

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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Protests in Georgia, Japan-South Korea reconciliation, and Iran's school poisoning

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(Protesters during a rally against the bill near the Georgian parliament building in Tbilisi, Georgia.

Image Source: AP Photo/Zurab Tsertsvadze)

Protests in Georgia: Foreign Agents bill called off

In the news

On 7 March, Georgia's parliament introduced the “Foreign Agents bill,” which mandates individuals, civil society organisations and media forums receiving foreign funds to get registered with Georgia’s Justice Ministry. Such organisations will be considered as “agents of foreign influence,” and will be subject to a penalty of GEL 25,000 if they fail to adhere to the “reporting and inspections” given by Human Rights Watch. This triggered protests across Georgia. Human Rights Watch's Europe and Central Asia Division Director Hugh Williamson stated: “The ‘foreign agent’ bills seek to marginalize and discredit independent, foreign-funded groups and media that serve the wider public interest in Georgia.”

On 7 March, in response to the bill, EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell said: “..incompatible with EU values and standards,” and the US Helsinki Commission said: “..the present government's increasing embrace of Russia.”

On 8 March, a mass gathering was staged against the bill. BBC reported on the protests; one of the protesters said: “People are really angry because this is not about one specific thing, it's about the future of Georgia and it's about how we'll function as a country.”

On 9 March, as the mass protests continued along with international criticism, Georgia’s Ministry of Interior announced the withdrawal of the bill “unconditionally,” citing the failure in making the public aware of the necessity for the bill. Georgia’s president and the EU welcomed the move.

Issues at large

First, question about democracy. The Georgian Dream party’s stance on Russia provided a glimpse and introduction to the new proposed law that mirrors legislation in Russia, opening a larger debate on where Georgia stands on the democracy radar. The law would bring the civil society, election supervisor, and independent media under regulation and ensure media from spreading fake news. The government claimed to trace the “foreign influence” and individuals behind the organizations and Georgian Orthodox Church through the law, but instead it gained domestic and international criticism. Previously, before the Ukraine war, Georgia likewise has been criticized for controlling the judiciary system, deepening polarisation, fragmenting the election process, and not aligning with EU’s “values and standards.” The introduction of the law shook the democratic values it stood for.

Second, the Georgian Dream Party’s link with Russia. Under Georgia’s former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili from Georgian Dream Party, the country was observed to be moving away from EU membership. This was continued by the Georgian Dream Party, since the detention of journalist Nika Gvaramia, and its objection in adopting EU policies and sanctioning Russia on the Ukraine war. The adoption of the foreign agent law similar to Russia’s 2012 rule cautioned the influence of Russia in Georgia’s political picture.

Third, larger concerns of the protesters. The immediate rage amongst the protesters was not limited to the implementation of the bill; rather, the larger concern was over undermining democratic values, freedom to express and media. Among the total population, three-fourths of Georgians are “pro-western,” and only one part is “pro-Russian”; the law provoked fear amongst the majority of Georgians over their rights, freedom and the country’s deviating

position on democracy.

In perspective

First, the withdrawal of the bill over a continued mass protest reflects the strong public stance and its ability to pressurise the Georgian Dream Party. The withdrawal of the bill does not mean an end, but has provided a venue to look out for future policies and laws put forward by the government. Therefore, independent media outlets and civil society organizations have to prepare ahead and be brazen to keep their practices on.

Second, at the regional level, Georgia's EU candidacy can be expected to derail. The divergence in Georgia's alignment with the EU policies, the protests amongst the Georgians and the party's regional image on growing closeness with Russia will further challenge Georgia-EU relations.

South Korea and Japan: Forced reconciliation amidst regional tensions

In the news

On 6 March, the South Korean government announced that they would compensate the victims of forced labour in Japanese factories during the Second World War. According to the proposal, South Korean private sector companies will compensate the victims instead of the Japanese companies.

South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol stated: "It's clear that future-oriented cooperation between South Korea and Japan will preserve freedom, peace and prosperity not only for the two countries but also for the entire world."

On 6 March, US President Joe Biden lauded the proposal calling it: "A ground-breaking new chapter of cooperation and partnership between two of the United States' closest allies. Critical step to forging a future for the Korean and Japanese people that is safer, more secure, and more prosperous."

On 7 March, Yang Geum-deok and Kim Sung-Joo, two elderly victims of forced labour atrocity, protested in their wheelchairs against the deal. A former Mitsubishi factory worker Yang Geum-Deok said: "Even if I die of hunger, I would not accept that dirty money." Kim Sung-Joo, another victim said: "It was Japan that took us (for forced labour), so who should we demand an apology from?"

Issues at large

First, unresolved issues and historical tensions. During the Second World War, more than 780,000 South Koreans were forcefully recruited to work in Japanese factories and mines under Japanese colonial rule. Additionally, Japan pushed nearly 20,000 Korean women into sex slavery, denoted as "comfort women" for the Japanese military. South Korea remembers the Japanese colonial rule as a period of humiliation that impacts the bilateral relationship till today.



Second, the public reproval. The remuneration proposal by the South Korean companies has amassed heavy criticism from the victims, the public and activists who deem this deal as “shameful”. The opposition party has urged to withdraw the proposal, stating it an “insulting” plan. In 2018, 15 plaintiffs won the Korean Supreme Court verdict which ordered compensation from Japanese Mitsubishi and Nippon Steel companies, which refused to follow suit. The critics believe that Japan never fully realised the crimes they had committed and that some of the biggest companies in the country, which had previously relied on forced labour, are at the peak of their success.

Third, Japan’s stance. Under the new proposal, Japanese companies are not obliged to compensate the victims; however, they can make voluntary donations. The Japanese government believes that their reparation obligations were settled under the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations Between Japan and the Republic of Korea, which provided a package of USD 300 million and USD 200 million in low-interest loans, settling final claims between the states. However, the Japanese companies refused to pay the compensation according to the 2018 Supreme Court ruling, stating that it is not consistent with the 1965 agreement.

Fourth, the role of common external threats. Both countries face multiple common threats geopolitically. On 7 March, North Korea warned that “shooting down any of its test missiles would be considered as a declaration of war.” They justified the tests on increasing joint military exercises between South Korea and the US. Besides, Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo-jong stated: “The Pacific Ocean does not belong to the dominium of the US or Japan,” hinting at their plans to shoot missiles over the Pacific Ocean. With the rising aggression of China in the South China Sea, North Korea’s rampant missile testing over contentious territories and the dispute over the Senkaku island, Japan and South Korea are facing common external international threats.

In perspective

First, a chance to strengthen bilateral relations. The treaty of 1965 was an outcome of South Korean diplomatic engagement with Japan. However, the treaty turned out as tricky when the victims refused to be compensated by the South Korean government as they demanded to be directly recompensed by the Japanese government, which was never achieved. Regardless, this is the closest the two nations have approached, leaving the past behind as the government seeks to prioritise future bilateral and international cooperation.

Second, public opinion. The issue remains close to South Korean public sentiments, which have levied heavy criticism by both the masses and the opposition party. Subsequently, the ongoing outrage can threaten the bilateral negotiations between the two countries looking to leave the past behind.

Third, the US interests in strengthening a trilateral agenda. The US, as a third party, has a major role in the move made by South Korea, as it tries to mend bridges between all its allies. While the US looks to form a more unified front against North Korea, China and Russia, the rift between the two countries are of major concern. However, increasingly threatened by North Korea's heightened military developments and missile testing, the South Korean government seems reluctantly planning to swallow the historical hurt and looking towards a plan that could provide a secure future against the common threat.

Iran: Poisoning of school girls

In the news

On 1 March, Al Jazeera reported that, according to a media report, one schoolgirl died after being poisoned in Qom. At least, 194 girls were reportedly poisoned in four schools in the city of Borujerd the previous week.

On 3 March, President Ebrahim Raisi claimed that the suspected poisoning cases were a part of “the enemy’s conspiracy to create fear and despair in the people.” On the same day, the United Nations Human Rights office demanded a “transparent investigation” into the attacks. Speaking at a press conference on behalf of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ravina Shamdasani said: “We’re very concerned about these allegations that girls are being deliberately targeted under what appear to be mysterious circumstances.”

On 6 March, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that the poisonings were a “major and unforgivable crime” and the offenders must receive the “harshest punishment” as they caused panic among Iranian parents and society as a whole. He further stated: “If there are people who have a hand in this and there are those that undoubtedly do in some way then responsible organisations, including intelligence and law enforcement, need to find the origin of this crime.”

On 7 March, Iran reported that an undisclosed number of suspects were arrested following the incidents.

Issues at large

First, the intensity of the issue. Over the past three months, the inexplicable poisoning of several schoolgirls in multiple Iranian cities has sparked outrage and concern throughout the state. According to Iranian human rights groups, at least 7,068 children in nearly 103 schools have been impacted. Out of 31 provinces in the state, 25 provinces have reported the incident. Over 50 female students were unwell in November in the city of Qom, and were taken to the hospital. The poisoning has particularly been focused on Qom, which is the home of significant Shia shrines and the religious establishment that serves as the foundation of the Islamic Republic. Other schools in Qom, Tehran, Borujerd, Ardebi have had similar incidents. In each occurrence, many schoolgirls were affected, and several required hospitalisation. Headaches, nausea, respiratory problems, and dizziness were the common symptoms, and some students experienced temporary paralysis. Additionally, there were reports of teachers being affected by the poisoning.

Second, the response of the regime. Supreme Commander, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that the authorities are taking the prospects of chemical poisoning seriously. He added that the regime would not spare the perpetrators. Yet, on the same day, Ali Pourtabatabaei, a Qom journalist who covered the incident, was arrested. Khamenei avoided addressing whether the poisoning originated from within or outside the state. The head of Iran’s judiciary vowed prompt action and hinted that anyone involved would receive the death penalty.

Third, the public response. The act is speculated to be committed by religious extremists who oppose girls attending schools. The religious extremists are trying to “copy” the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Islamist militant group Boko Haram in Nigeria by terrorising parents to stop their daughters attending schools. Similarly, another public opinion is that the attacks



were carried out to demoralise the protesters following the death of Mahsa Amini. Some Iranians have argued that the poisoning of the schoolgirls is a “payback” for their involvement in the protests.

In perspective

First, the way the Iranian authorities handle investigations on abuse against women and girls is appalling. In Isfahan, many women were attacked by acid in 2014, yet there were no arrests made by the police. The Iranians believe that adequate action will not be taken, given their history of disregard on their basic rights, particularly for women and girls.

Second, unlike Afghanistan, Iran has never prevented girls from joining schools. According to the World Bank, female literacy rose from 26 per cent in 1976 to 85 per cent in 2021 in the country. Iran has the highest female literacy rate in the Middle East. The incident is a shock for the whole region.

Third, moreover, Iran is already facing an immense socio-economic crisis. Subsequently, the poisoning incidents would amplify the protests against the regime and would further weaken the peace process.

Also, from around the World

Avishka Ashok, Abigail Fernandez, Akriti Sharma, Rashmi Ramesh, Harini Madhusudan, Apoorva Sudhakar, Anu Maria Joseph, Femy Francis, and Padmashree Anandhan

East and Southeast Asia

China: State encourages initiatives that could increase the birth rate

On 8 March, the Strait Times reported that China was cracking down on the practice of 'caili', a betrothal gift, in order to boost its birth rate and marriages. The tradition involves the groom paying a "bride-price" to show his sincerity and financial ability to take care of a family. According to a survey conducted by Tencent News in 2020, over three-quarters of marriages in China carry on the tradition. Another industry increasingly catching up in China is confinement care as parents of single children in cities outsource the caretaking to a third party.

China: Foreign minister refutes accusations of supplying weapons to Russia

On 7 March, China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang addressed the press conference on the sidelines of the annual parliamentary sessions and responded to the accusation of the country supplying weapons to Russia in the Ukraine War. Gang said that China was not supplying any weapons to Russia and was being unfairly dragged into the conflict. He said: "China did not create the crisis. It is not a party to the crisis. And it has not provided weapons to either side of the conflict. Why on earth is there blame and sanctions on China? This is absolutely unacceptable."

China: Hong Kong police detains pro-democracy activist under national security law after ten months

On 6 March, the national security police in Hong Kong arrested Elisabeth Tang, a pro-democracy activist, marking the first reported arrest under the national security law in ten months. She was arrested outside Stanley Prison while returning from meeting her spouse, Lee Cheuk-yan, a political activist. Tang was arrested on the charges of colluding with foreign forces. The arrest is also the first since Chief Executive of Hong Kong John Lee occupied his position in July 2022.

Taiwan: Defence Ministry advises keeping an alert all year against sudden attacks by the PLA

On 6 March, Taiwan's Defence Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng expressed concerns regarding China's military exercises near the island. Kuo-Cheng advised Taiwan's forces to be alert all year long and watch out for a sudden entry by the People Liberation Army. He said: "I specifically make these comments this year, meaning they are making such preparations. Looking forward, they would use force if they really have to."

Thailand: Protesters on their 50th day of hunger strike against the Royal Insult Law

On 8 March, two protesters on Hunger Strike reached the 50-day target against Thailand's discriminatory lese majeste (Royal Insult Law). With the advent of general elections, the government has been cracking down on dissenters and censoring updates on the strike. The politicians avoid speaking on the issue as they could be charged with lese majeste. The law states that anyone can be detained up to 15 years in jail, if found insulting the king or his family. Currently, 17 minors are facing detainment; two years ago, a man was jailed for selling satirical calendars with yellow rubber ducks, which the court ruled as an insult to the royal family. Today, the rubber duck has become a symbol of democracy and resistance.



Myanmar: UN's statement "sweeping" says junta

On 8 March, the Myanmar junta called the UN statements "irrelevant" after it accused the country of committing "war crimes" owing to their inability to control the resistance. The Foreign Ministry of Myanmar described the UN statement as "sweeping allegations against the government and its security forces" and that "Myanmar, therefore, asserts its firm objection against the irrelevant recommendations made by the High Commissioner [Volker Türk]." The junta claims that around 5000 civilians have been killed by "terrorist groups" since the coup.

South Asia

India: Border Security Force arrests Pakistani intruder

On 10 March, the Indian Border Security Forces (BSF) arrested a Pakistani intruder in Ferozpur, Punjab. He was arrested while trying to cross the international border. On 9 March, in a similar incident, a Bangladeshi national and a Pakistani national were arrested while attempting to cross the border and enter India from Amritsar and Gurdaspur sectors, respectively.

Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa

Israel-Palestine: Shootings and Raids

On 9 March, a shooting incident in Tel Aviv wounded three people, leaving one of them in a critical condition. Israeli police said that the perpetrator had been neutralised and that this incident could be a terrorist attack. Prime Minister Netanyahu said that this "a very serious attack, a terrorist attack, and we are strengthening the police and security forces." On the same day, Israeli forces shot three Palestinians during a raid in Jenin's Jaba village in northern West Bank. Israel stated that the operation was jointly conducted by the border police, the army and the intelligence, aimed at arresting "wanted persons on the basis of several shooting operations targeting [the] Israeli army." On 7 March, Israeli forces killed six Palestinians, wounding two others, during another raid in Jenin. The raid was conducted by both ground forces and helicopters. Prime Minister Netanyahu's office declared that the troops had eliminated gunmen who were involved in killing settlers in the West Bank.

Syria-Turkey: Earthquake damage exceeds USD 100 billion

On 7 March, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) said that the damage caused by the earthquake in Syria and Turkey exceeded USD 100 billion. The World Bank initially estimated the damage to be approximately USD 34.2 billion. However, added to the cost of recovery and reconstruction, the estimation was exceeded. The statement by the UNDP comes prior to the donor conference in Brussels with the aim to raise funds for the earthquake survivors and reconstruction.

Syria: Israel air strike in Aleppo

On 7 March, Israel conducted air strikes on Syria's Aleppo airport damaging the runway and rendering it out of service. SANA, the state news agency said that Israel "carried out an air attack from the direction of the Mediterranean Sea, west of Latakia, targeting Aleppo International Airport. It caused material damage and put it out of service." The primary concern is how the air strikes would affect the aid delivery to earthquake victims. The airport has been used by many countries to send aid, as an alternative to the border crossing between Turkey and Syria. The Syrian Ministry of Transport said that all the humanitarian aid flights would be rerouted to Damascus and Latakia.

Tunisia: Protest against Presidents' remarks on migrants

On 5 March, President Kais Saied, while denying allegations of racism, warned perpetrators of racial attacks of legal actions. Saied claimed that those carrying out the racism campaign are from known sources. Reiterating that Tunisia was an African country, Saied said: "Africans are our brothers." The development comes after Saied accused African migrants of attempting to alter Tunisia's demography. On 4 March, thousands of people, led by the UGTT labour union, protested against President Kais Saied's recent crackdown on opponents. Reuters reported that the protesters held placards reading "No to one-man rule" and "Freedom! End the police state." The UGTT leader, Nouredine Taboubi pledged to uphold Tunisians' "freedoms and rights, whatever the cost."

Somalia: 13 men executed in semi-autonomous Puntland

On 8 March, BBC reported that 13 men were executed in Somalia's semi-autonomous Puntland region. Nine of them belonged to the Islamist militant groups Al-Shabab and the Islamic State; six were former soldiers accused of murder. Meanwhile, human rights groups say the number of executions have significantly increased in Somalia.

Africa: Cyclone Freddy; death toll reaches 21

On 8 March, BBC reported that at least 21 people were killed after cyclone Freddy hit the Indian Ocean islands - Madagascar and Mozambique. The storm has become the long-lasting one on record of 32 days. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) described the cyclone as meteorologically "remarkable". According to the UN, more than 160,000 people have been affected by the storm.

Democratic Republic of Congo: UN calls M23 rebels to respect the ceasefire

On 7 March, the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres urged M23 rebels to respect the ceasefire agreement. In addition, he welcomed the regional and international actors for their efforts to end the conflict. Besides, he condemned the violence by all parties against the civilians and called on all armed groups to disarm unconditionally. On 3 March, the Burundi government said it would deploy nearly 100 soldiers to the East African regional force in the North Kivu province amid increasing violence in the region. On 5 March, military officials of the southern African regional bloc, SADC, reached eastern DRC to assess the security situation. Meanwhile, the EU has announced a flight in aid to thousands affected by the conflict.

Europe and the Americas

Peru: Six soldiers drowned while escaping anti-government protests, says Defence Ministry

On 6 March, the Defence Ministry said six soldiers had drowned and five soldiers suffered hypothermia while swimming across the Ilave river after they came under attack from anti-government protesters on 5 March. The ministry shared a video wherein a soldier said that around 900 people surrounded and threw stones at them and therefore, they were forced to jump into the river as they "had no other way out." The ministry held that the "hostile attitude" of the protesters led to the tragedy as they had blocked a bridge which the soldiers tried to access prior to swimming in the river.

Mexico: Two US citizens found dead in the kidnapping

On 7 March, the Tamaulipas state governor said two of the four US citizens who were



kidnapped in Matamoros were found dead; the remaining two people were handed over to the officials at the border along Texas state. The White House national security spokesperson said the US would closely work with Mexico "to ensure that justice is done in this case." Meanwhile, the US attorney general blamed drug cartels for the incident and said: "The DEA [US Drug Enforcement Administration] and the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigations] are doing everything possible to dismantle and disrupt and ultimately prosecute the leaders of the cartels and the entire networks that they depend on."

Mexico: Over 300 migrants found in abandoned truck in Veracruz

On 5 March, 343 migrants, including 103 minors, were found in an abandoned truck in Veracruz state along a route generally used to take migrants to the US border. Most of the minors were from Guatemala and the remaining migrants were from Honduras, El Salvador and Ecuador. A BBC news report quoted authorities that the migrants had colour-coded bracelets indicating that they were being smuggled; the driver has not been found yet. The National Immigration Institute (INM) said the minors would be placed under Veracruz's family services system and the adults would be processed to decide their legal status.

Colombia: Protesters free 88 hostages

On 3 March, President Gustavo Petro announced that 88 people, including 79 policemen, who had been taken hostage by protesters demonstrating against oil company Emerald Energy had been freed; the rest of the hostages were the company's employees. Petro promised the protesters, mostly from indigenous communities, that he would inquire with them about "their needs, their complaints, their claims." On 2 March, the protesters closed off access to an oil field and allegedly set fire to company property; they demanded "infrastructure investments and compensation for environmental damage to the surrounding community."

Ukraine: Moscow conducts a retaliation strike on Kiev's military infrastructure

On 9 March, the Ministry of Defense announced that the Russian forces had launched a massive missile strike on Ukraine's military infrastructure as retaliation for Kiev's terrorist attack on the Bryansk border region. The attack involved "high-precision long-range air, sea, and land-based weapons, including the Kinzhal hypersonic missile system." The strike is said to have hit key elements of Ukraine's military infrastructure, defence industry complexes as well as energy facilities that contribute to their operations. The retaliation came after a Ukrainian raid into Bryansk region located on the Russian-Ukrainian border on 2 March, leaving two local residents dead and injuring a ten-year-old boy.

Canada: Prime Minister recommends parliamentary probe to assess 'foreign interference' in federal electoral process

On 6 March, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau issued a statement asking legislators in the parliament's national security committee to launch an investigation to take stock of China meddling in the country's elections. The initiative by the PM is in the backdrop of certain media reports which claimed China wanted to see Trudeau's Liberals re-elected in the 2021 elections. Trudeau had also flagged similar concerns in his meeting with the Chinese President Xi Jinping in November 2022. The statement further said: "We have long known, as an independent report confirmed again last week, that the Chinese government, and other regimes like Iran and Russia, have attempted to interfere not just in our democracy, but in our country in general, whether it's our institutions, our businesses, our research facilities, or in the daily lives of our citizens."

The US: 23 people charged with domestic terrorism for protesting against construction of police training facility in Atlanta

On 5 March, a clash took place between protesters and the police at the construction site of the Georgia Police Training Facility in Atlanta. The site, dubbed as cop city, witnessed a month-long demonstration by the 'Defend the Atlanta Forest coalition'. The protesters say that the construction would cause irreparable damage to the forest which is being cleared to make the 85 acre training facility, costing USD 90 million. The charges under domestic terrorism will entail 35 years in prison. Human Rights Watch (HRW) explained that the charges violate the defendants' First Amendment Rights under the US Constitution, which protects the right to free speech, press and assembly.

The US: Hunger strike at US Immigration Enforcement Facility in California

On 3 March, terming the condition at immigration and customs facility as 'legalized slavery', participants had been carrying out hunger strikes for the past two weeks at the US Immigration Enforcement Facility in California. The two facilities in California are operated by private contractors. The detainees are expected to work and earn wages at the facilities, for which they claim USD one per day. Low wages, poor conditions and the high cost of commodities including phone calls fueled the hunger strike. The protesters ultimately have one goal to be released from the facilities.

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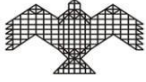
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About NIAS-International Peace Research Initiative(IPRI)

National Institute of
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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



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