

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 China and France, and post-earthquake crises in Turkey and Syria

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(Elderly citizens in China protest against changes in the medical insurance system.

Image Source: Byron Wan/Twitter)

China: Protests against medical insurance system highlights societal frustrations

In the news

On 15 February, videos and photos of a protest in Wuhan went viral after hundreds of pensioners protested against changes to the health benefits of the elderly. China's social media users shared glimpses of civilians protesting, chanting slogans and singing songs outside Zhongshan Park despite the police presence. Another protest was recorded in Guangzhou and Dalian after the elderly noticed significantly lower balances in their bank accounts, hinting at a cut to their medical benefits. The authorities explained that the changes to the public health insurance system may vary in different regions but it aims to bring more services under the system while cutting down on individual subsidies.

Issues at large

First, the change in the public health insurance system. In September 2021, the State Council adopted the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Medical Security. The Communist Party of China (CPC) aimed at improving the medical insurance system to include more people under its medical services and drugs. The insurance is the largest in the world; increasing its coverage from 1.36 billion people (13th Five-Year Plan: 2016-2020) to the entire Chinese population of 1.42 billion (2021). During the executive meeting in 2021, Premier Li promoted the new plan by highlighting its capability to make medical services more accessible and affordable.

Second, the challenges to the new medical insurance system. In Wuhan, the authorities introduced reforms to transfer capital from the mandatory health savings plan to an outpatient insurance fund managed by the state. The reforms were enforced from 1 February and led to the first protest on the issue on 8 February. The reforms were introduced to reduce the burden on the state's healthcare plan which suffered substantially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though the health insurance fund witnessed a fivefold increase in 2021, it has been struggling and had to tap into people's personal spending and mandatory savings accounts. The surge in accounts resulted in a temporary relief as the authorities could shift the capital from the younger users to the elderly who generally spent more on medical expenses. However, with the new reform, the government can use the capital to fund the medical expenses of everyone, regardless of their bank balance. China is also dealing with a quickly ageing population which is expected to further increase the strain on the insurance system. This is a cause of concern for the able-bodied younger generation who will have to bear the brunt of the insurance system.

Third, the shifting nature of protests in China. In the months after the revocation of the zero-COVID policy of the CPC, there have been numerous protests on a wide variety of issues such as a fireworks ban, the crumbling property sector, delay in wages, unfair dismissal at the workplace, and more. These protests are viewed in China as the ones which were able to produce a positive outcome from the authorities.

In perspective

After the revocation of the strict COVID restrictions due to the mass public unrest and protests, there is a change in the nature of China's social behaviour wherein the people are hopeful of bringing change through public displays of dissatisfaction and frustration.

However, it is unclear if all future protests will result in a similar positive outcome as the revocation of the zero-COVID policy did.

The increasing number of protests and mass unrests also pose a challenge to President Xi Jinping's third term as the leader of the country and the CPC. The protests against the health insurance system therefore come at a crucial time for the persistence of the CPC and Xi Jinping. Thus, there is a higher possibility for the protests to be crushed by the authorities.

Lastly, the strain on the healthcare system is a serious challenge for the CPC and is bound to hold a larger presence in China's politics and social structure in the future due to the increasing elderly population in the country. The declining birth rate further adds to the problem.

France: Continued protests against pension reform

In the news

On 16 February, around 1.3 million protestors took to the streets of France to protest for the fifth day against new pension reforms. This was the lowest turnout since the protests began. According to the Ministry of Interior, 963,000 protesters protested against the pension reforms on the fourth day of protests. The CGT Union said that around 500,000 people alone protested in Paris, higher than the number of protesters on 7 February.

The protests are led by eight main unions who said that if the government remains "deaf" to their demands, a major strike would be called on 7 March which would "bring France to a standstill." CGT Union leader Philippe Martinez, said "the ball is in the court of the president and the government to determine if the movement intensifies and hardens or if they take into account the current mobilisation."

On the same day, Paris Orly Airport air traffic controllers staged an unannounced strike which led to several flight cancellations. The unions representing Paris RATP public transport system workers called for rolling strikes from 7 March.

Issues at large

First, Macron's proposed pension reform. On 10 January, French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne introduced the new pension reforms to "balance" the pension system. The pension reforms were featured in President Emmanuel Macron presidential election campaign and are based on the September 2022 Pension Advisory Council report. Borne outlined that the new reforms would raise the retirement age from 62 to 64 by 2030, increasing the age by three months per generation. The reforms will also accelerate the Touraine reform implementation which increases the required years of service from 42 to 43 years by 2027. Borne also announced that the government will be increasing the minimum pension wage to EUR 1,200.

Second, the Pension Advisory Council report. In September 2022, France's Pension Advisory Council released a report where it outlined that the pension finances will decrease "significantly" between 2023 and 2027. It added that the pension system will reach a deficit of around four per cent of GDP or more than EUR 10 billion per year. At the same time, the report outlined that the system recorded a surplus in 2021 and 2022 with the latter amounting to EUR 3.2 billion. It said: "The results of this report do not support the claim that pensions



spending is out of control.”

Three, previous protests over pension reforms. Since 10 January, there have been three protests with the first protest held on 19 January. On 19 January, the first day of protest took place nationwide with the unions saying that around 2 million people participated in the protests. Subsequent protests took place on 31 January and 07 February where the unions saw an increase in the number of protesters in Paris. Previous attempts to introduce pension reforms in 1993, 2003, 2010 and 2019 also witnessed protests. In 2019, Macron announced plans to reform the pension system which resulted in a protest by 30 unions from 5 December to 25 January 2020 after which it was shelved due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In perspective

First, France's ageing population. Since the beginning of the 21 century, France's population has been ageing, thereby increasing the burden on the youth. The protests saw increased participation by the youth. These new reforms will further increase the burden on the youth and also on the aged population who are still in the workforce.

Second, a larger impact on France's social justice system. One of Macron's reforms includes cost-cutting which will aid in “balancing” the pension system. This will also bring in additional revenue which can be used to finance other projects in Macron in line with the EU. Many protesters have questioned the impact of these reforms of France's justice system.

Turkey-Syria earthquake: Inadequate aid and humanitarian crisis

In the news

On 9 February, Greece sent 36 rescue workers to the earthquake-hit Turkey despite being at odds for decades. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, addressing a European Union conference in Brussels, assured that they would play a leading role in aiding Turkey.

On 12 February, the Turkish government issued 113 arrest warrants after declaring that it would investigate the poor quality of infrastructure and officials responsible for it.

On 14 February, the Syrian government opened two more border crossings after the earthquake damaged the Bab-al Hawa opening, which was used by the UN. The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged Syria to open border crossings especially to aid northwestern Syria, predominantly controlled by President Bashar al-Assad's dissenters.

On 15 February, the United Kingdom provided a special General Trade License to organizations involved in humanitarian aid in Turkey and Syria. Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu met Foreign Minister of Armenia and appreciated the latter's timely help. The Foreign Minister of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Al Nahyan and Jordan Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi visited Damascus. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim met with the Turkish President, Tayyip Recep Erdogan. Ukraine sent 88 rescue workers to Turkey and Cuba along with medics to the affected areas of Turkey and Syria. Saudi Arabia sent its first aid plane to Syria.

On February 16, Turkey estimated the death toll had increased to 36,187 and Syria and the UN estimated the death toll in Syria to be 5800. Meanwhile, Qatar sent 10,000 mobile housing units to the quake-hit areas in both countries.

Issues at large

First, inadequate aid to northwestern Syrian territory. Syria has already been ravaged by a decade-long civil war, infrastructure damage, and a widespread cholera outbreak. Despite the opening of borders, there is less medical help coming into the quake-hit zones in Syria. Search and rescue teams are inadequate to work along with the Syrian Civil Defense volunteers, the White Helmets.

Second, the internal displacement and humanitarian crisis. In Turkey, people are residing in tents, playgrounds, and roads even when temperatures are as low as minus nine degree celsius. The UNHCR says 5.3 million people are in desperate need of shelter assistance. The earthquake has damaged several water systems in both countries, thereby making acquiring water for drinking and sanitation difficult.

Third, the anti-Syrian sentiment in Turkey. According to the UNHCR, Turkey is home to 3.6 million Syrian refugees. Following the earthquake, anti-Syrian sentiments are increasing across quake-hit towns and cities, especially in Antakya; Syrians are accused of looting. On social media, phrases such as “We don’t want Syrians”, and “No longer welcome” have gone viral.

Fourth, the irresponsibility of authorities. In Turkey, the response by the Disaster and Energy management presidency (AFAD) to the earthquake was late. The government took down Twitter for 12 hours and arrested building contractors desperately to cover up their irresponsibility.

In perspective

In Syria, aid delivery is a challenge as on the one hand, the government has weaponized aid and on the other, dissenters refuse the assistance. In some places acquiring water for sanitary purposes is negligent. It is a crisis inside a crisis in Syria. With the prevailing consequences of the civil war, the earthquake has led to increased homelessness and a massive humanitarian crisis.

In Turkey, the 2018 amnesty which allowed the construction and licensing of buildings not built abiding by the safety measures shows Turkey’s ambitions for growth by any means. If this trend continues, the quality of reconstruction and rehabilitation will be worse.



Also, from around the World

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

East and Southeast Asia

China: Foreign Ministry accuses US of flying intelligence-gathering balloons over Tibet and Xinjiang

On 15 February, China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin accused the US of flying high-altitude balloons over Xinjiang and Tibet and warned that the country would take measures against any act that undermines its sovereignty. China also accused the US of flying balloons over the airspace without prior permission. Wang said: "Without the approval of relevant Chinese authorities, it has illegally flown at least 10 times over China's territorial airspace, including over Xinjiang, Tibet and other provinces."

Philippines: Chinese coast guards accused of using military-grade lasers

On 14 February, the Philippines accused Chinese coastguards of using 'military grade laser light' that temporarily blinded the Philippines' crew. The Philippines claimed that the Chinese coast guards were only 150 yards away from the Filipino vessel and termed it a "dangerous manoeuvre." The Philippines coast guard accused the Chinese vessel of deliberately blocking them and stated that this would be a clear violation of the law. The US has condemned the Chinese action as aggressive.

South Asia

Afghanistan: Amid Taliban's absent security strategy, ISIL-K, Al-Qaeda and TTP enjoying freedom of movement, says UN Report

On 14 February, the UN in its 31st report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team stated that Afghanistan continues to remain the primary threat of terrorism for Central and South Asia due to groups such as the ISIL-K, Al-Qaeda and Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan enjoying greater freedom of movement in the country owed to the absence of an effective Taliban security strategy. The report said, "It originates from groups including the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant- Khorasan (ISIL-K), Al-Qaeda, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, as well as ETIM/TIP (Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement/Turkistan Islamic Party), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Islamic Jihad Group, Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari, Khatiba al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, Jamaat Ansarullah and others. These groups enjoy greater freedom of movement in Afghanistan owed to the absence of an effective Taliban security strategy."

Central Asia, Middle East, and Africa

Armenia-Azerbaijan: PM Pashinyan proposes a demilitarized zone around Nagorno-Karabakh

On 15 February, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan proposed the creation of a demilitarized zone (DMZ) around Nagorno-Karabakh with international guarantees. He made this proposal during a cabinet meeting stating that they have proposed for the DMZ in the later draft sent to Azerbaijan and the OSCE Minsk Group. He said, "The creation of a demilitarized zone around Nagorno-Karabakh with international guarantees has been proposed, as a result of which Nagorno-Karabakh may not need a defence army of that scale. This proposal is still valid, I think." Previously, PM Pashinyan proposed a DMZ in Russia's Black Sea resort of Sochi, during a meeting with President Vladimir Putin and President Ilham Aliyev.

Libya: At least 73 migrants presumed dead after a shipwreck

On 15 February, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported that at least 73

migrants were presumed dead after a shipwreck at the Libyan coast. So far, 11 bodies have been salvaged by the Libyan Red Crescent and police. The ship was carrying migrants to Europe through the route that IOM describes as "the world's deadliest migratory sea crossing." According to IOM, more than 130 people have died this year alone while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

Burkina Faso: At least 12 civilians killed in armed men attack

On 13 February, BBC reported that at least 12 civilians were killed in an attack by armed men in northern Burkina Faso. The report quoted a French news agency which was informed by the residents of the village that armed men on motorbikes stormed the village and looted animals and goods. Assailants are assumed to be members of an Islamist group that has forced thousands to flee their homes in Burkina Faso and in neighbouring Mali and Niger.

Europe and the Americas

Russia: Moscow demands UN probe into Nord Stream blasts

On 16 February, lawmakers of the Russian State Duma unanimously voted to adopt an appeal to the UN demanding a probe into the September sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines. They describe the incident as a, "crime committed by the US." The vote comes after an Exposé which was published in The Washington Post by a veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, revealing the role of US and its NATO ally Norway cooperating to develop a plan and destroy the pipelines. State Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin said: "Just think about it: a terrorist act aimed against Russia, Germany, the Netherlands, and France. The USA, shamelessly, brought it into motion, with President Biden publicly endorsing it." He also noted how the countries involved in the incident were "working on instructions from both the CIA and the US."

Colombia: Second round of peace talks with ELN rebels resume

On 13 February, peace talks between the government and National Liberation Army (ELN) had resumed in Mexico City after a new round of talks were launched in December. The talks were resumed after the ELN, contrary to the government's claims of a ceasefire, denied that any agreement had been concluded in December. The ELN is the largest remaining rebel group in Colombia; meanwhile, the government announced that it had agreed to informal ceasefires with four rebel groups.

Mexico: Cuban migrants' relatives to go through a faster visa process

On 15 February, Mexico's Foreign Relations Department announced that from April, Mexico would expedite visa applications of Cubans with relatives in the country. For this, special visa appointments would be held at the Mexican Consulate in Havana. The AP News reported that amid "deteriorating economic conditions and political dissent," many Cubans were entering Mexico to reach the US border.

About the authors

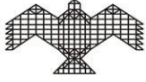
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About NIAS-International Peace Research Initiative(IPRI)

National Institute of
Advanced Studies



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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