrive and reemerge from a state of weakness. Malaysia, for instance, may have been becoming a safe haven for terrorists either with a plan to operate in that country or to use the country as transit. Malaysia's friendly immigration policies, with the visa-on-arrival facility for citizens from many countries, including those from which the foreign terrorists come, is certainly a factor to consider. A large percentage of the terror suspects arrested in the country are foreigners.

There are evidences that the successes derived from hard CT measures, may have been pushing the security establishments in many SEA countries to a state of complacency. As a result, soft, yet painstakingly slow measures including peace negotiations, counter-radicalization, educational reforms etc. may have become the under-emphasised aspects of CT. Therefore, in most cases, it is this official approach, which could have been preventing the conflicts from reaching a state of ripeness. Such phases of peace, marked either by absence of or reduced violence, have minimal potential of endurance. The SEA region, in 2022, may witness the continuation of much of what took place in 2021, with the lurking possibility of some conflicts escalating into more critical phases.



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NIAS-IPRI Brief

# State of Peace and Conflict in South Asia in 2021

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*The region of South Asia in 2021 witnessed violent incidents, popular protests against the existing regimes and policies, and extreme apprehensions among the citizens induced by political instabilities.*

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## Introduction

The South Asian region (the Indian sub-continent as it is popularly known) offers an interesting case to investigate the state of conflict and peace. The paradoxes of its visible diversities in terms of governance systems of respective nation-states yet, the historical and cultural commonalities of the region make the case for investigation interesting. The close connections among the states in terms of sharing territories, people-to-people contacts, and historical ties often find the conflicts in a particular state having their implications at the bilateral and regional levels. Despite the differences in the governance systems, one finds some common threads in terms of the nature of conflicts that the South Asian states witness. The disagreements on the nature and functioning of democracies, assertion of identity politics, and the prevalence of violent extremism (in its multiple forms) are some of the major forms of conflicts one can observe as commonality among the South Asian states. This brief intends to reflect upon the theme of the 'state of conflict and peace in South Asia' for the year 2021. In doing so, I limit the investigation to the major developments in 2021. Given the limitation of the size of the paper, I may be excused for not being able to cover the entire range of conflicts and the peace process that have taken place during this year. Accordingly, the brief begins with highlighting the major developments in various states in South Asia and offers a critical analysis in terms of their implications at the national, bilateral, and regional levels. The next section identifies and makes sense of the trends and the issues of conflicts and peace processes in South Asia. The last section of the brief offers a forecast in terms of analyzing what would be the scenario in the next year.

## Violent Incidents, Protests, and Extreme Apprehensions: Major Developments in 2021

The major developments covering the state of conflict and peace in South Asia can be categorized around three broader perspectives of violent incidents, popular protests against the existing regimes and policies, and extreme apprehensions among the citizens induced by political instabilities. The available data provided by South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) shows that in the year 2021 (till December 4, 2021) the region witnessed 1666 violent incidents which killed 9533 people (civilians, security forces, and militants). The majority of these cases are mostly confined to the states of

Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Talking about the violent incidents as an important form of conflict, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan can be considered as a major development. Such a development has its critical implications not only on the state of Afghanistan but also on the entire region as well. As the US and NATO declared a complete pull out of their forces from the land of Afghanistan, the violent march of the Taliban in seizing territories and taking the state of affairs to complete control was rather unexpectedly fast and worrisome. Once the state of Afghanistan has come under full control, the Taliban continues to brutally crackdown through its Ministry of Promotion of virtue and Prevention of Vice to enforce prohibitions on the practices deemed 'un-Islamic'. Continuing its legacy, the Taliban has restricted the freedom of women and only permits women's education in gender-segregated classrooms and wearing Islamic attire. The newly established Islamic Emirate by the Taliban is seen as a victory of radical Islam and is considered to be a threat to the neighboring countries as the like-minded groups seem to be influenced by this.

The impact of the Taliban can be directly visible with the anti-state activities by terrorist groups like the Tehreek-E-Taliban-Pakistan (TTP) and the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). While the presence and activities of the terrorist groups in carrying forward the state activities and subverting them as well are never new in Pakistan, the victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan has certainly strengthened the activities of these groups. For example, the ban imposed on the TLP- a far-right Islamist organization- has been lifted by the present government after months-long violent protests by the former. Back in India, the Kashmir valley witnessed terrorist attacks by a newly formed organization, The Resistance Force (TRF). After the abrogation of Article 370 and the split of the former state into two union territories in August 2019, Jammu, and Kashmir (J&K) witnessed a relative peace for a short period of a year or so. While many attributed the uneasy peace in the valley to the fatigue factor among the radicalized youth, the Taliban factor has believed to have substantially contributed to the rise of TRF. Apart from the religious violent incidents, the Indian state also continues to witness violent activities carried out by the Communist Party of India-Maoist (Maoist in short) and by the various militant groups operating in some of the Northeastern states.

The protests demanding the change of a regime or against a particular policy by existing governments were witnessed in many countries in South Asia. In India, the year-long farmers' protest demanding the revocation of three farm laws enacted by the existing National Democratic Alliance-2 (NDA-2) was a major conflict between the Union Government and a section of the farmer-citizens. While the Government has repealed the law in November, this section of the farmer citizens continues to protest demanding a guarantee on more legislation in their favor. While the former protest has been able to create a discourse around it and has been much discussed in media and policy circles alike, there are some important but overlooked protests mostly by the marginalized sections of the society. The tribal and other marginalized groups in the Central and Eastern states of India, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha, have been protesting against state policies that are perceived to be a major threat to their rights and entitlements, and their survival. Unfortunately, these protests as major conflicts in society are hardly highlighted through a discourse. On the other hand, Pakistan, despite its murky experience with democracy, witnessed civil protest against the existing regime. The year 2021 witnessed massive and popular protests against the Pakistan Tehreek-E-Insaf (PTI) government led by Imran Khan. Termed unprecedented, the

protests by the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) led by Maulana Fazlur Rehman of Jamiat-Ulema-Islam reflect upon multiple grievances of the people that range from poor governance, foreign policy, and the rise of extremism in Pakistan state. These protests have also been vocal against the present government's policies in supporting China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in which Pakistan has been an important ally.

The violent incidents and the protests have contributed substantially to extreme apprehensions among the people of the region. With the political power changing hands in Afghanistan and the optics of civilians' struggling for basic human rights under the Taliban the fundamental aspects of human rights and survival comes in conflict with ideas of freedom, equality, liberty, and fraternity. However, in the case of states like Nepal, the apprehension among the citizens is not really because of the existence of violence but because of political instability and lack of governance during an unprecedented pandemic period. Despite having a new constitution and relatively peaceful environment for one and half decades following a bloody civil war by the Maoists, the state of Nepal continues to wait for political stability that would ensure the rights and entitlements of its citizens through governance. The over-ambitious political parties and a manufactured divide between the political elites in the Terai and the Hilly regions have been the important factors for political instability in Nepal. The change of governments before completing their tenures (the latest being the change of government led by K P Oli to Sher Bahadur Dubey) testifies such instabilities. These major developments in the states of South Asia call for identifying the issues and the trends around which they function.

### **Issues and Trends**

One of the main issues leading to conflicts in South Asia is violent extremism. It will be safe to argue that barring Bhutan, all South Asian states have been victims of violent extremism in multiple ways. From the existing body of definitional frameworks, one can conclude that violent extremism initiates, condones, and carries out violence as a method to further religious political, social, and national interests. In a South Asian context, violent extremism has its deep root in history. In the present context, we observe the consolidation of the extremist groups as they increasingly get their legitimacy through garnering social support. Violent extremism in South Asia can be observed in three major forms: religious, ideological, and ethnic. Arguably, the Islamist radical forces dominate the religious violent extremism discourse. Religious violent extremism, especially the Islamist ones, operate through two dominant ways; assertion of a particular version of Islam where they are majority and legitimization of violence through victim card in the places where they are a minority. However, in both cases, intolerance towards the people following other religions exhibited openly with motives to cause harm and eliminate the perceived opponents. In 2021 we have witnessed such violent religious extremism in terms of lynching foreign workers, destroying religious establishments of the minority Hindus and Sikhs in the states of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Similarly, In India, we have also observed an open call for the beheading of a Hindu priest by a section of Islamist extremists.

Apart from the religious violent extremism, violent extremism influenced by Maoist thoughts has been a serious threat in India. The Maoists, as they are widely known, continued to carry out violent activities killing the security forces and the civilians. Though the Maoist-related violent activities have come down drastically, it remains a

major conflict as the idea of the use of violence against the state continues to be celebrated. Similarly, some of the states of India's Northeast witness ethnic extremism. It is important to highlight that, in 2021, we have observed the alliance among the fringe ethnic militant groups in Manipur and Nagaland in carrying out militancy. The case of the Singat ambush in Manipur on November 13 is a good example.

Violent extremism does not necessarily confine its scope in inducing domestic conflicts. In the South Asian context, it has serious implications on disturbing bilateral relations and thereby contributing to bilateral conflicts. The lynching of a Sri Lankan worker in Sialkot, Pakistan, The Hefazat-E-Islam led anti-Hindu riots in Bangladesh following the Indian Prime Minister's visit in March 2021 have substantially contributed to bilateral mistrust. Moreover, violent extremism, in the South Asian context, unfortunately, has been condoned by some state machinery to further its national interest.

Secondly, the assertion of identity politics has been an important issue of conflict in the South Asian states. Not confined to merely the religious sphere, assertive identity politics covers a host of factors like region, ethnicity, ideology, and nationalities. Grievances and demands around assertive identities often induce competing group formation leading to both implicit and explicit conflicts. The demands for greater autonomy by the ethnic Nagas, Kukis, Bodos (to name a few) in the Northeastern states of India continued their assertive identity conflicts. Similarly, the demands by the rebelling Balochi nationals for autonomy and the systematic annihilation of the Baloch nationalists by the Pakistan Security forces have been a disturbing testimony of identity conflict in Pakistan. Going by the figures of Human Rights Councils of Balochistan (HRCB) in 2021 (till November 10) 301 Balochi nationals have disappeared and 298 civilians have been killed by the Pakistan army. We have also witnessed such violent identity conflicts in Bangladesh between the radical Islamist forces and the minority Hindus. In Sri Lanka, the identity conflict refuses to die down among the minority Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and the ruling Buddhist majority. As mentioned before, in Nepal the identity conflict has been in terms of regional identities (Pahadi and Madheshi). The conflicts induced by assertive identity politics also critically reflect upon the state of democracy in South Asian states.

The status and the functioning of democracy have been an important issue around which most of the conflicts have functioned in South Asia. It is interesting to note that the countries with robust democratic governance mechanisms in place witnessed less violence compared to the countries with fragile democratic systems. The case of Afghanistan and Pakistan with their fragile and vulnerable democratic governance mechanism witnessed massive violent conflicts. India with a strong and stable democracy, on the other hand, witnessed several protests against the ruling regime and some of its policies. However, these protests remained largely peaceful within the democratic rights of the citizens. While Nepal is yet to experience a stable government, its experience with democracy has been rather impressive. Despite some sort of political instability, we did not observe major violent incidents in Nepal in 2021. Unfortunately, Afghanistan's experience with democracy has not been encouraging in 2021. The fall of the democratically elected government to the Taliban terror has been a cause of concern to the entire region. The Sri Lankan case has been a conflict between majoritarian democracy and minority grievances. While Bangladesh, under the Awami League government, continues to consolidate its position, the visible fault line between

the democratic forces and the religious extremists offers a conflictual situation and a matter of concern. Drawing from these experiences, one can argue that democracy (both as a governance mechanism and value system) has completely deteriorated in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka. At the same time, countries like India, Bangladesh, and Nepal look promising. Having discussed the issues and the trends of conflicts in South Asia, the last section of the brief offers a forecast of the future course of conflict and peace in the region.

### **Forecast for 2022**

Drawing from the dynamics of conflicts in the previous years, one can safely argue that there won't be a drastic change in 2022. However, the change of a regime in a particular country might alter the nature of the conflict. The issues of violent extremism and assertive identity politics will continue to dominate the conflict landscape in most of South Asia. In India, the Maoist violence in Central and Eastern India and the ethnic conflicts in Northeastern states will remain a major cause of concern. Though several militant groups in the Northeast are already part of the ongoing peace process with the government, the absence of any visible positive outcome of these processes raises questions on the state of peace in this region. As the peace processes with various militant groups fail to deliver leading to the emergence of newer and smaller militant groups, the sustainability of conflict in 2022 should not be doubted. Similarly, unless the government initiates a dialogue with the Maoists, Central and Eastern India will continue to witness conflict as well. The emergence of TRF in carrying out terror activities against the civilians and security forces, the involvement of Pakistan, and the influence of Taliban victory in Afghanistan will have direct implications on the conflict in J&K.

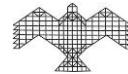
In the case of Pakistan, one should not expect radical changes in the conflict landscape in Pakistan. The deep roots of the extremist forces will be difficult to be uprooted even if the present regime of Imran Khan gets replaced by the protesting 'democratic forces'. the vicious nexus among the political elite, army, and extremist forces, and the poverty and debt trap will not allow altering the nature of conflict in Pakistan in 2022. However, given the present situation in Pakistan, one can expect the addition of new stakeholders to the ongoing conflict.

In the case of Afghanistan, the course of the conflict in 2022, arguably, will involve extremist forces like the Taliban and ISIS-K. Such a conflict will be on the issue of proving more radical than the other. The people supporting democracy will have a very little scope and political power to take on the extremist forces. Deprived of peace and basic human rights, Afghanistan will continue to be under the control of the Taliban.

Despite its economic growth Bangladesh will continue to witness the conflict between the liberal democratic forces and the radical Islamist groups. The organizations like the Jammat-e-Islami-Bangladesh (Jei-B) and Hefazat-E-Islam with their robust social base will continue to mobilize their supporters in furthering their agenda. The rise of a new phase of JMB is going to be a concern for Bangladesh.

In the case of Nepal, one does not see any major violent conflict in 2022. However, the regional divide between the Pahadi and Madheshi will be a major conflict unless the

country works on the personal political ambitions of the leaders that often leads to political instability.



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NIAS-IPRI Brief

# State of Peace and Conflict in Central Asia in 2021

Dr Athar Zafar

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*The region of Central Asia largely remained stable in 2021. Peace was disrupted in the region in April 2021. There was a short but severe border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Nevertheless, this period was short and tension subsided quickly.*

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## Introduction

The region of Central Asia consisting of five republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, largely remained stable in 2021. Peace was disrupted in the region in April 2021. There was a short but severe border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Nevertheless, this period was short and tension subsided quickly. The larger trend in the region is of increasing regional cooperation and it continued in 2021. The regional countries meet annually to take the cooperation agenda forward and the third meeting of the regional leaders under the consultative format was held in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, in August 2021.

The move towards regional cooperation, which has witnessed increased pace since last few years, is likely to continue and gain further momentum in the future. The process of regional cooperation is being driven by Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan under the new leadership in these countries but certainly supported by other three republics. Kazakhstan is the largest economy while Uzbekistan is the region's most populous country. Uzbekistan is strategically placed in the region and it is the only country which shares borders with all other regional countries as well as with Afghanistan. The region made steady economic growth in 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down the pace of economic and regional cooperation in Central Asia. Secondly, the recent developments in Afghanistan have been unexpected for the regional countries in Central Asia, three of them - Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan share borders with Afghanistan. Instability in Afghanistan can be considered as the biggest external concern for the region. In the near future, the terrorism and drug trafficking threats are likely to continue in the discourse in the region. The regional republics are cooperating and coordinating with other countries, including India, to help contributing to stability in the region. All Central Asian republics participated in the recent regional security dialogue held by India.

## Major developments in Central Asia in 2021

- Central Asian countries became independent in 1991 from the erstwhile USSR and they are commemorating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their independence in

2021. The republics plan to celebrate the occasion, including by creating dedicated parks and the cultural programmes.

- In 2021, parliamentary elections were held in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyz Republic. Earlier, Kyrgyzstan had held the presidential elections in January 2021 and Sadyr Japarov became President by securing a landslide victory with about 80 per cent of votes.
- Central Asia also hosted some major regional summits, including the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Tajikistan while Uzbekistan organized a significant international conference on Central and South Asia connectivity in July 2021. Turkmenistan, which pursues the policy of neutrality, hosted the third Consultative meeting of the heads of state of Central Asia in Turkmenbashi on 6 August 2021. Kazakhstan hosted the Eurasian Economic Union meeting in virtual mode.
- Two major challenges for the region in 2021 were the flare up of the tension on the borders between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which subsided subsequently. The second challenge was from outside in the form of the sudden takeover of Kabul by the Taliban in August 2021.
- Besides, Central Asian countries continued the efforts to deal with the challenges of the corona virus pandemic. Though Turkmenistan has not officially declared the presence of COVID-19 infections in the country, all five republics have taken measures to counter the disease.
- In a major related development from the region, Kazakhstan successfully developed the vaccine against the COVID-19 virus - QazVac. In the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), only Kazakhstan and Russia have their own corona virus vaccine production. Kazakhstan plans to export the QazVac to other countries, including Afghanistan.
- The region sends large number of migrant workers, primarily to Russia and receives remittances. Movement of workforce from the region has been affected due to the pandemic-led travel restrictions.

Some major developments can be identified at the country level in 2021, which could be important from the perspective of national and regional developments.

### **Kazakhstan**

The primary focus of the region's largest country in 2021 was to deal with the pandemic and its impact on the economy. The country held its parliamentary elections in January 2021. The ruling Nur Otan party, which till recently was headed by the former President Nursultan Nazarbayev, secured about 70 per cent of votes. In October 2021, the country hosted the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meeting in virtual format. The developments in the country have been along the expected line in 2021 and the trajectory is likely similar in 2022.

### **Kyrgyz Republic**

For Kazakhstan's neighbour the Kyrgyz Republic, year 2021 was eventful. It began with the border tension with Tajikistan and ended with protests over the November 2021 parliamentary election results. In April 2021, there was a conflict between the residents of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan borders, where security forces got involved after dispute over water and installation of surveillance cameras. It led to the death of more than 50 and injury of over 300 people and displacement of many. Though in the past there had

been instances of clashes, the April conflict was most severe in many years. Most of casualties were from the Kyrgyz side. There were reported suggestions of land swaps and transfer of Tajik exclave Vorukh to Kyrgyzstan. In April 2021 Kyrgyzstan held a referendum, which significantly increased the power of President. The borders are reportedly reopened and negotiations for demarcation have restarted between the two countries.

Kyrgyzstan held the parliamentary elections in November 2021. Pro-government parties secured majority of seats in the parliament but no opposition parties could secure 5 per cent threshold mark to enter into the parliament. Opposition parties were protesting against the results of the elections.

### **Tajikistan**

Tajikistan was one of parties to the border conflict with Kyrgyzstan. However, it seems to have handled the situation with lesser casualties. Tajik President visited Vorukh in early April and denied talks on transfer of the exclave to Kyrgyzstan. Tajik-Kyrgyz have about 1,000 kilometre long border and almost half of the border have been demarcated during negotiations between the two countries so far.

The most serious concern for Tajikistan is the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban. The government of Tajikistan has taken a firm stance against the Taliban, insisting on an inclusive government in Afghanistan.

In terms of regional diplomacy, year 2021 was important for Tajikistan, it hosted two important summits of the regional groupings: CSTO and the SCO in September 2021. A joint summit of the two organizations was also held, focusing on the situation in Afghanistan. Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the SCO summit and the joint summit.

### **Turkmenistan**

Turkmenistan has been facing economic challenges, including due to low international hydrocarbon energy prices. Turkmenistan is yet to acknowledge the presence of coronavirus in the country. Nevertheless, it was among the first in the region to close borders in view of the pandemic outbreak.

In January 2021 Afghanistan and Turkmenistan had inaugurated three projects of power transmission, fibre optic line and a railway link to boost bilateral and regional engagement. The country has been engaging with the Taliban and in February 2021 it hosted a Taliban delegation, which assured 'full support for the implementation and security of TAPI and other developmental projects' in the country.

### **Uzbekistan**

Uzbekistan has been witnessing wide ranging reforms launched by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the process continued in 2021. The parliamentary elections were held in Uzbekistan in October 2021 in which the party associated with the president got majority of seats in the parliament. People of Uzbekistan largely support the reform measures taken by the president.

### **Central Asia-Afghanistan**

The regional republics have historical connections with Afghanistan. They share overlapping ethnic and cultural linkages with people in Afghanistan, including with number of Tajiks, Turkmen and Uzbeks living across the borders in their south. Their condition and concerns are shared by many people living in the region. Rapid developments in Afghanistan, especially the fall of the Ghani administration in August 2021 surprised the Central Asian countries. There are primarily three concerns of the regional countries over the persisting security situation in Afghanistan, which are related to security, refugee and connectivity.

The takeover of Kabul by the Taliban has brought new challenges to the security in Central Asia. A recent UN report says fighters from many countries continue to operate in Afghanistan, though it has been denied by the Taliban. The report estimates that the number of foreign terrorist fighters is between 8,000 and 10,000, who are mainly from Central Asia, Russia's north Caucasus region, Pakistan and Xinjiang. Further, the report says that though the majority of them are affiliated with the Taliban, many also support the al-Qaida.

Da'ish in Khorasan or ISIL-K has emerged as another security threat in Central Asia. The Central Asian countries are not sure how the Taliban will keep their promise of not hosting in Afghanistan terrorists aiming to harm other countries and control such elements from carrying out destructive activities in the region.

The countries of Central Asia are concerned about refugee flow to the region. As the Taliban launched military offensive to take over Afghanistan, many in Afghan security forces crossed over to the neighbouring Central Asian countries. About 5,000 Afghan troops had crossed to Tajikistan, they were later sent back to Afghanistan. Over 580 Afghan soldiers fled to Uzbekistan with 22 military planes and 24 helicopters while many crossed the border on foot.

The Central Asian countries neither have the capacity nor willingness to host large number of refugees from Afghanistan. The regional economies are already strained due to the global economic slowdown, relatively lower hydrocarbon energy prices and the COVID-19 impact. Further, hosting a large number of Afghan refugees can complicate the region's relations with the Taliban in Kabul.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the US two decades back, the Central Asian countries fully cooperated with the international coalition's campaign against the Taliban and in combating terrorism. Some Central Asian countries had not only allowed military bases and use of their air space but also provided land access to reach Afghanistan through its north (Northern Distribution Network-NDN) for supplies. Their responses towards the developments in Afghanistan this time, however, have been different and also varied from regional perspective. The perceptions of some Central Asian countries towards Afghan problem and the Taliban have changed over the last two decades. Some commonalities among the countries in terms of their responses to the developments in Afghanistan are mentioned below:

1. It can be mentioned that as the campaign in Afghanistan dragged on for years, its achievements came under question. Uzbekistan closed the US base in 2005, Kyrgyzstan

shut down the American military facility in the country in 2014. In 2005 the SCO, where four republics of Central Asia are full members, called to set a deadline for the stay of foreign forces in the region.

2. There is a sense among many people in the region that methods applied from outside, including the military method, and installation of a democratically elected government in Kabul could not bring peace in the country.

3. Central Asian countries seem alarmed by the meltdown of Afghanistan's security and political order. They were concerned over the disintegration of the administration in the country and takeover by the Taliban.

4. All republics in the region are concerned about the fragility of situation in Afghanistan and its impact on the region, including the concerns about terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking.

5. Republics of the region are maintaining their supplies, including of electricity, fuel and food items to Afghanistan.

6. Central Asia is yet to formulate a comprehensive regional response to the situation in Afghanistan, though the issue has been discussed by the regional leaders in their annual consultation summits.

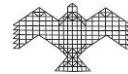
Though the Central Asian countries seemed apprehensive, probably they are prepared to engage with the Taliban in Afghanistan this time. Afghanistan is critical for the landlocked Central Asia in overcoming its connectivity challenges, which is hampering the region's international trade and economic development. From the region, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have been developing connectivity and energy linkages with Afghanistan to access wider South Asian markets. Economy is probably a key driver for the countries of the region to continue their relations with Afghanistan.

### **Trends and issues in 2021**

- The difference in stances of Central Asian countries on the Taliban and their approach to engage them is a new trend in the region. It is likely to continue in the year to come. Among the bordering countries Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are talking to the Taliban while Tajikistan is critical of the Taliban and is not engaging with them publicly.
- In view of the coronavirus pandemic, major economic trend was to gradual easing up and continue cooperation with regional and extra regional countries. The regional countries will remain watchful over the pandemic situation.
- The region faces no serious internal security threat. They have been able to control and keep the local extremist organisations in check.
- Drug trafficking and consumption is a security, economic and health threat to the people in Central Asia. The region falls on major international drug trafficking route from Afghanistan to Europe.
- The impact of climate change on the region has been emerging as an important issue for the people in the region. The Aral Lake is drying up and availability of water is an issue in the region.

### **Brief forecast for 2022**

- Keeping in view the sustained economic progress made in the region despite the pandemic, especially by Uzbekistan, the efforts towards greater regional cooperation will continue in future. The regional cooperation has got political as well as popular support.
- Kazakhstan is likely to remain politically stable. The transfer of authority from former President Nursultan Nazarbayev to President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev will continue.
- Despite the protests in Kyrgyzstan over the results of the parliamentary elections, the situation is likely to stabilize in coming days.
- In Tajikistan, there seems no threat to political stability. The biggest concern for Tajikistan will continue to be the situation in Afghanistan.
- Turkmenistan will continue to push for diversification of its energy export. It is engaging with the Taliban to secure transit of Turkmen exports to South Asia, including the revival of the TAPI natural gas pipeline.
- Uzbekistan in 2022 is expected to maintain its substantial economic growth rate. The all round reform measures in the recount are likely to continue.
- The overall forecast for the region is positive from within the region. The republics are visualising the benefits of regional cooperation in terms of increase in trade and easy movement of people from country to another. Before the pandemic, some regional republics were preparing to start a regional 'Silk Road' visa to boost pan-region tourism.



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NIAS-IPRI Brief

# State of Peace and Conflict in the Middle East in 2021

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*The Middle East in 2021 witnessed powers making quick moves to consolidate their geopolitical positions considering the larger changes at play. The Middle East and North Africa region, which encompasses the Arab world, Iran, Israel and Turkey, saw conflicts, coups, power grabs, human suffering and economic miseries in 2021.*

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## Introduction

The Middle East (or West Asia) is no stranger to conflicts. Since the end of the Second World War, the region has seen multiple wars as well as peace summits. Given its geo-strategic importance and hydrocarbon resources, great powers have always been interested in the region. If the British Empire was the most important power in the Middle East until the Second World War, the United States has retained an outsized influence in the region ever since. After the end of the Cold War, the US, which emerged as the world's most powerful nation, has carried out a series of military interventions in the larger Middle East and North Africa region as it sought to remake its engagement with local powers. It went to war with Iraq in 1991 and 2003, bombed Libya in 2011 and sent troops to Syria to fight the Islamic State (IS) terrorist groups after the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011.

In recent years the region has also seen the rise of terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda in Iraq and the IS. The US is now gradually shifting its focus to the Asia Pacific region where China is rising fast. The US has pulled back its troops from Afghanistan and announced the end of combat operations in Iraq. It has also drawn down troops from Syria, and removed some of the weapons, including the Patriot missile defence system, it had deployed in the Gulf. As the US is resizing its presence in the Middle East, regional players are repositioning themselves. Turkey wants to play a bigger role in the region, which was ruled by the Ottomans for centuries until the end of the First World War. The Gulf kingdoms, America's allies, have warmed up to Israel. The rivalry between Israel and Iran is at an inflection point, particularly as Iran has resumed its nuclear programme after the US pulled out of the 2015 nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). These developments leave the Middle East in a state of flux, like much of the world.

## Major Developments in 2021

The year 2021 saw Middle Eastern powers make quick moves to consolidate their geopolitical positions considering the larger changes at play. The Middle East and North Africa region, which encompasses the Arab world, Iran, Israel and Turkey, saw conflicts, coups, power grabs, human suffering and economic miseries in 2021. This paper looks

at five major crises and other trends that shaped up Middle Eastern geopolitics in 2021 and the prospects for peace and concerns of conflict going forward.

## **1. Yemen**

One of the early foreign policy decisions of the Biden administration, which was inaugurated in January 2021, was to end its support for Saudi Arabia's war in neighbouring Yemen. But President Joe Biden's decision had little impact on the conflict, as the year saw one of the most intense phases of the war in Marib between the Saudi-backed government and the Houthi rebels. Saudi Arabia started attacking Yemen in 2015 after the country's capital, Sana'a, was seized by the Houthis. The Houthis are Shia and the Saudis, a Sunni-Wahhabi kingdom, allege that they are backed by the Shia theocratic Iran, Riyadh's regional rival. When the Saudis launched the war, in an alliance with the United Arab Emirates and with support from the US, it was expected that they would wrap it up rather quickly and restore the government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi in Sana'a. But to the surprise of many, the war dragged on, with Saudi Arabia struggling to find a way-out. Six years after the war started, the Saudi-led coalition is fractured with the UAE having exited Yemen and a separatist group in the south, the Southern Transition Council, challenging President Hadi's government. The Houthis are still in Sana'a, and have carried out cross-border drone and short-range missile attacks, targeting Saudi positions. In early 2021, the Houthis, who control northern Yemen, advanced towards Marib, east of Sana'a, triggering an all-out war. Hundreds of people were killed in the ongoing battle the result of which could alter the balance of power in the Yemeni civil war.

## **2. Lebanon**

Lebanon, whose capital Beirut was ripped apart by a blast in August 2020, continued to remain on the brink with economic miseries and sectarian rivalries bringing back the memories of the civil war of the 1970s and 1980s. After months of negotiations, Lebanon finally got a full-time Prime Minister in 2021, but the country is witnessing a once-in-a-generation economic crisis. The 2020 blast caused damages worth \$15 billion. Even before the blast, the Lebanese economy was facing a steep contraction. It dates back to the 2019 financial crisis, which saw the country defaulting on its bonds for the first time since its independence in 1943. According to the World Bank, Lebanon's GDP per capita fell by 40% in dollar terms between 2018 and 2020, while real GDP contracted by 20.3% in 2020, pulling the Mediterranean country into "one of the most severe global crises episodes".

Already, Lebanon is witnessing scarcity of medicines and other goods. It is also facing frequent power cuts as the government doesn't have funds to import fuel. Inflation has shot up more than 110%. Unemployment rate soared to 40%, according to the Bank. As the country grappled with these many crises, sectarian tensions were also soaring. In October, shots were fired at a rally called by the Shia Hezbollah against the Beirut blast probe. Hezbollah and its Shia ally Amal Movement blamed the Lebanese Forces, a Christian party, for the shooting. Meanwhile, Gulf countries withdrew their ambassadors from Lebanon over a comment made by one of the ministers of Prime Minister Najib Mikati's new government on the Yemen war, signalling that they don't support the Hezbollah-backed government. As Lebanon moves from one crisis to another, the biggest security risk is the collapse of the state and the possibility of an outbreak of a sectarian civil war. The wounds of the previous civil war are yet to heal in this country.

### 3. Israel-Palestine

One of the oldest crises in the Middle East, the Israel-Palestine conflict saw another flare-up in 2021. In May, Hamas, the Islamist militant group that controls Gaza Strip, launched rockets into Israel after Israeli troops entered Al-Aqsa compound in Jerusalem, the third holiest mosque in Islam. In response, Israel started air strikes on Gaza, which went on for a week. Tensions were rising between Palestinians and Israel over the Israeli move to evict Palestinian families living in Sheikh Jarrah, a Jerusalem neighbourhood. Israeli settler groups claim that the land in Sheikh Jarrah where Palestinians have been living for decades belongs to them and want to evict the Palestinians. During Ramzan, the Islamic holy month, Israel set up new barricades in Jerusalem's Old City ahead of an expected court ruling on Sheikh Jarrah. This led to violent protests by Palestinians and use of force by the Israeli troops, who stormed al-Aqsa Mosque with tear gas, rubber bullets and stun grenades. The crisis quickly slid into an open conflict between Israel and Hamas.

Israel carried out heavy bombing of Gaza, which resulted in high civilian casualties, while Hamas kept firing rockets into Israel — some of them evading Israel's Iron Dome defence system. What shocked Israel more was the outbreak of protests by Palestinians across historic Palestine — from the Gaza Strip on the Mediterranean coast through Israeli proper to the occupied Jerusalem and West Bank on the banks of Jordan River. As civilian casualties mounted, Israel also came under international pressure, with the Biden administration publicly demanding a ceasefire. On May 21, Israel agreed to an Egypt-backed ceasefire. When the Abraham Accords were signed between Israel and four Arab countries in 2020, there was one argument that Israel has successfully bypassed the Palestinian issue to normalise ties with Arab countries. But the 2021 conflict suggests that the Palestinian issue would remain one of the critical crises in the region as long as the Israeli occupation continues and irrespective of Israel's warm-up to Arab countries. Tensions still remain high as there are no attempts to kick-start negotiations. Palestinian territories continue to see sporadic violence.

### 4. Syria

With regard to Syria, the year 2021 endorsed what was already evident — President Bashar al-Assad has won the civil war. His regime has recaptured most of the lost territories, except Idlib province, which is controlled by Hayat al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda branch in Syria) and pro-Turkish rebels. The Syrian Kurdish territories are run by the People's Defence Units (YPG), a Kurdish militia group that has entered into a de facto deal with Damascus. The Kurds seek autonomy, not independence, and for now, the Syrian troops are not fighting the Kurds. Pro-Turkish rebels are controlling slices of territories on the Turkish-Syrian border, which Turkey sees as a buffer between the Turkish Kurdistan, where it's fighting an insurgency, and the Syrian Kurdistan.

In May 2021, President Assad got "re-elected" in a presidential election, in a clear message from the regime that he was not going anywhere. Arab countries, including Jordan which had at the beginning of the civil war helped the anti-Assad rebels, have warmed up to Damascus. But Assad's victory is not complete and there still are fault-lines that could turn the crisis worse. Assad wants to take back Idlib, where 3 million people live. Turkey is steadily opposed to any Syrian-Russian effort to recapture Idlib

because it fears that such an attack would unleash another wave of refugees across the border. Turkey is already hosting millions of Syrian refugees. For now, Turkey and Russia have entered into an agreement to delay an all-out attack on Idlib. But if the Syrian government, backed by Russia, launches an attack, that could trigger a wider conflict.

## 5. Iran

The Iranian nuclear crisis turned worse in 2021 with Iran steadily expanding its nuclear programme and talks in Vienna to restore the 2015 nuclear deal having hit a deadlock. The nuclear deal, JCPOA, signed by Iran, the US, China, Russia and European powers, had limited Iran's nuclear programme. Iran agreed to cut its stockpile of enriched uranium by 98% and open its nuclear plants for international inspection. But the deal became dysfunctional after the Trump administration unilaterally pulled the US out of it in May 2018 despite UN certification that Iran was fully compliant with the terms of the agreement. Following the US violation of the agreement, Iran also started breaching the deals' terms. Over the past year, it has started enriching uranium to 20% and more purity level, a technical step away from the weapons-grade level of 90%. Iran has also scuttled the IAEA access to its plants and reportedly started manufacturing advanced centrifuges, which are used to enrich uranium. If the breakout period — the time Iran would take to make a bomb if it decides to do so — was one year according to the nuclear deal, it has now reportedly shrunk to one month.

The Biden administration has appointed Robert Malley, the lead negotiator of the 2015 deal, as a special envoy for Iran and offered talks to Iran. Tehran held multiple rounds of talks with the remaining signatories of the deal in Vienna in 2021, but refused to hold direct talks with the Americans. The US has agreed to lift the Trump-era sanctions if Iran returns to the nuclear deal, but Iran demands the US first enter the agreement, remove all the sanctions and provide assurances that a future American President would not violate the deal. The talks have so far produced no breakthrough. In the meantime, Israel has warned the US against lifting sanctions on Iran. If the nuclear deal is not revived and Iran enriches uranium to the weapons-grade level, it could send tensions with Israel soaring.

## Trends and issues in 2021

While conflicts overshadowed the year, 2021 also saw some realignments in the Middle East. The Israel-Palestine conflict is no longer a hurdle in Arab-Israeli ties. If in 1967, Arab countries, in the Khartoum conference in Sudan, declared 'no peace, no talks and no recognition' with Israel, six Arab countries, including Sudan, have now established formal ties with the Jewish nation—four of them did so in 2020. The UAE and Bahrain, both Gulf kingdoms, have steadily expanded ties with Israel in 2021. This is part of the UAE's reassessment of regional politics. For decades, the UAE played second fiddle to Saudi Arabia and was dependent on the US for security guarantees. The US's move to shift its focus to the Asia Pacific and Saudi Arabia's adventurism, including the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi and the unwinnable war in Yemen, seems to have prompted the UAE to take a different foreign policy course. On the one side, it established ties with Israel, Iran's main rival in the region, and on the other, it reached out to Iran for better diplomatic ties. The UAE exited the Yemen conflict, mended the broken ties with Turkey and joined Saudi Arabia to end the blockade of Qatar. Simultaneously, it's also boosting its defence capability.

Saudi Arabia has also taken half-hearted steps to reorient its foreign policy. While it hasn't formally opened ties with Israel, it's an open secret that the Kingdom and the Jewish nation enjoy warm backroom ties. The Saudis have also started negotiations with Iran. The 2019 attack on Saudi oil installations, which knocked off half of Saudi Arabia's oil production capacity for days, was a game changer for Saudi policy makers. Since the late 1940s, the bedrock of the Saudi-US cooperation was the latter's security commitment to the kingdom. Yet, the US did nothing when Saudi oil facilities came under attack from Iranian drones. Saudi Arabia also sees a growing security challenge across its southern border in Yemen. So it adopted a twin approach — continue to fight the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen while at the same time seeking direct talks with Iran. If there's a breakthrough in Saudi-Iranian rivalry, that could help both countries dial down tensions in the region.

Turkey is another country that needs to be watched closely. Under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey has turned its focus back to the Middle East from Europe. It had also played an ambitious role in several conflicts in recent years — in Syria, Libya and the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. It's also trying to reassert itself in the Eastern Mediterranean region, which has traditionally been dominated by European powers. Its interests clash with that of Russia in the Caucasus, Libya and Syria, but it has still entered into an entente with Moscow. Turkey even angered the US by buying Russian missile defence system S400. All these developments point to Turkey's desire to play a larger role in the geopolitics of the region which once controlled by the Ottomans. Turkey has built a strong partnership with Qatar and has stationed some troops to the Gulf kingdom. It has carved up a sphere of influence on the Syrian border and helped the Libyan government based in Tripoli defeat General Khalifa Haftar's forces that were backed by the UAE and Egypt. While it's making baby steps in expanding its influence in the region, a weakening economy and a crashing currency remain its biggest challenges.

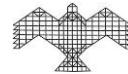
## Forecasts for 2022

The dominant trends in Middle Eastern geopolitics suggest that the region would continue to see realignment going forward. In the post-War world, the Middle East has seen the sands of power shifting many times. If Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel were the three main regional powers in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, a quarter century into the Cold War, the world saw Israel emerging as a new pillar and Egypt losing its influence. The Iranian revolution of 1979 ended America's alliance with the Shia country and ever since, the competition, if not rivalry, between the Islamic Republic and Saudi Arabia was one of the driving factors of Middle Eastern geopolitics. The region is once again witnessing changes in the existing equations.

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have made it clear that they want some kind of détente with Iran. Having realised that the US is shifting its strategic focus away from the Middle East, the Sunni Gulf Kingdoms do not want to get caught in the crossfire in the event of a military confrontation between Iran and Israel — which is probable if the nuclear talks in Vienna collapse. So 2022 is likely to see diplomatic efforts by both Saudi Arabia and the UAE in improving ties with Iran. The Saudi-led bloc has made peace with Qatar, for now. But their paths are different. Qatar would seek to further strengthen its ties with Turkey. The Syrian crisis would remain dormant unless the Russia-Turkey entente collapses and Moscow backs a Syrian plan to retake Idlib by force. The Israel-Palestine issue remains tense. There are no prospects for peace between the two peoples. Israel's

new ruling coalition, in which an Arab party is a member, has halted the eviction of Palestinian residents in Sheikh Jarrah. But the real problem is that there is no peace process. And there's no unity among the Palestinians, with the Fatah running the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas ruling the blockaded Gaza. Unless there's an international push to relaunch the peace talks, the issue would continue to fester with the potential for more flare-ups in the future.

The most dangerous contradiction in the region is the growing rivalry between Israel and Iran. Israel is facing a dilemma: If the Vienna talks are a success and the nuclear deal is concluded, that would lead to the lifting of American sanctions on Iran. Sans sanctions, Iran, rich with hydrocarbon resources, would be free to tap its economic potential and rise as an economic power. Growth and money would only strengthen Iran's regional activism—where it supports militant groups from Hezbollah in Lebanon to the Islamic Jihad in Gaza — and its conventional defence programmes, including its ballistic missile programme. This would alter the regional balance of power and Israel would face a much more conventional rival in Iran. And if the nuclear talks collapse and Iran goes ahead with the production of more centrifuges and highly enriched uranium, Iran could reach the nuclear threshold (90% purity), which could challenge Israel's nuclear monopoly in the Middle East. In either case, Israel faces unpleasant choices and game-changing outcomes. The choices Israel and Iran make in the coming months would decide the future of Middle Eastern geopolitics.



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NIAS-IPRI Brief

# State of Peace and Conflict in Africa in 2021

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*The continent of Africa in 2021 has been exposed to expansive Covid-19 pandemic, increased level of climate change, economic recession, along with other ongoing problems including increased violence, the return of military rule and authoritarian regimes, widening of ethnic fault lines and communal divides.*

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## Introduction

The ongoing year (2021) has been an eventful one for Africa as the continent has been exposed to expansive Covid-19 pandemic, increased level of climate change, economic recession, along with other ongoing problems that the continent has been facing for a very long period such as ethnic and communal conflicts, inter-state wars and so on. As the current year comes to a close, certain major developments in Africa raises enhanced concerns while looking at the digression from the trajectory that Africa as a continent has traversed in the last decade, especially the increased number of conflicts and backsliding of democracy. The international and regional organizations, along with the national governments tried to address some of these issues, though the outcomes were not encouraging. The current trends and trajectories in the African States can have long terms effects on peace building in general and on the lives of people in Africa in particular, and regions beyond. Certain States such as Ethiopia has witnessed increased violence whereas after engaging with democracy, several States witnessed the return of military rule and authoritarian regimes such as in Sudan. Ethnic fault lines and communal divides began to widen in several instances prompting one to draw a few general trajectories. Spread of Covid and health impacts, economic crisis, and the spread of large-scale internal migrations are compounding the situation in the region in current year.

## Major Conflicts and Developments in Africa during 2021

The year 2021, like many other regions, exposed Africa to the Covid pandemic at a bigger scale with around 8.7 million people being exposed to the deadly virus so far. In a way, states like South Africa, Morocco, Tunisia, and Ethiopia bore the brunt of most of the new infections. Covid pandemic, consequent lockdown and economic recession, along with existing crises has begun to shape Africa in the year 2021. In 2021, pandemic resulted in various kinds of conflicts in Africa emanating out of Covid protocol management, lack of resources to deal with Covid (both medical and economic resources) along with other issues like over health securitization, postponement of the election, suspension of rights citing extraordinary situations and so on. South Africa is a noteworthy example in this context. Communal conflicts and ethnic violence have disrupted normal life in most of the States in the region like Nigeria where food crisis is expected for the year 2022 as the livelihood of common people is widely affected.<sup>i</sup>

Similarly, the climate change issues are estimated to affect 86 million Africans leading to migration within their countries and the region, according to a recent World Bank Study.<sup>ii</sup> In the climate front, West Africa, especially the Sahel region, will be severely affected.

Conflicts as a response to authoritarian tendencies are also visible in Ghana, Kenya, Algeria, and so on. In addition, extremist and terrorist groups like ISIS and Boko Haram in Nigeria too exploit the societal tensions and gaps in development and political representation among various communities and tribes to their advantage and indulge in increased instances of violence. Out of the other Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs), Al Shabab, a transnational terrorist group, in Somalia, persists with attacks on the official and civilians within the country, Kenya, and the neighboring Somalia. Recently, Global Conflict Tracker of Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) has indicated that out of the several major conflicts in Africa, Ethiopian conflict has worsened whereas the intensity of others continues to remain same (South Sudan, Mali, Somalia, Congo, Nigeria, Central African Republic).

There were several military interventions in Africa and the subsequent regimes, which in turn have escalated conflicts across the continent. Such intervention could be witnessed in Sudan, Guinea, Chad, and Mali. In Sudan, in October 2021, military leader, General Al Burhan declared emergency in the country and dismissed Prime Minister Abdala Hamdok who was leading a transitional government with the support of the military since 2019. Sudan, of course, has long history of experiencing frequent military coups and attempts to topple civilian governments. Since 1956, there have been five successful coups in Sudan. In fact, a transitional government through a coalition, involving the military and a pro-democracy group – Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) came to power in Sudan in 2019 after expelling Omar al-Bashir, the autocratic military ruler who was in power in Khartoum (1989-2019). The fall of the coalition government, one year before the term (three-year term was fixed to Prime Minister Hamdok when the coalition took over in 2019) clearly implies that democratization which was promised at the time of formation of transition government, is in crisis. In a very recent development, Hamdok was reinstated through an agreement signed between him and the military (on 21<sup>st</sup> November, 2021). However, it is alleged that there are provisions in the agreement which gives enormous power to military, especially to control the Sovereign Council.<sup>iii</sup> It is yet to be seen how the agreement works and the transition to civilian government will take place in the near future. So is the case with other states like Nigeria. Even, the South Sudan, which was carved out of Sudan in 2011, is in the grip of several internal conflicts. In South Sudan and in Darfur, several thousand people were killed in the conflict. South Sudan seceded from Sudan in 2011. The agreements signed by conflicting parties Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Government (SPLA-iG) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in Opposition (SPLM/A-iO) that has questioned the Peace and Transitions accords such as ARCSS<sup>iv</sup> (Agreement on the Resolution of Conflicts in South Sudan) and R-ARCSS (Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflicts in South Sudan) under SPLA/M. Even in neighboring Uganda, Yoweri Museveni's re-election as the President for the sixth term has raised questions about the validity of election processes and the anti-democratic rule that Museveni is presiding over in that country.

Similarly, in Chad, a central African State, after the death of Idsisi Deby,<sup>v</sup> the then President, a military government under Mahamad Kaka has come to power. In Guinea, the military overthrew the government of President Alfa Conde, representing the political party - Rally of Guinean People (RGP) who ruled the country for 10 years. A transitional government came to power in Mali, a West African State too. A series of internal changes and minor power transfers were manifested within the military regime in Mali after the country witnessed the overthrow of the democratically elected President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. Climate Change<sup>vi</sup> is considered to be one of the reasons for the increased conflict in the country. Mozambique, which has second largest oil field in Africa, is in the grip of a civil war, leading to the killing of thousands of people. Cabo Delego and the North East province are also witnessing civil wars. Ethiopia, another prominent state in the horn of Africa, which is considered to be relatively stable state, is also going through a massive crisis. Abiy Ahmed, the Ethiopian President, a Nobel Laureate for Peace (in 2019), is in the forefront of war, leading a war against Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a rebel group, by mobilizing his troupes and supporters. The TPLF is allegedly supported by the Western government of European Union and the US. Tigray region, where it is engaged in a major armed rebellion has pushed the region closer to a humanitarian crisis. In a way, TPLF dominated the Federal Government in Ethiopia for almost 27 years. The crisis is also linked to ethnic divide in the society.<sup>vii</sup> Ethiopian troops are accused of a serious humanitarian crisis. There is a huge toll of death and the levels of internal displacement are so acute that thousands of people face starvation. If the leaders of Ethiopia do not take a pro-active role in building peace through the negotiations and reconciliation with each other, the solution to the conflict is distinctly distant. Similarly, even a dam construction – Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has resulted in bitter conflicts involving Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan. Apart from the climate change induced issues, there is an increased level of hunger since the civil war erupted last year (2020) with 5 million people living with hunger/food insecurity. So is the case with Nigeria, Chad and Congo. There are also groups in Africa which function in transnational fashion acting against multiple states. For instance, Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) militia has killed thousands of civilians and carried out multiple bombings in neighboring Uganda. Similarly, Western Sahara Conflict which was frozen is re-activated again with Polisario Front challenging Moroccan interference in the country.

### **Trends and Issues in 2021**

A glance at these developments leads one to decipher a few broader trends and trajectories. However, unlike in the last decades, there has been substantial decline of democracy<sup>viii</sup> in Africa and increase in number of civil wars/armed conflicts in the recent times. This is contrary to the trend in the realm of African polity in the last two decades wherein, since the end of Cold War, several of the African States have changed their polity from one party/military regime to multi-party system over a period of time. In this context, Freedom House in its report for the year 2021 highlighted a few countries from Africa showing significant digression from democratic path such as Ethiopia, Côte d'Ivoire and Malawi. Of course, very recently, Malawian Supreme Court reversed some of the anti-democratic policies and processes including the conduct of elections. It also reports that people living under free countries in Africa is at just 16 percent while some of the worst performers in democracy front are Somalia, Eritrea, Central African Republic and so on.<sup>ix</sup>

Broadly, Africa which entered into the 'third wave of democratization' in the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century by way of conduct of elections, establishment of representative institutions (though partially as a response to pressure from Global lending bodies like WB and IMF, along with regional organizations like African Union (AU), human rights groups, UN bodies,), is facing a roll back at present. At least, procedural democracy in terms of conduct of elections/ referendum was carried out throughout the last two decades though the implementation of substantive democracy was in question in several States.<sup>x</sup> One can certainly observe that there is a setback to democracy in Africa in the year 2021 as evident from the onset of military rules, sabotage of elections and suppression of human rights and so on. In 2021, so far, four countries have fallen to military rule. Several current conflicts in Africa are based on historical and ethnic fault lines and ethnic nationalism are raising its head once again. The conflict like in Ethiopia point to that direction. There are internal criticisms (like that of former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan) in Africa that several problems of Africa are due to the inability of African States to manage diversity. Such views point to the direction that multi-cultural, multi-ethnic oriented policies can address some of the conflicts in African societies. It is also a reflection of the decline of a pan-African vision of multi-ethnic, multi-cultural societies that the first-generation African leaders envisioned after decolonization in the continent. The recent conflict involving Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan on Grand Ethiopian renaissance Dam (GERD) shows the decline of continental / regional mechanism to resolve inter-state crisis, even on pan-regional developmental issue. Several observers point out that there should be a regional solution to regional problems in Africa. Regional Organizations such as African Union (AU) can play a constructive role in this regard. Nigerian President, Olusegun Obasanjo's role through African Union is quite notable in this regard.

In the human security realm (non-traditional security areas), hunger has increased drastically with around 700 million people in Africa facing hunger/poverty related issues. These issues have to be seen in the larger context of developments such as democratization and economic development that the continent witnessed in the pre-covid times. The climate change and consequent loss of livelihood, migration, and food insecurity is leading to conflicts and aggravation of existing conflicts. The example of Mali is often invoked to substantiate such an argument. The developments in Africa in 2021 show that ethnic fault lines in the democratization processes, and lack of institutionalization of governance practices are deeply affecting the conflict resolution processes in the continent even in the relatively stable polities like that of South Africa. The covid situation has aggravated the problem. In addition, Covid related border securitization has led to the wiping away of livelihoods especially in areas like tourism, the main stay of several economies. In several states like South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, the decline of tourism has led to severe economic crisis. The disruption of global supply chain system also added to poor availability of resources in several countries which had an indirect effect on several conflicts. In addition, the involvement of foreign powers, both western and emerging powers, in conflicts are often referred. For instance, the role and involvement of France and China are invoked, especially in the conflicts related to Sahel (the former) and in Sudan, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique (in the case of latter).

## Concluding Remarks

In 2021, Covid induced societal, socio-economic tensions, increasing level of authoritarian practices and democratic back-sliding make the current situation in Africa quite volatile. In this context, new conflicts can emerge, and existing low-intensity conflicts can transform into major ones (some to the level of civil wars). The authoritarian tendencies are already visible even in relatively stable democratic systems like South Africa. The case of Uganda is no different where questions on the validity of the election processes is raised and was hugely criticised by the Western governments. However, given the geo-strategic position of Uganda in Central and Eastern Africa, there is a huge possibility of Western governments supporting its president - Museveni, especially taking into the consideration the fact that Uganda has emerged as a stable state that confront terrorist organizations linked with Al-Qaeda. In other words, Africa is likely to face several issues next year, ranging from the COVID crisis, economic recession to inter-sates conflicts on resources sharing (like of GERD). The deteriorating socio-economic landscape, along with rolling back of democratization can accentuate African crisis. Therefore, if global and regional attention and actions are not mobilized, Africa is likely to face serious issues in the long run. Perhaps, there should be regional solutions to African problems. At the same time, global or regional support to the conflicts is complimentary to the individual state-centric approaches. If major rich states from the world do not disengage from 'vaccine nationalism', there can be a huge crisis in Africa, which in turn will vitiate the situation in the entire region and the world. In certain big countries like Nigeria, hardly 5 percent of its population is vaccinated whereas a richer state like South Africa has vaccinated just over 24 percent of its population. Similarly, covid related travel restrictions can further cripple African economies, as evident from recent actions on the part of countries across the world to halt/regulate movement people from Africa due to the emergence new covid variant - Omicron. The Covid crisis is likely to aggravate and the economic crisis will deepen further. Endogenous democratic decline has become real in the African context. The developments in Ethiopia in 2021 is of utmost concern, and if not handled in a more inclusive approach, with due respect to the diverse and multiple cultural practices, this can lead to a major civil war which the country and the continent can ill afford.

<sup>i</sup> News Item, <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/nigeria-key-message-update-crisis-ipc-phase-3-or-worse-outcomes-likely-conflict>, accessed on November 29, 2021

<sup>ii</sup> Press Release, World Bank, October 27, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/10/27/climate-change-could-further-impact-africa-s-recovery-pushing-86-million-africans-to-migrate-within-their-own-countries>, accessed on November 28, 2021.

<sup>iii</sup> News, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/hamdok-would-quit-if-post-coup-deal-not-implemented-supported-source-2021-12-01/>, accessed on November 27, 2021

<sup>iv</sup> An agreement signed between the Government of South Sudan and the South Sudan Armed Opposition under aegis of Intergovernmental Authority on Development in 2015, <https://peacemaker.un.org/node/2676>, accessed on November 28, 2021. The same agreement was revived and modified in 2018 as Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflicts as R-ARCSS

<sup>v</sup> Idris Deby died after sustaining injuries while combating the rebels in April, 2021, News, BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56815708>, accessed on May 1, 2021.

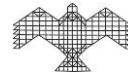
<sup>vi</sup> There are several studies which show that climate change lead to conflicts. The correlation between climate change and conflicts is indirect. Climate change leads food shortage which in turn trigger conflicts or aggravate existing conflicts. Please see Mach, K.J., Kraan, C.M., Adger, W.N. *et al.* Climate as a risk factor for armed conflict. *Nature* **571**, 193–197 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-019-1300-6>

<sup>vii</sup> Oromo and Amhara are the major ethnic groups which constitute around sixty percent in the total of nearly 100 million population where as Tigrayans constitute around 6 per cent. Please see FactBox: Ethiopia's Ethnic Groups, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics-factbox-idUSKCN1G01HZ>, accessed on November 26,2021

<sup>viii</sup> In the last decade (2000-2010), Africa registered an economic growth of 5.4 per cent, adding \$78 Billion annually to economy.<sup>viii</sup> In general, African States have undergone substantial changes in terms of governance models, especially when one compares their situation in the last decade with one before the beginning of the century. All these have made observers predict (in the last two decades) that Africa has emerged on the centre stage of the world and an ascendency of 'African Renaissance'.

<sup>ix</sup> Freedom In The World 2021 (2021) , Freedom House, Washington DC, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FIW2021\\_World\\_02252021\\_FINAL-web-upload.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FIW2021_World_02252021_FINAL-web-upload.pdf), accessed on November 29,2021

<sup>x</sup> S.Shaji (2021) Democratisation in the Changing Economic Landscape of Africa: A Perspective in Nivedita Ray (eds) India and Africa : Road Ahead, New Delhi : KW Publishers.



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NIAS-IPRI Brief

# State of Peace and Conflict in Latin America in 2021

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*The region of Central Asia largely in 2021 was dominated by the Covid and its wide-spread impact primarily. The region also witnessed protests almost as an entirety instead of small pockets and with good reason.*

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## Introduction

The region of Latin America has been dominated by the Covid and its wide-spread impact primarily. The pressure that the pandemic put on the region augmented the political inadequacy, economic instability, and the societal inequality and divisions that have long been a part of the region's fabric. The world saw Latin America erupt in protests almost as an entirety instead of small pockets and with good reason. While there are peculiarities to every country, there is also a common thread of dissatisfaction and political fatigue among the people. Popular protests that began and then spread across the region like dominoes falling to unearth a beautiful pattern did so due to the fact that the majority of the work force in the region demands change in the very foundations of Latin American societies. The inequality in social capital and income that is synonymous with the region is a legacy of colonialism; however, Latin America now demands change.

## Major Developments in 2021

While Covid remained an important theme in the region, Latin America was also in the middle of an election super cycle and attempting to recover from the economic ravages of 2020.

## Politics

Beginning with the politics, every few years the world gets obsessed with either the beginning or the culmination of a new 'pink' tide in Latin America. The Pink in the Pink Tide is an acceptable shade of the originally 'red' left in the proverbial American backyard. This palatable shade of Pink is emblematic of governments that are often termed as the Left of Centre, focused on socialist fundamentals, social spending, and welfare. While the election results in this cycle almost provide favourable settings for the declaration of a Pink Latin America; they don't quite hit the mark. The region has often been characterized by its contradictions and this election cycle is not devoid of such wonderful conundrums either. While Honduras, Peru, and most recently Chile have elected Presidents that can be placed on the spectrum towards the left in varying degrees; and the Argentina has continued with Fernandez and Bolivia elected another indigenous leader immediately after Evo Morales; they all come with caveats. The Peruvian President has been quite vocal about being ruthlessly tough on

immigrants and has shown no signs of softening the Peruvian stance on homosexuality and /or reproductive rights of women. The Boric Gabriel in Chile, is yet to deliver on his campaign promises and it still remains to be seen as to how he effectively marries the economic interests with social ones. Alberto Fernandez' party that narrowly won the provincial elections is already showing signs of a split and in all probability, he seems like a one – term president despite being the one to legalise abortions a year ago. Moreover, one only has to look towards Central America and Venezuela to realise that authoritarianism is alive and well in the region. Daniel Ortega, Nayib Bukele, and Nicolas Maduro are the pillars of authoritarianism in the region that refuse to fall. The people seem to be too exhausted and terrified to protest or fight. It would be harsh to colour the lack of popular protest in authoritarian countries as surrender; it must be studied with the understanding of the regions history of death squads and torture and little compunction about political assassinations.

The existence of Gabriel Boric who represents change and popular will, and Nicolas Maduro who represents the oppression, and autocracy in the same region at the same time points not to the convenience of an all-encompassing wave but towards a need for greater understanding of individual countries.

### **Economics**

2021 wasn't too abysmal for Latin America. The region showed some signs of improvement as the world started to put in place systems that could function with the Pandemic restrictions. As these systems came into place; Latin American economies also began to find their feet and begin stabilizing. While no country in the world has reached their pre-Covid levels of growth, and the same goes for Latin America; 2021 saw the Latin American economies recovering in a way that was better than the one predicted.

The other major development has been the discovery of massive crude oil and natural gas reservoirs in the region. While crude oil fields have predominantly been discovered in the Caribbean region; a massive reservoir of natural gas has also been unearthed in Paraguay which is estimated to be larger than the Bolivian reserves. As the region as a whole begins to transform into an energy destination of the world it has attracted the Chinese attention in its energy sector. China has been making large scale infrastructural investments in the region and has now began to make large scale investments in the national oil and gas companies of the region in addition to its infrastructure and defense sectors.

It will not be far-fetched to expect a greater presence of the US in the next decade in the region not only to contain the rapidly increasing Chinese presence, but also owing to the fact that Latin America with the Caribbean is on its way to becoming an energy destination to the world.

### **Social**

Countries saw wide-spread protests against the policies that focused on increase in taxes and reduction in social spending. While some countries were trying to adopt measures to combat their plummeting economies due to Covid for others it was just a political decision that was completely devoid of concerns for the people or any recognition of their problems. Countries like Chile, Colombia, Bolivia saw protests as the

administration raised taxes on the use of everyday services like public transportation which acted as the last straw in an already seething population.

The protests have been brutal and violent but have led to political cognizance and change. The outcome that popular protests lead to wide-spread political change is commendable and has not been replicated in other parts of the world. Countries like Poland and Belarus also witnessed wide spread protests that emerged from a discrepancy between social needs and political action; however, no other region reacted to the demands of the voters with change albeit after violence the way Latin American nations have changed.

## **Major Trends**

### **Need for Change**

The Elections in Latin America have pointed towards a need for endemic change. Peru, Bolivia, Chile, to an extent even Argentina witnessed the election of leaders who can be termed as left leaning. One is quick to label leaders as left and right; however, what is more important to realise for Latin America is that while the leaders might come from political parties that are left or right leaning, they have been elected on the basis of their own political rhetoric and promises. A new term that has now been bestowed upon the region is 'Millennial Left'. This term quite aptly describes the new wave of politics that most of the younger Latin Americans from 18 to 40 years of age are leaning towards. A millennial left leader is one who personifies progressive change; an increase in social spending, sensitivity and commitment towards the environment, understanding and fixing the gender gap, building a society and a parliament that is more inclusive of communities and minorities, and one who is open to change beyond religious parameters, accepting of LGBTQIA community. While Latin America has seen progressive leaders in the past and has whole heartedly supported these leaders; due to the region's religious inclinations homosexuality, reproductive health and rights, as well as non-traditional gender norms have remained untouched topics, the generation that makes up the work force wants a dialogue on these subjects and also wishes to see transformation towards an equitable society.

### **Change through Protests**

The Chilean Protests have elicited reactions of shock and awe in the world. While it is not unknown for countries to formulate entirely new constitutions, such an event usually is a consequence of political regime change, or the incumbent reforming the constitution to ensure their own political permanence. The Chilean case however, is a study in the political transformation that germinated from the grass roots. The Chilean constitution had been built on the foundations of neo - liberalism and class divisions; it was the Constitution formulated during the Pinochet era and was reminiscent of not just an era of extreme oppression and state sanctioned death squads, it was also a system that allowed the concentration of wealth and power among the powerful few. The protests that began with a marginal increase in the metro fare ended in the agreement to formulate a new constitution and now the election of a young, tattooed Gabriel Boric who comes from the coalition of left of centre parties including the party that is considered an extreme left party.

### **Demand for Greater Gender Equality**

The legalisation of abortions in Argentina has also inspired similar demands across the region. The religious tenacity of the region has often manifested itself in the oppression

and suppression of reproductive rights and the freedom of sexuality. While the social dialogue regarding both has managed to include and attract people from all aspects of the spectrum; the increased financial independence of women, and greater freedom of choice that is both demanded and accepted as a social norm by women around the world has had an impact in the Latin American continent too.

Coupled with this sentiment is the backlash against high rates of sexual and violent crimes against women in the region. As well as their villainization as a tactic in conservative politics. This was widely witnessed during the Brazilian elections when a women's protest was presented as an attack on the prevalent conventional social system often equating a demand for freedom with an escalating loss of morality and righteousness. This narrative directly plays into the concept of Marianismo that puts women on a pedestal of sacredness and vulnerability which conveniently sets them up for failure and degradation at the slightest action which would be considered outside the framework of the accepted social norms.

This dialogue and conflict between what is socially acceptable and what is demanded by women is a reality of Latin America which shall have political and social manifestations in the future.

### **Growth in the energy Sector**

Nations like Guyana, Suriname, Jamaica and Barbados have had huge crude oil and natural gas discoveries which have the potential to change how the world perceives the region. Geologically most islands and the nation of Guyana share the same underwater shelf as the Orinoco River. It is the same Orinoco River that flows through Venezuela and whose basin has been a provider of dense Maya crude to Venezuela of centuries, while the reserves in Venezuela have not diminished, years of maladministration and lack of technical know-how have driven Venezuela into a situation where they find it difficult to harvest the vast quantities of crude oil that they have in their midst.

The same plate has led to most geologists believing that most of the Caribbean islands and continental Caribbean countries potentially would possess crude oil and natural gas reserves. Trinidad and Tobago proved this theory right decades ago, when they also were an oil rich nation, however, Trinidad and Tobago now are a nation with depleted oil reserves but still surviving on natural gas. As of the recent discoveries, Guyana has come out on top of the crude oil lottery, since 2015 it has announced twenty-two commercial oil discoveries in its territorial waters. Similarly, Jamaica, Suriname and Barbados have also had sites that have had positive crude oil and natural gas discoveries around these countries. It stands to reason that with further research more sites could be discovered and larger oil reserves could be found.

While these sites are welcome news for the Caribbean nations and their economies, it is also a harbinger of some change. Beginning with the events in the region itself. As a country that has been steadily spiraling out of control since 2015, Venezuela is understandably unhappy about alternatives to its status as the largest oil producing nation in the Latin American and the Caribbean region. Maduro has also claimed that the Guyanese off shore sites fall inside the Venezuelan territorial waters in addition to initiating small border skirmishes along the Venezuelan – Guyanese border. There is little to no substance in these claims.

Natural gas reserves have also been found in Paraguay and are estimated to be larger than those in Bolivia which are already some of the biggest reserves in the world. This has led to a renewed interest of the world in the region. As the world attempts to engage with the region, staking their claim in the energy sector and bidding for their share, it will be interesting to see the dynamics between Latin American politics with that of China and the US and the competition for dominance on Latin America between the US and China.

### **Projections for 2022**

Covid, Protests, and elections have been the primary theme for Latin America for 2020-21. The election cycle that began in 2019 will end in 2022 with the two big Presidential elections in Brazil and Colombia. An economic recovery will be the major endeavour in the region; and the society shall continue to battle protest movements and, in all probability, new strains of Covid. The Caribbean might be the only source for a little cheer with its energy boom.

2022 looks for Latin America and the Caribbean, a lot like its past two years. It would be unfair to think that such melancholy predictions are limited to Latin America and the Caribbean; most regions in the world are grappling with economic and social insecurities that have been augmented by the constant threat of Covid – 19 and its ever evolving new variants. While the global north is gearing up to provide booster shots to their populations and those in the south are yet to vaccinate large majorities of their population; it would be wrong to single out only Latin America and the Caribbean that would be suffering the consequences of the Omicron variant.

### **Elections**

As Brazil and Colombia head towards Presidential elections, it seems like a probable victory for Lula in Brazil, and Gustavo Petro in Colombia who is rapidly becoming a favourite. While Lula's return seems certain in Brazil, it won't be wrong to expect Jair Bolsonaro to adopt Trump like tactics for violence and disruption; however, Bolsonaro doesn't enjoy a support base as loyal, blind, and large as Trump in the US. Colombian politics on the other hand is responding to the protests that were seen in the country these past two years. Colombia has been a largely conservative country; however the people's outburst about increasing taxes and reducing social spending and the protests in Chile have inspired the people to see a potential leader in Petro. The polls suggest that he would garner 43 per cent of the votes in the first primary which is not enough to ward off a second primary but it would not be far sighted to say that Petro might just win the race.

### **Economic Recovery**

economists suggest a slight slowdown again. This would be attributed to statistical adjustments that happen after an initial bang, while the increase in growth rate that happened in 2021 was encouraging it was also exaggerated statistically as the reference point became the year 2020 when the world had come to a complete halt. Therefore in 2022, when the point of reference is 2021; the slight statistical shrinking of Latin American economies is a mathematical inevitability.

The Caribbean on the other hand is all set to see rapid increase in growth rates and overall economies as it is set to become the new energy destination of the world. With Guyana, Jamaica, Suriname, and Barbados discovering crude oil and natural gas in their

waters, companies like Total, Shell, and Exxonmobil have flocked to the region and the Caribbean is set to become the new oil destination in the near future. This would certainly lead to a strengthening and burgeoning of the economies of the region; however, the political interaction with major multinational oil companies and state sovereignty over their own resources is a separate topic for discussion.

### **Greater Political Protests**

Social unrest seems to be a predictable outcome for the region in 2022. The impact that protest movements can have on the politics of the region has been demonstrated quite well in the past two years. However, as the people demand greater progressive change for a society more equal than the one they grew up in; the values of political, religious, and economic conservatism are set to clash with the values of the majority of the work force that demand gainful employment, job security, equality of income, gender, and sexuality. The demands that are being made by voters aged 18 to 40 who also make up the majority of the work force can be termed as the 'Millennial Left' demands. They want a society that is progressive, tolerant, and accepting. A society more equal with opportunities for growth. A voice for women and minorities, and equality of opportunity for those who have been marginalized for generations.

### **Authoritarianism is here to stay**

On the diametrically opposite end of the spectrum, it is also true that countries currently under authoritarian leaders shall remain under authoritarian leaders. Authoritarian regimes will hold on to power through greater political violence and militarization of police. Countries like Venezuela and Nicaragua, show no signs of a possible revolution and US shows no signs of wanting to step into the politics of Venezuela and/or Nicaragua; beyond making official statements. Venezuela and Nicaragua are bound by a common thread of lack of political opposition; while Nicaragua hardly has an opposition leader not controlled by Ortega, Juan Guaido of Venezuela does not enjoy popular support as he is seen as an American attaché rather than a potential Venezuelan president. Bukele in El Salvador shall also continue with his less than democratic regime.

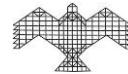
### **Conflict due to Climate Change**

As the impact of energy discoveries lead to the inevitable process of crude oil and natural gas harvesting which is an extremely polluting procedure by its very nature and the shrinking amazon becomes apparent and the loss of homes, bio-diversity, and for the Caribbean entire neighbourhoods becomes a reality, an obvious conflict will emerge as a result. An imminent refugee crisis that could be preceded by waves of social unrest might see a beginning in 2022.

### **Contesting Chinese and US Presence**

The Chinese presence in the region is already quite pronounced and as China is gradually encroaching on the defense and the energy sector as well, the US has started to take notice. The recent declaration by Biden about an increase in the aid package to the region is a subtle nod towards a combined past of the US and Latin America but not the only one. It can be reasonably predicted that Latin America would witness a greater presence of the US in addition to that of China.

As Latin America and the Caribbean enter the new year it would be interesting to see how they match their expectations with their reality.



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NIAS-IPRI Brief

# State of Peace and Conflict in North America in 2021

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

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## Introduction

The state of peace and conflict across the world continues to be dominated by the consequences of Covid-19 pandemic for the last two years. The human and economic costs of pandemic have surmounted and continue to exacerbate. The pandemic has been responsible to a certain extent for scaling back years of progress on democracy, poverty reduction, inequality, weakened social cohesion as well as global cooperation.

Worldwide scenarios of job losses, unemployment, mental health issues, social unrest, political fragmentation, and geopolitical tensions have worsened. Along with that, the issues of climate change, extreme weather, digital inequality and cyber security failure remain major pressing points. The pandemic has also brought across some opportunities largely in the area of innovation and research and development. This paper is an attempt to cover how peace and conflict have played out in the United States in 2021. It will be divided into three parts: Major developments during the year; trends and issues; and forecast for year 2022.

## Major Developments During 2021

### Democracy:

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

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

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

### **Human Rights:**

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

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

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

### **Political and Social Activism:**

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

### **The Changing World Order:**

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

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

## **Trends and Issues**

### **Inequality and Civil Unrest:**

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

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

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

### **Economics:**

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

### **Shifting World Order and Changing Geo-Economics:**

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

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

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

### **Forecast for 2022**

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

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

### **Climate Change action:**

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

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

### **Religious Extremism:**

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

### **Increased Polarisation:**

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

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

### **Cyber attacks:**

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

### **Competition:**

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

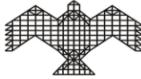
forecasted to grow in importance in 2022, both countries will remain keen to decouple strategic sectors, while also seeking opportunities for limited bilateral cooperation in areas of mutual interest, including trade, climate, and the global pandemic.

### **Conclusion**

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



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## About NIAS-International Peace Research Initiative (IPRI)

The International Peace Research Initiative (IPRI), initiated in 2018 at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), is a part of the Conflict Resolution and Peace Research Programme at the School of Conflict and Security Studies.

IPRI undertakes research on various issues relating to peace with special emphasis on radicalisation, sustainable peace, gender roles in peacebuilding and global protest movements. IPRI research are published as briefs, reports and commentary.



## About Konrad Adenauer Stiftung

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is a political foundation. Established in 1955 as "Society for Christian-Democratic Civic Education", in 1964, the Foundation proudly took on the name of Konrad Adenauer, the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. With 16 regional offices in Germany and over 120 offices abroad, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation is committed to achieving and maintaining peace, freedom and justice through political education. KAS promotes and preserves free democracy, social market economy, and the development and consolidation of the value consensus. KAS also focus on consolidating democracy, the unification of Europe and the strengthening of transatlantic relations, as well as on development cooperation.

KAS cooperates with governmental institutions, political parties and civil society organizations, building strong partnerships along the way. In particular, KAS seeks to intensify political cooperation in the area of development cooperation on the foundations of its objectives and values. Together with the partners, KAS makes a significant contribution to the creation of a global order that empowers every



## About Conflict Weekly

The Conflict Weekly an academic endeavour to bring every Wednesday/Thursday a weekly analysis of the conflict and peace processes in the world; aiming to look at the larger peace picture. It is published by the NIAS-IPRI in collaboration with the KAS India Office.

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