

Conflict Weekly

An initiative by NIAS-IPRI and KAS India Office

A brief review of conflict and peace processes across the world

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The US-China tensions over balloon, and Weather anomalies in the Americas

Melvin George and Akriti Sharma



(A Chinese balloon, equipped with solar panels and surveillance devices, was shot by the US on 4 February.

Image Source: Larry Mayer/AP Photo/Bloomberg)

US: Air Force shoots down Chinese balloon

In the news

On 4 February, two US Air Force F-22 fighter jets shot down a Chinese balloon equipped with solar panels and surveillance devices 15 miles north east of Myrtle beach. The incident led to the closure of the airspace over Charleston, Myrtle Beach and Wilmington. The Federal Aviation Administration shut down three airports in North and South Carolina. This prompted Secretary of State Antony Blinken to cancel the visit to Beijing. Previously, on 2 February, the Pentagon press secretary said: “The United States government has detected and is tracking a high-altitude surveillance balloon that is over the continental United States right now.” The Pentagon quoted a senior official who said that the US is confident that the balloon belongs to China.

On 5 February, China condemned the shooting down of the balloon; the Ministry of National Defense spokesperson said: “We solemnly protest this move by the US side and reserve the right to take necessary measures to deal with similar situations.”

On 6 February, China's Foreign Minister Xie Feng confirmed that he had filed a formal complaint with the US Embassy over the "US attack on a Chinese civilian unmanned airship by military force." On the same day, CNN reported that the Colombian Air Force and Costa Rica's Civil Aviation Authority had tracked a similar balloon in their airspace in the previous week but did not link it to China. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said the balloon was useful for flight tests.

On 7 February, Ning defended China's claims, saying the balloon was for research purposes and strayed from its route because of bad weather.

Issues at large

First, a note on the balloons. The wind-driven balloons are capable of reaching high altitudes between 24000 and 37000 metres and can operate off the radar. According to a report by Scientific American, the balloon appeared to have a high level of manoeuvrability as opposed to China's claim of using them for “civilian purpose,” especially when monitored over sensitive sites like Montana. Back in the 18th century, hot air balloons were preferred for surveillance activities because of their low costs.

Second, tensions between the US and China. Apart from the trade war, which escalated during former President Donald Trump's administration, issues like Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests, human rights abuses within China, Chinese thefts of intellectual properties and technologies, and Taiwan's right to self-governance, increased the friction between the US and China. The balloon was claimed to be used for civilian purposes by a Chinese company which was offered protection by China but not yet recognised so far. The alleged relations of Chinese companies with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have also been questioned during the trade war.

Third, lack of clarity on the international legal frameworks. The balloon flew at an altitude of 60,000 ft which is above the prescribed altitude for air traffic - 45,000 ft. The upper limit of the sovereign air space is unsettled in these international laws. The incident questions the capability of an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) that can fly beyond the limits of prescribed air traffic. Along with this, the 1944 Chicago Convention on International Civil Aviation that says about regulations and rules on hot air balloons and UAVs, does not regulate military activities. Here also,

international laws and laws of the countries on such matters differ. The interpretation of law is done by the countries as per the circumstances.

In perspective

The US-China relationship remains volatile. Despite trade deals and summits between both countries, taking the balloon affair as an example underlines the larger tension in the US-China relationship.

Climate change: Wildfires in South America and extreme cold in North America

In the news

On 5 February, Chile declared a state of emergency in the Biobio, Nuble, and Araucania regions, due to wildfires that swept across the regions, killing more than 23 people. An official briefing held that 1,100 people had been relocated, and 979 were injured in the fires. The fires engulfed 6,67,000 acres of land, making it the second-largest fire in the country. On 4 February, President Gabriel Boric travelled to Nuble and Biobio to ensure relief in the affected areas.

On 5 February, Chilean Interior Minister Carolina Toha said: “Weather conditions have made it very difficult to put out (the fires) that are spreading and the emergency is getting worse.” Meanwhile, South American countries, including Paraguay and Argentina, witnessed 40 degrees Celsius.

On 4 February, in North America, the National Weather Service (NWS) said Mount Washington in New Hampshire witnessed a wind chill of minus 78 Celsius. The agency said: “This is an epic, generational Arctic outbreak,” terming it the “lowest wind chills in decades or, in some cases, the lowest ever recorded.” Authorities advised residents from Manitoba to Maine to limit their time outdoors. Some places recorded frost quakes and splitting of trees due to the freezing of sap.

On 5 February, in Canada, Moncton recorded minus 28.1 degrees Celsius breaking a 1917 cold weather record of minus 27.8 degrees Celsius.

Issues at large

First, the complex meteorological conditions. The extreme cold in Canada and the US is attributed to an “Arctic blast.” According to the US National Weather Service, it is an Arctic outbreak which is “very cold air masses that typically originate in the Siberian Region of Asia, cross over the north pole into Canada and push south and east into the lower United States.” North and South America are witnessing extremely opposite temperatures at the same time.

Second, the impact of climate change. According to the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report titled “Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability,” such extreme events can be attributed to anthropogenic causes like climate change. Extreme weather events including wildfires, cyclones, and heatwaves have increased in frequency and intensity globally. The US and Canada have witnessed increased frequency in recent years of heatwaves, wildfires, cyclones, and droughts.

Third, the need for adaptation. An increase in the frequency and intensity of such extreme weather events need efficient adaptation. Such events can impact health and food insecurity. Extreme hot



and cold temperatures also impact wildlife. In Chile, wildfires have injured animals, including the world's smallest deer treated in the rehabilitation centre.

In perspective

First, the need for better preparedness. Extreme weather events are likely to increase multifold and therefore, countries must enhance their preparedness for such events and limit human and economic costs.

Second, the disparity between mitigation and adaptation. With climate change continuing to manifest extreme weather events, effective climate adaptation can significantly mitigate such events. Globally, climate mitigation measures dominate the climate action discourse and it is equally necessary to focus on adaptation measures in climate action plans. However, adaptation finance is more of the Global South.

Third, the impact on vulnerable populations. Extreme cold temperatures and wildfires can adversely impact vulnerable people. The preparedness and response to such events should be inclusive of vulnerable sections.

Also, from around the World

Avishka Ashok, Abigail Fernandez, Rashmi Ramesh, Ankit Singh, Apoorva Sudhakar, Anu Maria Joseph, Sethuraman N, and Padmashree Anandhan

East and Southeast Asia

China: Hong Kong begins national security trial for 16 activists after two years

On 6 February, Hong Kong began the trial of 16 democracy activists who have been charged under the national security law. The activists are amongst the 47 who were arrested in 2021 for participating in an unofficial primary election organised by pro-democracy supporters in 2020. The 16 individuals have pleaded not guilty. The trial is considered a determining case in Hong Kong's status of judicial independence. Former lawmaker and defendant Leung Kwok-hung stated: "There's no crime to answer. It is not a crime to act against a totalitarian regime."

North Korea: Development of solid-fuel weapons aiding the country's nuclear capacity

On 5 February, North Korea staged a military parade in Pyongyang to mark the 75th armed forces founding anniversary. It displayed 11 Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) showcasing the new solid-fuel weapon. South Korea criticised the event citing North Korea's food crisis, and urged Pyongyang to stop the illegal development of nuclear missiles and promptly return to denuclearization negotiations.

Myanmar: Prime Minister Anwar urges Thailand to play a constructive role in bringing stability

On 9 February, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim held a meeting with Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha and discussed the instability in Myanmar and Thailand. Anwar urged Thailand to play a bigger role in facilitating stability in Myanmar. He further pledged to assist in finding a solution to the insurgency in Southern Thailand. He said: "There's very little we can do except to continue this so-called constructive engagement with the Myanmar Junta. But I think you are placed, Prime Minister, in a better position to express many of our concerns."

South Asia

Pakistan: TTP claims responsibility for an attack in Quetta

On 5 February, five people were injured in an attack in Quetta's Police Lines area. Claiming responsibility for the attack, the Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (TTP) stated it was a suicide attack. This attack comes after the suicide blast in Peshawar's Police Lines, resulting in the death of over 84 people. In a separate incident, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) stated that at least 12 TTP militants were killed in an intelligence-based operation (IBO) in Lakki Marwat district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. According to officials, the TTP militants from the Azharuddin group were moving from the Lakki Marwat district to the Tank district when a joint team blocked the road to intercept the TTP convoy.

Central Asia, Middle East, and Africa

Turkey-Syria: Strong earthquake leaves a trail of destruction and deaths

On 6 February, an earthquake of 7.8 magnitude struck the southeastern part of Turkey and the bordering northwestern part of Syria, leading to almost 100 aftershocks and a further 7.6 magnitude earthquake. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared a state of emergency in 10 provinces for three months. Aleppo, Idlib, Hama and Latakia were among the affected provinces in Syria. As of 9 February, the approximate death toll stood at 16,546 in Turkey and 3,162 in Syria. However, the numbers in Syria may be undercounted, given the difficulty in access. The earthquake also damaged historical monuments in both Turkey and Syria, including the Gaziantep Castle and Diyarbakir Fortress in Turkey and Aleppo Citadel, in Syria.

Turkey-Syria: Countries assist in search operations; Syria remains a challenge

President Erdogan stated that 70 countries had offered help in search and rescue operations, and delivery of medical and material help. However, the access to Syria is challenging; Bab-al-Hawa, the only crossing between Turkey and Syria open for the UN to deliver humanitarian aid, has been damaged due to the earthquake. As an alternative, Turkey has opened two more crossings to ensure assistance to Syria. Prior to the quake, 70 percent of the population in north-western Syria required humanitarian assistance as a result of the prolonged war. However, despite the earthquake, the Assad regime in Syria continues to bomb the rebel-held areas.

Israel-Palestine: Raid and killings continue

On 6 February, Israeli forces carried out a raid on Jabr refugee camp in Jericho in the West Bank and shot five Palestinian men. The Jebr refugee camp is under Israeli siege for more than a week. On 7 February, the forces raided Nablus and killed a 17 year-old Palestinian teenager. The Palestinian Health Ministry said that he was shot in the face and later succumbed to his injuries. The Israeli forces acknowledged the killing and said that the teenager was involved in a gun fight and had fired at the troops.

Somalia: UN warns famine after failed rainy season

On 9 February, the United Nations warned of a possible famine in Somalia by April. The warning comes amid the country's sixth consecutive failed rainy season, which has left over seven million people affected. The UN, the Somali government and humanitarian agencies said that the international response to the drought was insufficient. Besides, the dire humanitarian situation has forced more than 1.4 million people to flee their homes. The country's special envoy to the UN for drought response said: "Somalis have zero contribution to climate change but we are facing this dire consequence."



Somaliland: At least 50 people killed in clashes

On 8 February, the UN called for an investigation into the death of 50 people during clashes between regional government and local militias in the self-declared republic of Somaliland. The clashes occurred over the disputed city of Las Anod between Somaliland and Puntland. Reuters quoted a resident of the city: “Somaliland forces are carrying out heavy attacks on medical facilities and civilian homes. The deaths and injuries of civilians cannot be counted.” Somalia’s President Hassan Sheikh Mahmoud called for calm and urged Somaliland authorities to negotiate with traditional leaders for peace.

Nigeria: 15 pilgrims killed in gunmen attack

On 7 February, at least 15 Nigerian Muslim pilgrims were killed in an attack by unidentified gunmen. Following the incident, the Nigerian presidential spokesperson said: “The Nigerian foreign affairs ministry, through the Nigerian embassy in Burkina Faso, is engaging with the Burkinabe authorities and awaits the outcome of their investigation of the unfortunate incident, and if necessary, to ensure that all culprits are appropriately sanctioned.” President Muhammadu Buhari shared condolences to the deceased and added that the government would make “every effort” to return the survivors back home as well as the bodies of those killed.

Democratic Republic of the Congo: At least eight killed in protests against peacekeeping forces

On 7 February, hundreds of people protested against the UN and the East African Regional Force accusing them of failing to support the Congolese force’s operations against the M23 rebels. On 8 February, BBC reported that at least eight people were killed during violent clashes between the protesters and the peacekeeping forces. The military governor of the North Kivu province said that the peacekeepers fired in self-defence when the protesters attacked a convoy.

Europe and the Americas

Ukraine: North Korea to deploy troops to aid reconstruction efforts

On 2 February, Daily NK reported that the North Korean government has allegedly asked its trading companies in Russia to send select personnel to Eastern Ukraine to assist in reconstruction. The news report referred to an order issued on 20 February to the trading companies in Russia which include Cholhyon Construction and Kumrung Construction are affiliated to the North Korean defence ministry. The news report claimed that North Korea would be deploying soldiers or police personnel due to the ease of providing safety measures to security personnel rather than civilians. The Daily NK also claimed that the selected personnel will be sent to Eastern Ukraine from mid-February to March and will help in reconstruction efforts and repair destroyed buildings and roads.

The UK: Intelligence reports decrease in people recruited by Wagner Group

On 3 February, the UK Defence Intelligence found that the number of people recruited through the Wagner Group’s convict recruitment programme has reduced significantly compared to the summer and autumn of 2022. It said that the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN) data published on 31 January 2023 showed that the national penal population was 433,000 and reported a decrease of 6,000 inmates compared to the decrease in September 2022 to November 2022 when the figure stood at 23,000. Additionally, the UK Defence Intelligence said that in the last 10 days, assaults by the Wagner Group convicts had decreased.

Austria-Switzerland: 10 people killed in a series of avalanches in the Alps

On 5 February, Austrian authorities reported that eight people were killed in a series of avalanches in the Alps. Previously, on 4 February, Swiss authorities reported two deaths caused by unstable

snow in the Graubünden canton. The avalanches were reportedly caused by heavy snowfall and high winds. Alpine regions of Western Austria, especially Tyrol, are under a level 4 avalanche warning. On 4 February, several people went missing after Tyrol experienced around 30 avalanches. Meanwhile, rescue missions were hindered by poor weather conditions and visibility. Swiss and Austrian authorities have issued warnings to tourists, winter sports athletes and skiers urging them to avoid the slopes.

Peru: Landslides claim 36 lives

On 6 February, AP News quoted a civil defence official of the Mariano Nicolás Valcárcel municipality who said that at least 36 people had been killed in landslides across several villages. The landslides took place after constant rains swept away mud, water and rocks; the 36 bodies were found in the Miski sector.

Ecuador: Another mayoral candidate assassinated

On 5 February, mayoral polls results, announced a few hours after Omar Menendez's assassination, revealed that Puerto Lopez residents had elected him to the position. Menendez was shot dead by unidentified gunmen. His party, Citizen's Revolution, accepted the results and announced that Verónica Isabel Lucas Marcillo would step in on his behalf. Menendez's assassination comes two weeks after another mayoral candidate was assassinated, and indicates the gravity of the violence and killings presumably linked to the increasing organised crime.

Brazil: Government launches operations against illegal miners in Yanomami territory

On 6 February, the government launched an operation to drive away illegal miners from the Yanomami indigenous community's territory in the Amazon. The government reported a helicopter, an aeroplane and a bulldozer belonging to the miners had been destroyed in the operation. On 7 February, Minister for Indigenous People Sônia Guajajara said the government was committed to protecting nearly 30,000 Yanomami people. Referring to former President Jair Bolsonaro's governance when deforestation increased, The Guardian quoted a Yanomami leader, Júnior Hekurari: "It was a government of blood."

Haiti: 2.6 million children in need to assistance, says UNICEF representative

On 7 February, The Guardian quoted UNICEF's Haiti representative Bruno Maes who said at least 2.6 million children in Haiti require humanitarian aid for survival. Maes outlined the challenges faced by children, ranging from gang violence to a lack of access to food and potable water, collapse of the healthcare system, and disruption of the education system.

The US: World heading for a wider war, says UN Secretary-General

On 6 February, while addressing the UN General Assembly (UNGA), Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was inflicting untold suffering on the Ukrainian people with profound global implications. He expressed concerns saying: "I have a special message for fossil fuel producers and their enablers scrambling to expand production and raking in monster profits: If you cannot set a credible course for net zero with 2025 and 2030 targets covering all your operations, you should not be in business."

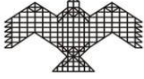
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National Institute of
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About NIAS-International Peace Research Initiative(IPRI)

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 researches 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. 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 country to determine its own developmental priorities and destiny in an internationally responsible manner.

KAS has organized its program priorities in India into five working areas: Foreign and Security Policy; Economic, Climate, and Energy Policy; Rule of Law; Political Dialogue focused on Social and Political Change; and Media and Youth. The India Office of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation takes great pride in its cooperation with Indian partner institutions that implement jointly curated projects and programmes.

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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