

IPRI Conflict Weekly

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A brief review of conflict and peace processes across the world

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Anti-Coup protests in Myanmar, a new US strategy on Yemen, and the US-Iran differences on the nuclear roadmap

Aparupa Bhattacharjee, Rashmi BR and D Suba Chandran



Civilian protests against the coup have started in Myanmar, demanding the release of Sui Kyi and other NLD leaders, and the return of democracy. (Image Source: BBC)

Myanmar: The anti-coup protests begin, but the military stands undeterred

[In the news](#)

On 9 February, General Min Aung Hlaing, issued a long public statement for the first time since coming to power. He justified the necessity of the coup as the 2020 November election was “unfair.”

On 8 February, the NLD lawmakers formed a committee called the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) as an alternative Parliament body, denouncing the coup as illegitimate.

On 6 February, the street protests started and continue to gain momentum. However, beginning from 9 February the Tatmadaw started taking action against the protestors on the grounds of violation of the martial law and the ban on the assimilation of more than five people.

On 9 February, New Zealand declared to sever all ties with Myanmar. On the same day, the coup and the other developments in the country were discussed by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the US President Joe Biden over a telephonic conversation.

Issues at large

First, the flawed rationale and the real reasons behind the military in staging the coup. General Hlaing's speech and his reiteration that the 2020 election was fraudulent are not enough to justify the coup. The military's statement of fraud is without any evidence; the Union election commission and international observers disagreed on this blame. The military, that came to power under General Ne Win's leadership, was never keen to give up its power. The 2010 shift to democracy was because of international pressures through sanctions, crippling economy and widespread anger from the people.

Second, the military's control despite the two elections in 2010 and 2015 and the new danger post-2020 elections. In 2010, the USDP, a military proxy came to power as NLD boycotted it. The 2015 elections, though brought the NLD to form the government, the military had sufficient leverage. The 2008 Constitution enabled the military to have 25 per cent reservation in both the Houses; along with the USDP, the military to continue the façade of democracy through these two options. The 2020 election threatened this arrangement, as the USDP was unable to get minimum votes required. Hence the coup.

Third, the history of protests in Myanmar and what is new in February 2021. Myanmar has witnessed massive and organised protests against the military governments in 1988 and 2007. The 1988 protests were started by the students with demonetisation triggering it. The 2007 protests (referred to as the Saffron revolution due to the participation of the monks), was also instigated due to economic reasons. However, in 2021 protests are different; the desperation for democracy is evident in the zeal to fight against the Tatmadaw.

In perspective

Internally, the military is consolidating, as could be seen from Gen Hlaing's speech. On the other side, the protests against the coup have also started. The next few weeks, there would be instability in the streets.

Externally, countries like New Zealand, that do not have major investments in Myanmar, cutting ties will not affect the military. Unless countries like Japan, South Korea, and the immediate neighbourhood makes a stand, the coup leaders would face less pressure. The

silence to the coup from the region and ASEAN is shocking. There have been several strong condemnations across the globe, but none from the region. It appears Southeast Asia decided to keep it low. This could be due to the Chinese influence; Beijing considers the coup as an internal matter. China is an old ally of the military and also one of the largest foreign investors in Myanmar along with the rest of Southeast Asia.

Yemen: Joe Biden's new strategy should aim at ending the disastrous war

In the news

On 8 February, the Houthi rebels launched an offensive on Ma'rib, a city in the northern part of Yemen, and one of the few strongholds of the government. The attacks were launched from three fronts and continued despite strong resistance from the government forces, allied tribesmen, and the air cover provided by the Arab coalition. The clash resulted in the death of at least 20 soldiers and few Houthi fighters.

On 4 February, President Biden announced that the US is "ending all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arm sales." On 5 February, the US State Department informed the Congress that it will reverse the Trump administration's decision to declare Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization.

On 7 February, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths began his two-day visit to Iran to meet Iranian foreign minister and officials, to discuss the conflict in Yemen.

Issues at large

First, the shift in the US policy under Biden. The Trump administration, though not directly involved in the war, explicitly extended its support to the Saudi Arabia-led Arab coalition, primarily through increased arms sales, circumventing the opposition the US Congress. It also did not condemn Saudi Arabia for committing human rights violations and war offences in Yemen and in other parts of the region. Continuing the policy against Iran and its proxies, the Trump administration had listed the Houthis as a terrorist organization. Under Joe Biden, there is a shift in the US policy towards Yemen. In his address at the State Department, he remarked that the war in Yemen must end. In this regard, he appointed Timothy Lenderking, a veteran diplomat, to cooperate with the UN and "all the parties to the conflict to push for a diplomatic resolution." Nevertheless, the State Department condemned and called upon the rebels to halt the offensive and violence that is impacting civilians in Yemen.

Second, the long-drawn war in Yemen and the domestic political crisis. The rebels and the government forces are in a long-drawn conflict and violent clashes continue, as the Houthis remain strong despite stiff resistance from the Arab coalition. The government, despite the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement, lacks decisive power enough to control the rebellion.

Third, the humanitarian crisis. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project, the relentless fighting in Yemen has inflicted severe damage, killing more than 110,000 people of which more than 12,500 are civilians. According to the UN, 80 per cent of the population in the country depend on assistance for survival. It also issued strong warnings of an impending famine that will push Yemen into a crisis, from where revival would be nearly impossible.

In perspective

First, the renewed efforts in Yemen to end the war. The government representatives and the Houthis participated in the UN-sponsored peace talks in December 2018. The talks failed and any further negotiations were not held despite repeated efforts from the UN. Biden's announcement to end support to Saudi Arabia and Martin Griffiths' visit to Iran, is now seen as the first step towards reviving the efforts to end the conflict. Griffiths stated that his priorities include an agreement between the parties on a "nationwide ceasefire, urgent humanitarian measures and the resumption of the political process."

Second, the measures Biden ought to take. The assurance on the reversal of Trump's policy on Yemen has revived hopes on beginning the peace process. By appointing an envoy and announcing a review of assistance to Saudi Arabia, Biden has provided space for diplomacy. However, though his address to the State Department calls for ending the war, it does not provide a solution. The questions of how and what kind of assistance to Saudi Arabia, the US plans to end, must be answered through definitive policies.

Third, the question of responsibility. The war will not end unless the Houthis and the government; the Arab coalition and Iran arrive at a consensus on the issue. The regional countries and other western powers that indirectly support the primary parties to the conflict must consider the humanitarian crisis that is unfolding.

US and Iran: Biden and Khamenei on sanctions and renewing nuclear negotiations

In the news

On 7 February, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran made a statement on the removal of sanctions as a precondition for Iran to return to its nuclear commitments. The Washington Post referring to the State TV quoted: "If (the U.S.) wants Iran to return to its commitments, it must lift all sanctions in practice, then we will do verification ... then we will return to our commitments." The report also quoted the Ayatollah saying "This is the definitive and irreversible policy of the Islamic Republic, and all of the country's officials are unanimous on this, and no one will deviate from it."

On the same day, when Joe Biden was asked in an interview whether the US would remove sanctions first in order to get Iran back to the negotiating table, he responded negatively saying that Iran should stop enriching Uranium first.

On 10 February, the Wall Street Journal, referring to an IAEA report that it had access to, reported that “Iran has produced a material that is banned under the 2015 nuclear accords and could be used to form the core of a nuclear weapon.” According to the WSJ, the “material produced was a small amount of natural uranium metal.”

Issues at large

First, the new US administration and an old issue in the Middle East. Curbing Iran’s nuclear capability to produce nuclear weapons has been one of the primary goals of the American administrations under different Presidents during the last few decades. Until the Obama administration, sanctions were used as a primary tool to prevent Iran from pursuing the nuclear weapon option. Under Obama, the US tried to approach Iran with a negotiation strategy, thereby halting the sanctions approach. Along with a few other countries, the US in July 2015 signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA); besides the US, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and Germany are a party to the agreement. In 2018, Trump announced unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA without any consultation with other members, and reimposed sanctions on Iran, as a part of his new maximum pressure strategy.

Second, the policy options for the new US administration. Biden earlier did underline the need for the US to return to the JCPOA. He was a part of the Obama administration, that negotiated the JCPOA with Iran. However, for Biden, so much had happened between July 2015 (when the Iran nuclear agreement was signed) and January 2021 (when Biden became the President). In a statement last week, Biden announced the “US is back” and “diplomacy is back” strategy and outlined his intentions on Yemen and Saudi Arabia; however, he was silent on Iran. This underlines the huge differences within the US policymaking institutions on Iran – from the Congress to State Department. Biden will have to build consensus within the US on Iran, before reaching out to Iran.

Third, Iran’s maximum pressure strategy. Ironically, it is Iran and not the US, that has been pursuing a maximum pressure strategy since Trump withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018. A series of statements in the recent months and actions have announced Iran’s intentions to go ahead with its threats to take the nuclear weapon road. Trump administration’s regional approach (from the Middle East peace plan to assassinations) also had a target-Iran, as an underlying strategy. In return, Iran has been pursuing the nuclear weapon option, to pressurize the US and the others to get back to the JCPOA.

In perspective

Sanctions have not worked in the past. And it would not in the future. Biden will have to build consensus within the US and return to the JCPOA. Iran will have to stop the nuclear weapon route as a strategy and fulfil its JCPOA commitments. Any other option is fraught with danger and regional instability.

Also, from around the world

By Apoorva Sudhakar and Abigail Miriam Fernandez

Peace and Conflict from East and Southeast Asia

China: Australian journalist arrested on suspicion of spying

On 8 February, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson confirmed that Chinese-born Australian journalist for the state-run media CGTN, had been arrested for allegedly leaking state secrets. On the same day, Australian Foreign Minister said the government was concerned about the number of detentions the arrested journalist Cheng Lai had faced; Australia hoped that the case would be treated with international "standards of justice, procedural fairness and humane treatment." However, the Chinese spokesperson urged Australia to refrain from interfering in China's handling of the case. China had previously detained the journalist, Cheng Lai, in August 2020 on grounds of "national security."

Hong Kong: Court denies bail to Jimmy Lai

On 9 February Hong Kong's top court, the Court of Final Appeal (CFA) denied bail to media tycoon Jimmy Lai who was detained under China's national security law in December 2020. Referring to the bail granted by a lower court, the CFA judges maintained that the lower court had used an "erroneous line of reasoning" and "misconstrued" Article 42. A provision under Article 42 reads, "no bail shall be granted to a criminal suspect or defendant unless the judge has sufficient grounds for believing that the criminal suspect or defendant will not continue to commit acts endangering national security." However, the CFA judges clarified that their verdict focussed only on the nature of the lower court's judgement; Lai's team can apply for bail again.

North Korea: Continues to maintain the nuclear programme, says UN report accessed by Reuters

On 9 February, Reuters reported it accessed a confidential report by independent sanctions monitors of the UN. According to the report, North Korea continued to maintain and develop its nuclear and ballistic missile programs throughout 2020, thereby violating international sanctions. Further, the report said North Korea used hackers to conduct virtual thefts amounting to USD 316.4 million to support the nuclear programme. The revelation comes after a US State Department spokesperson said the Biden administration planned to adopt a new approach to North Korea which would include possibilities of future diplomacy.

The Pacific: Five Micronesian countries announce withdrawal from the Pacific Islands Forum

On 9 February, Nauru, Kiribati, Palau, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia announced their withdrawal from the Pacific Islands Forum. Their joint statement read, "There is no value in participating in an organisation that does not respect established agreements, including the gentlemen's agreement on sub-regional rotation." The sub-regions are Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia. The five countries, belonging to the Micronesia sub-region, said it was their candidate's turn to be appointed as Secretary-General of the Forum. However, the former Prime Minister of Cooks Island was appointed for the post.

Peace and Conflict from South Asia

Sri Lanka: P2P, five-day long march held for justice

On 7 February, the five-day march from ‘Pothuvil to Polikandy’ or ‘P2P’ came to a peaceful end after covering several towns. Prominent Tamil and Muslim politicians, activists, students, and residents took part in the march bringing up the issues of not just the Tamil community but also the Muslims and Indian-origin Tamils. Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa criticized the five-day-long protest claiming it was "trying to divide the country," adding, "while protests are being organised in the South, another group in the North is trying to divide the country" and that those who are organising protests are struggling for "political survival."

India: Uttarakhand flash floods leave 32 dead

On 7 February, a flash flood was triggered by ‘glacier burst’ when a portion of the Nanda Devi glacier broke off at Joshimath in Uttarakhand’s Chamoli district. The floods incurred heavy damage to the Tapovan-Vishnugad hydropower project and the Rishiganga Hydel Project and several homes. Following rescue operations, a total of 32 bodies have been recovered while the number of missing persons stands at 197. The massive flood came as a reminder of the 2013 Kedarnath disaster which led to widespread devastation in the Himalayan region.

India: 4G mobile internet restored in J&K

On 5 February, the Government of India announced the restoration of 4G internet service in the entire region after 18 months. On the announcement, National Conference (NC) vice-president Omar Abdullah tweeted, "4G Mubarak! For the first time since August 2019, all of J&K will have 4G mobile data. Better late than never." Previously, the government cut 4G service across Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019 following the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir. The service was restored in two districts, Udhampur in Jammu and Ganderbal in Kashmir, after a year while it remained suspended in the rest of the 18 districts.

Pakistan: UNSC Report says the TTP responsible for over 100 cross-border attacks

On 3 February, the 27th Report of the UN Analytical and Monitoring Team showed that the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was reported to have overseen a reunification of splinter groups that took place in Afghanistan and was moderated by Al-Qaida. The report cites five entities pledged alliance to TTP in July and August, warning that the merger of TTP is expected to enhance the threat of terrorism to Pakistan and the region. Further, Member State assessments of TTP fighting strength range between 2,500 and 6,000, reporting that TTP was responsible for more than 100 cross-border attacks between July and October 2020.

Afghanistan: Abdullah criticises the Taliban for avoiding negotiations

On 9 February, Abdullah Abdullah, head of the High Council for National Reconciliation, criticised the Taliban for not being present at the negotiating table, stating that their absence has stalled the talks for over three weeks. Conversely, the Taliban has been busy with regional trips visiting Iran, Russia and Turkmenistan over the last few days, seeking the regional countries’ support for the implementation of the February 2020 agreement in Doha. These statements come as violence continues to surge with the Taliban being under criticism for "keeping the violence" high as stated by senior US and Afghan officials.

Bangladesh: Human Rights groups call for a review of Bangladeshi UN troop deployments

On 6 February, Al Jazeera reported that seven human rights groups called on the United Nations to review its use of Bangladeshi peacekeeping troops after the organisation denied claims by the country's military. The statement was co-signed by HRW, International Federation for Human Rights, Asian Human Rights Commission, World Organisation against Torture, Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, Robert F Kennedy Human Rights, and Eleos Justice demanding a comprehensive review of the UN's ties with the military of Bangladesh. The call was in response to a report titled 'All the Prime Minister's Men' by Al Jazeera's Investigative Unit revealed how the Bangladesh armed forces, led by General Aziz Ahmed, bought intrusive mass surveillance technology on peacekeeping missions.

Peace and Conflict from Central Asia, Middle East and Africa

Azerbaijan: Lawsuit regarding the conflict in the 1990s filed against Armenia

On 8 February, Azerbaijan filed a lawsuit against Armenia accusing the latter of "human rights violations during its almost 30-year occupation" of Nagorno-Karabakh region and seven neighbouring districts and during the recent conflict in 2020. Azerbaijan also maintained that Armenia did not implement measures to track 3,800 Azerbaijani nationals who went missing during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the 1990s. Further, it accused Armenia of using ballistic missiles, white phosphorus munitions, and cluster munitions to target Azerbaijani towns in 2020. The lawsuit has been filed with the European Court of Human Rights.

Palestine: Fatah, Hamas reach consensus on upcoming elections

On 9 February, two Palestinian factions, Fatah and Hamas, and 12 other groups agreed on electoral mechanisms for the upcoming legislative and parliamentary elections. The announcement came at the end of a two-day session in Egypt. According to a joint statement, the groups have agreed on setting up an electoral cases court, allowing free campaigning. They have also agreed to follow the timetable for the elections and "respect and accept" the results. Fatah runs the Palestinian Authority which has limited self-rule in the West Bank and Hamas has control over the Gaza strip.

Egypt: Hosts emergency meeting of Arab foreign ministers

On 8 February, Egypt hosted an emergency meeting of Arab countries. Secretary-General of the League of Arab States said the Palestinian issue will remain an important concern for the organisation until an independent Palestinian state is established with East Jerusalem as the capital. He was speaking at an emergency meeting of Arab foreign ministers hosted by Egypt. Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, echoed the statement.

Libya: Interim government formed; UN hails breakthrough

On 5 February, the UN-recognised government in Libya and the parallel rebel authority in the country agreed to form an interim unity government. The interim presidency council will be headed by Mohammed al-Menfi, a former diplomat from Benghazi and Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dbeibah will be the interim prime minister. Dbeibah is expected to present a new

government on 26 February. The decision is a major breakthrough and the UN Secretary-General urged Libyans to “recognize and accept these results and to work with the new authorities that were elected.”

Somalia: UNSC calls for dialogue to hold presidential elections

On 9 February, the UN Security Council urged the Somali government and opposition to resume dialogue to hold the presidential elections. On 8 February, opposition leaders said they no longer recognised Mohamed Abdullahi ‘Farmajo’ as the president. They justified their decision stating his term ended on 8 February, the day when Somalia had scheduled its presidential elections. However, the country missed its deadline after talks between the government and opposition, to decide the electoral procedure, collapsed on 5 February.

Peace and Conflict from Europe and the Americas

EU-Russia: Germany, Poland and Sweden expel Russian diplomats in retaliation

On 8 February, Germany, Poland and Sweden expelled Russian diplomats in a coordinated act of retaliation over the expulsion of three EU officials by Moscow earlier last week. In response to the move, Moscow criticised the decision saying, “Today's decisions by Poland, Germany and Sweden are unfounded, unfriendly and are a continuation of the very series of actions that the West is taking with regard to our country and which we qualify as interference in our internal affairs.” Previously, Russia had expelled three EU diplomats who had participated in a demonstration in support of Alexey Navalny.

The UK: Lifting Northern Ireland restrictions will 'need 70-80 per cent vaccinated'

On 9 February, the chief medical officer stated that Covid-19 restrictions will not be completely lifted in Northern Ireland until 70 to 80 per cent of the people are vaccinated. Further, the officer stated, “It's really important that we ease restrictions gradually,” adding, “We need to be realistic that the current restrictions that we have in place will be in place for a significant part of this year to a greater or lesser extent and into next year as well.” Currently, about 22 per cent of adults have received at least a first dose of a vaccine.

The US: Trump's second impeachment trial begins

On 9 February, the trial for Donald Trump began in the Senate after it was decided that the proceedings were constitutional. Trump's defence team argued that he could not face trial after leaving the White House, however, in a 56-44 majority voting the Senate rejected the argument from Trump's defence team, paving way for the procedures to move forward. However, it is unlikely that Trump would be acquitted because only six Republican senators voted to move forward with impeachment, short of the 17 Republicans whose votes would be needed to convict him. Trump is accused of “incitement of insurrection” for his part in kindling the violence witnessed at the US Capitol House.

Haiti: Unrest continues as President Moïse refuses to step down

On 7 February, President Jovenel Moïse vehemently stated, “I am not a dictator,” adding, “My term ends Feb. 7, 2022.” His statement came in response to the opposition’s demand for his resignation saying his five-year term ended on 7 February 2021, however, Moïse refusing to vacate office, arguing that an interim government occupied the first year of his five-year term. As tensions soared, the government announced the arrest of over 20 people, claiming they had been involved in a plot to overthrow and kill the president. The political crisis in Haiti is likely to worsen the country’s situation.

Ecuador: Andres Arauz claims 'victory' in the first round

On 7 February, Andres Arauz claimed victory in Ecuador's presidential election in the first round, however, official projection by Ecuador's National Electoral Council revealed that Arauz would have to face off indigenous candidate and lawyer Yaku Perez in the election run-off. Further, the elections council’s website stated that 13 per cent of poll statements show some type of inconsistency, which means they would have to be reviewed once all the votes are counted. Ecuador’s election is taking place amid the growing discontent over the handling of the pandemic, an economic crisis and other corruption scandals.

About the authors

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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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