

# IPRI Conflict Weekly

Research | Review | Forecast

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

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## Farmers' protests in India, Vaccine Wars, another India-China border standoff, and Navalny's imprisonment

Alok Gupta, Sourina Bej, Sukanya Bali and Harini Madhusudan



Farmers' protest in India turns violent: On 26 January 2021, the farmers who have been protesting on the outskirts of New Delhi, decided to organise a tractor rally; it turned violent later. (Image Source: The Indian Express)

### India: Farmers' protest turns violent with a political game of double-speak

#### In the news

On 26 January, the farmers' protest turned violent on New Delhi's streets, after two months of their commencement. The outrage was massive and unprecedented; reportedly, 200,000 tractors were mobilized against the permission of 5,000 tractors for the rally and flouted the routes specified by the administration. The protestors and the police clashed after protestors removed the barricades to enter Central Delhi. They successfully entered Delhi, destroyed

public property, injured police personnel, stormed the historic Red Fort, and hoisted their two different flags scaling iconic monuments' walls.

Farmers, while entering Central Delhi, were continuously requested to maintain law and order by the Delhi Police. Reportedly, a tractor overturned leading to the death of a farmer who was driving. When police approached to help and rescue, they were attacked, hence left the scene. Following which the farmers turned violent, and hooliganism began.

The Delhi Police registered FIR against several farmer leaders and has also detained nearly 200 farmers to be arrested. 86 police personnel got injured as reported. According to Police, farmers used swords, lathis and other weapons during their attacks. Hence, police booked them under IPC sections like 395, 397 and 120(b).

### Issues at large

The farmers' unions are being accused of double-speak: promising peaceful march to the administration and resorting to violence when allowed in good-faith. Thus, it has led to blame game raising several issues.

First, the police must have had intelligence report if the attack was a planned-one. The administration must be aware of the number and quality of the protestors scheduled to enter Delhi for Tractor Rally, as the matter was under consideration for last two weeks. Under such circumstances, police would have made adequate arrangements to restrain any untoward incident and would have regulated the entry. Calling off participation in Tractor Rally by Samyukt Kisan Morcha on January 26 itself suggests, farmers may be in full-knowledge of such plans.

Second, one incident of tractor accident and death of farmer may have enraged the protestors. Even if the violence was a consequence of some spontaneous happening, Delhi Police and administration must have had preparation for immediate interventions and containment of its escalation. Then, why it continued destroying huge public property?

Third, the Home Minister, Government of India, must have maintained a strict vigil on the entire episode. Responsibility for maintaining law and order in the wake of proposed tractor rally lies on him. Opposition parties also have blamed it on the government. The Home Minister is being castigated as the weakest Home Minister of India and is being asked for his resignation, taking responsibility for failure to contain it.

Fourth, the government has been on an offensive towards the movement since the beginning. It has been highlighting external funding to the movement, external agencies and branding the protestors as Khalistanis. This smacks of government's mishandling of the movement and lack of capacity to resolve after several rounds of negotiations.

Fifth, some farmer unions pulled out of the protest movement because of the vandalism in Delhi. The Rashtriya Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan, All India Kishan Sangharsh Coordination

Committee and the Bhartiya Kisan Union (Bhanu) condemned it as unacceptable. This suggests that the crack within the movement evident on many occasions is now obvious and has deepened. Protestors are likely to lose the support of civil society.

Sixth, Abhay Singh, MLA of Indian National Lokdal reached Haryana Assembly on a tractor and tendered his resignation to the Speaker from membership of Assembly in support of farmers protest in Delhi. Speaker subsequently accepted the resignation. Since the beginning, attempts have been made at the politicization of the movement. Present violence reveals that the political parties are now trying to gain political mileage out of the movement.

### In perspective

The farmer's leaders may not have envisaged that the tractor rally would witness such incidents. The violence questions the control of the leaders over the movement. It may have degraded their 'good cause' in the eyes of the civil society; some may even opine, that the violence has served the very purpose of the government. Vested interests may have been eying to defame the protest movement and were successful in their endeavour.

Government has entire state machinery at its disposal. Therefore, the onus of restraining and containing such episodes of internal conflict lies upon the Government. Political game of one-upmanship must not be played at the cost of public property.

## COVID-19: The Vaccine Wars

### In the news

On 27 January, the Johns Hopkins University, one of the global trackers of coronavirus cases, reported that the world now has 100 million cases. Along with it, the countries in the Global South, especially China and India, are competing and promising to gift the COVID-19 vaccines in their extended neighbourhood and alliances.

On 24 January, the Indian newspaper Hindu Businessline reported that "Bangladesh refused to share the cost of the trials as the Chinese firm maintained that this is the condition that every country has to abide by in order to purchase the coronavirus vaccine."

On 26 January, in response, the Chinese daily Global Times stated that, "Bangladesh had agreed to Sinovac clinical trials in July. At that time, it did not need to share the cost. But the clinical trials were delayed until October due to the Indian government allegedly meddling in the two sides' cooperation during the period." From 21 to 22 January, India has gifted COVID-19 vaccines to Myanmar as part of its goodwill diplomacy. The 1.5 million doses to Myanmar were the first to any Southeast Asian country. It is followed by two million doses of vaccine to Bangladesh. Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Seychelles and Brazil are the other countries to receive the doses.

On 16 January, the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi completed his four-nation visits to Myanmar, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines to initiate Sinovac doses in these countries.

Yi promised Myanmar 3,00,000 doses of a Chinese COVID-19 vaccine. On 8 January, Indonesia approved Sinovac, deeming it permissible under Islam and on 11 January, Philippines 25 million doses from China.

### Issues at large

First, competition and vaccine diplomacy. Since October 2020, Sinovac had kicked off clinical trials in several countries, such as Brazil, Turkey and Bangladesh. Among the biggest takers of the Chinese vaccine in Southeast Asia, is Malaysia. The country has been in talks to secure 23.9 million doses from Sinovac and CanSino Biologics. Similarly, the race to vaccine procurement has been led by India in its neighbourhood. From Seychelles to Brazil, the Serum Institute of India has been the nodal group to promise Covid-19 vaccine to the developing countries. Both India and China have raced to reach its neighbours that have tested their sphere of influence. Both India and China have made promises and granted vaccines as a goodwill gesture amid the humanitarian crisis.

Second, the question of efficiency and apprehension against Chinese vaccine. Chinese vaccines do not have approval from the WHO and have been rushed out for emergency use, but success rates have fallen short of the mark. Reports from outside of China have recorded just 50-50 effectiveness, compared with Chinese claims of around 75 per cent. The WHO team has been visiting Wuhan to investigate the origin of the vaccine. In the sidelines, Bangladesh, Nepal and Brazil have preferred to commit to the Indian vaccines to evade another Chinese dependency.

### In perspective

The vaccine warriors and the race to reach the last man standing by India and China have opened up new options for the developing countries. Health diplomacy will be pivotal for creating new technological supply chains and boosting each of the countries' technological prowess. While vaccine research has been led by the Global North, Global South still faces accessibility and punctuality issues. The dependency on the supply chains from the west is slowly being replaced, as countries like India and China look inward and outward to push for the vaccine supply.

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## India and China: The border disputes expand, despite the ninth round of military talks

### In the news

On 24 January, India and China held its ninth round of Corps Commander meeting. Following the meet, on 25 January, both sides released a joint statement; it said: "The two sides agreed that this round of meeting was positive, practical and constructive, which further enhanced mutual trust and understanding. The two sides agreed to push for an early disengagement of the frontline troops. They also agreed to follow the important consensus of their state leaders, maintain the good momentum of dialogue and negotiation, and hold the 10th round of the Corps Commander level meeting at an early date to jointly advance de-escalation."

On 25 January, India Today reported a new military standoff in Sikkim in which "around 20 soldiers were injured on the Chinese side and four on the Indian side." However, the Global Times has replied, the above report on injuries of both PLA and Indian soldiers as "fake". It said: "There is no record of this incident in the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) front line patrol logs".

### Issues at large

First, the border standoff remains unresolved and, worse, is getting aggravated. Despite the multiple rounds of negotiations since 2020, the border standoff is expanding from the western sector (Ladakh) to the others in Arunachal Pradesh. In 202, the death of 20 Indian soldiers' and an unspecified number of Chinese casualties raised concerns over the border escalations seen since 1962. In November 2020, NDTV revealed China had created a new village in the Arunachal Pradesh. The satellite imagery shows new structure built verifying it with empty hillside two years ago. Now, the latest report of another standoff in Sikkim region. On 20 January, a face-off between Indian and Chinese soldiers wounded soldiers on both sides. Reuters reported that India army had clarified "it was a minor face-off at Nakula which was resolved by local commanders as per established protocols".

Second, the political gap between the two countries, not limited only to the border talks. Despite the Wuhan and Mahabalipuram summits between the two countries during the recent period at the highest levels, there is a political gap. Furthermore, the gap is increasing and should be worrisome.

Third, the rising sentiments against the other, fanned by media. Recent statements would reflect this. Global times has accused Indian media of hyping Sinophobic sentiments. It said that the Indian media's habitual "rumormongering" may hurt New Delhi's interest. In the recent clash at Nakula, Indian media claimed that China suffered five times more casualties in the latest round in an attempt to show preparedness and valor. Qian Feng, Director of the research department at the National Strategy Institute at Tsinghua University, said fanning anti-China flames and confusing people will, in the end, harm their own reputations and India's national interests.

### In perspective

The multiple dialogues over the recent border standoffs have not yielded results, and the larger political dialogues at the summit levels, also have not brought the two countries any closer. Both the developments should be worrisome for the bilateral relationship.

The immediate need should be to prevent/avoid any further standoff along the border or to expand the theatre of confrontations. With jingoism on the rise, a military confrontation may further the polarization between the two countries. With the immediate focus on COVID vaccination and economic recovery, both countries cannot afford their resources being pulled off on other directions

## Russia: Pro-Navalny protests turn anti-government

### In the news

On 23 January 2021, following the arrest of opposition leader Alexey Navalny, protests erupted in Russia and have begun to escalate into a movement against the leadership at Kremlin. What began as a call for the release of Navalny has garnered support from hundreds of thousands of protesters driven by long-term frustration towards the government and the failing economy. Dozens of Navalny associates in various cities were detained before the protests. Additionally, more than 50 journalists were "arbitrarily detained" during the protests.

On 23 January, more than 3900 people, including Navalny's wife, have been detained. Navalny released a feature-length video on YouTube titled, "Putin Palace" that has attracted 67 million views. The palace is said to be situated at Gelendzhik by the Black Sea and alleged that people close to Putin paid for the palace.

### Issues at large

First, Navalny in the limelight. Since August 2020, Navalny has been in the news after a near-fatal poisoning of a military-grade nerve agent. In the later months of 2020, his team released a recording of an intelligence operative confessing to the attempt of killing him. In December 2020, marking the end of his probation, the Russian police began forcing his return, with a warning of seizing his assets. By 19 January 2021, Alexey Navalny was ordered to be jailed for 30 days after his return from Germany. The hasty process to arrest him drew much attention. In a video statement released after the ruling was announced, Navalny said, "Don't be afraid, take to the streets," "Don't come out for me, come out for yourselves and your future."

Second, responses to the arrests and protests. The public protests saw many youths take to the streets. There is strong criticism against detention and human rights groups have joined the Western governments in calling for Navalny's release and condemning the crackdown on peaceful protests. G7 leaders have said that the detention is politically motivated and the Russian forces are using violent suppression against the protesters. The Reporters Without Borders (RSF) have called on the EU to impose sanctions on Russian officials for the journalists' arbitrary detention. The US has announced that they support the immediate release of Navalny. While Navalny accuses the Kremlin of carrying out the poisoning against him; Kremlin accuses Navalny of being supported by the US.

### In perspective

The arrest of Navalny and the subsequent dissent on the protesters has drawn global outrage with a chorus of calls for his immediate release. He can be seen as a driving force of the protests. However, Russia's current situation emphasizes the underlying issues of rising costs of living and corruption at multiple levels of the system. Navalny's team has called for more demonstrations on 31 January and 2 February when a court is scheduled to consider motions to convert his suspended sentence into a real prison term. Hence, we can expect the protests to gain further momentum in the coming weeks.

## Also, from around the world

By Apoorva Sudhakar and Abigail Miriam Fernandez

### Peace and Conflict from East and Southeast Asia

#### China: Foreign Ministry condemns US ships entering the South China Sea

On 25 January, China's Foreign Ministry spokesman said: "The United States frequently sends aircraft and vessels into the South China Sea to flex its muscles." The Ministry was responding to a US carrier group which entered the disputed waters on 23 January. On the other hand, the US military said the warships entered the South China Sea to promote "freedom of the seas." The US entry coincided with China's entry into the Taiwanese air defence identification zone.

#### Taiwan: Chinese warplanes enter Taiwan's air defence zone, US urges for dialogue

On 25 January, 15 Chinese bombers entered Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ). On 24 January, 13 Chinese warplanes entered Taiwan's southwestern ADIZ. On the same day, US President Joe Biden reiterated support to Taiwan given China's "ongoing attempts to intimidate its neighbours, including Taiwan." Further, the US State Department spokesperson said Washington urges "Beijing to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan." He pushed China to hold dialogue with Taiwan's democratically elected representatives.

#### Singapore: Teenager detained for planning attacks on mosques

On 27 January, Home Affairs and Law Minister of Singapore K. Shanmugam raised concerns about the rising right-wing extremism in the country. He made this statement in the context of a 16-year-old Singaporean detained last month under the Internal Security Act (ISA) after planning to use a machete to attack Muslims at two mosques, on the anniversary of New Zealand's Christchurch attacks. The statement released by the Ministry of Home Affairs stated: "This youth, a Protestant Christian of Indian ethnicity, is the first detainee to be inspired by far-right extremist ideology. He is also the youngest individual to-date dealt with under the ISA for terrorism-related activities."

#### Indonesia: Iranian and Panamanian vessels seized

On 24 January, Indonesia said its coast guard had seized Iranian and Panamanian vessels over alleged illegal oil transfer in its waters, and 61 crew members were detained for the same. The Indonesian coast guard spokesperson said the two vessels had concealed their identity by hiding their national flags. He said that the Panamanian vessel was receiving oil from the Iranian tanker when the Indonesian authorities discovered them. The two tankers will be moved to Riau Island Province for further investigation.

#### Thailand: Opposition parties file a no-confidence motion

On 25 January, an opposition coalition filed a no-confidence motion against 10 cabinet ministers including Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha. 208 MPs supported the move. The Speaker said the motion would be put on the House's agenda and moved after the parliamentary officials verified the supporting signatures. The Pheu Thai party, which initiated the motion,

said the issues for the censure debate would include "malfeasance, actions deemed benefiting interest groups, administrative failures and lack of legality and justice."

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### Peace and Conflict from South Asia

#### **India: The Supreme Court stays the Bombay High Court order on sexual assault of a minor**

On 27 January, the Supreme Court stayed the decision of the Bombay High Court which held that groping a minor girl without touching her skin did not amount to sexual assault under Protection of Children against Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act. In a judgment passed on 19 January, Justice Pushpa V Ganediwala had acquitted the accused under Section 7 (sexual assault) of the POCSO Act, while ruling that the act of groping a child's breast, without any skin-to-skin contact and sexual intent, is not sexual assault under the law. However, Attorney General KK Venugopal mentioned that this verdict is a "disturbing conclusion" and "sets a dangerous precedent."

#### **Sri Lanka: Investigation into war crime allegations likely**

On 22 January, the Sri Lanka government stated that it would investigate allegations its troops committed war crimes during the ethnic conflict. It comes a month before the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) is due to discuss the island's rights record. At least 1,00,000 people were killed in the decades-long civil war, and there were allegations that 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed in the final onslaught. After coming to power, Rajapaksa had stood opposed against investigation and threatened in May 2020 to withdraw from the UNHRC. However, his office late said although Sri Lanka will withdraw from the UNHRC resolution of 2015, it was ready to make "institutional reforms" to ensure justice and reconciliation.

#### **Afghanistan: Biden administration to review peace deal**

On 24 January, the Biden administration said it would review the peace deal clinched between former President Trump and the Taliban. The White House wanted to make sure the Afghan militant group was "living up to its commitments," including reducing violence and cutting ties with terrorists. Jake Sullivan, President Biden's top security adviser, has spoken with Afghan officials to confirm the review. Also, senior leaders of Afghanistan's Taliban insurgency travelled to Iran on 23 January to "exchange views" on the US-brokered peace negotiations between warring Afghan parties.

#### **Nepal: Election commission recognizes Nepal Communist Party**

On 24 January, the commission said that since both factions—one led by Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli and the other by Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Madhav Kumar Nepal—failed to follow the party statute and the provisions of the Political Parties Act-2017, it only recognizes the Nepal Communist Party (NCP), which was formed in May 2018. With the commission refusing to recognize either faction as the NCP, legal experts and observers say there could have technical and political implications. Dispute resolution is a technical part, according to them, which could affect the elections. If the elections are not held on the declared dates, there could be a political vacuum.

## Peace and Conflict from Central Asia, Middle East and Africa

### **Syria: Family of four killed amid Israeli airstrikes**

On 22 January, Syria's state-run media, SANA, reported that a family of four including children was killed and four other civilians injured in airstrikes carried out by Israel. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the family was killed after the debris of the Syrian anti-aircraft defence missiles, launched to intercept Israeli airstrikes, crashed into a civilian neighbourhood. SANA claimed that the Syrian air defences downed most of the Israeli missiles. However, the Israeli airstrikes destroyed five Syrian military posts. Israel has been regularly carrying out attacks against alleged Iran-backed forces in Syria.

### **Yemen: Prisoner exchange talks resume; the US allows transactions to Houthis**

On 25 January, the US allowed transactions involving the Houthi movement after Washington initiated a review of the Trump administration's decision to designate the rebel group as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation. The transaction can be held for one more month as the Treasury Department clarified that foreign banks will not face sanctions "if they knowingly conduct or facilitate a transaction" for the Houthis." On 24 January, the Yemeni government and Houthi rebels engaged in UN-backed negotiations on prisoner exchange. Aljazeera reported that the two sides discussed the release of 300 prisoners, including President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi's brother, "whose internationally recognized government was removed by the Houthis in late 2014." On the same day, the UN's special envoy to Yemen called for the immediate release of the elderly, sick and detainee children.

### **Uganda: Soldiers kill 189 al-Shabaab fighters, says Army**

On 22 January, the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF) claimed that it killed 189 al-Shabab fighters during ground and aerial raids in three villages 100 kilometres southwest of Somalia's capital city. The UPDF also claimed to have destroyed military equipment of the terrorist group. The Ugandan soldiers are a part of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). The raid comes a week after the US announced the completion of its operations in Somalia.

### **Central African Republic: Army kills 44 rebel fighters' days after the government declares emergency**

On 25 January, CAR government said that its army killed 44 of several rebel fighters who were planning to surround the capital city, Bangui, to overthrow President Faustin-Archange Touadera who recently won his second term. The casualties include mercenaries from Chad, Sudan and the Fulani ethnic group. On 21 January, the government had announced a 15-day emergency after armed rebels attempted to take over Bangui indicating an escalation of the ongoing conflict. Further, the UN warned that the rebels were trying to "strangle" Bangui by blocking three major roads leading to the capital.

## Peace and Conflict from Europe and the Americas

### **Italy: PM Conte to resign amid heightening political turmoil**

On 26 January, Prime Minister of Italy Giuseppe Conte handed his resignation plunging the country into further chaos. Conte, who has been in office since June 2018, hopes President Sergio Mattarella will give him the mandate to form a new stronger government after losing his majority in the Senate over a dispute in its handling of the coronavirus pandemic and economic recession. Further, his resignation comes ahead of a vote on judicial reforms scheduled for later this week leaving it unclear if he will be able to form and lead a new coalition government or whether a snap election will be called for.

### **The Netherlands: Riots over coronavirus curfew continues**

On 25 January, riots continued for the third night as protesters opposing a coronavirus curfew clashed with the police in Amsterdam as well as the port city of Rotterdam, Amersfoort, and the city of Geleen near Maastricht. Protesters initially took to the streets to express dissent over a government decision to implement a night time curfew, the first in the country since World War II, after the National Institute for Health (RIVM) warned a new wave of COVID-19. On 23 January, Prime Minister Mark Rutte condemned the "criminal violence" which was described by police as the "worst rioting in 40 years."

### **EU-UK: Josep Borrell says that Brussels will resolve embassy row with the UK despite 'unfriendly signal'**

On 25 January, Josep Borrell, the European Union's high representative for foreign affairs, stated that the EU and UK would resolve a diplomatic row over the status of the bloc's ambassador to London, however, warning that the UK's attitude was "not a friendly signal," adding, "the first one that the United Kingdom has sent to us immediately after leaving the European Union. If things continue like this there are no good prospects." This comes as the UK is refusing to grant the ambassador the same diplomatic status as other ambassadors arguing that the EU is an international federation, not a nation-state, thus it should be treated likewise.

### **Honduras: Parliament set to make legalization of abortion impossible**

On 23 January, BBC reported that Parliament in Honduras has initially approved a bill that will make it impossible to legalize abortion in the country. The new legislation which referred to the measure as a "shield against abortion" incorporates the illegality of abortion into the constitution, stating that "it is considered prohibited and illegal by the mother or a third party to practice any kind of interruption of a life that is about to be born." Presently, Honduras forbids abortion under any circumstance, even rape or incest.

### **Brazil: Anti Bolsonaro rallies call for impeachment**

On 23 January, left-wing and centrist protesters organized motorcade rallies in more than 20 state capitals, including Rio de Janeiro, Porto Alegre, Belo Horizonte and Belém demand Jair Bolsonaro's impeachment. The left-wing leader Guilherme Boulos stated that the protests signalled the start of "a popular uprising against this genocidal government." Further, an online petition being promoted by conservative former supporters attracted more than 180,000

signatures in three days in which it stated, "President Bolsonaro is a curse on Brazil and ... it's up to us, the people, to secure his removal."

### **The US: Biden to undo Trump's immigration policies**

On 23 January, the White House stated that US President Joe Biden plans to reverse draconian "immigration policies" of Donald Trump. Previously, on 22 January, in a telephonic conversation with President of Mexico Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Biden outlined his plan to create new legal pathways for immigration and improve the process for people requesting asylum. Both sides also agreed to work together towards reducing "irregular migration."

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### **About the authors**

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The IPRI undertakes research on varied issues affecting a peace process and conflict regions every year. The research by IPRI is regularly published as issue briefs and analyses looking at larger trends in contemporary conflict regions in the world.

As part of its capacity building activities, the IPRI organizes Peace Lectures of eminent academicians, leaders and advocates of peace. The Young-IPRI platform is a network of young scholars working on peace initiatives and conflict resolution programmes across South Asia.

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