



MANIPUR REMAINS TENSE AS THOUSANDS FLEE TO SAFER AREAS

An uneasy calm prevailed in Manipur on Sunday, four days after the State spiralled into ethnic violence, with thousands either taking refuge in neighbouring northeastern States or being evacuated from conflict zones by their respective governments.

Though there were some curfew relaxations as the situation improved, it was decided not to restore mobile Internet in the State, Manipur's newly appointed security adviser Kuldip Singh told The Hindu.

Mr. Singh put the tentative death toll at 37, as on Sunday, cautioning that the administration was verifying whether all deaths were due to the violence or not. The unofficial death toll, based on hospital body counts, has crossed 50. Manipur appointed a new Chief Secretary, requesting that IAS officer Vineet Joshi be repatriated to his parent cadre from Central deputation to the Union Education Ministry in order to take up the role. Authorities in Manipur's Churachandpur district, one of the worst affected districts, relaxed the indefinite curfew for three hours from 7 a.m. for people to fetch essential supplies.

The unrest had started from areas near the boundary between the Kuki-Zomi tribe-dominated Churachandpur and the majority Meitei-dominated Bishnupur, following a tribal solidarity march on May 3, which was meant to protest a Manipur High Court order directing action be taken toward granting ST status to the Meiteis.

Mr. Singh said there was a considerable improvement in law and order situation in the State in the past two days and curfew relaxations were made in Imphal city on Sunday for two hours. He said that district police chiefs have been

asked to identify miscreants and take strict legal action by either binding them down or arresting them. Thirty people have been arrested so far, he said.

Officials in other northeastern States said that about 2,000 people, mostly from the Kuki-Zomi group of tribes, have taken refuge across seven relief camps in southern Assam's Cachar district, while more than 200 have crossed over to the Saitual and Vairengte districts of Mizoram. Providing special buses, Nagaland evacuated about 600 of its citizens from strife-torn Imphal and about 110 people, mostly students, have returned safely to Meghalaya through special flights organised by Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma.

Mr. Singh said that despite the improvements, mobile Internet would remain suspended for now. "Today, we took a call to not restore mobile Internet in the State. In some areas, broadband is available, and people are using it," he told The Hindu.

He added that three people, including a woman, were killed in firing by security forces on the night of May 5 in Churachandpur district. "A security situation has developed in the area following some rumours. Assam Rifles opened fire in which three people were killed," he said.

The retired officer said Article 355 of the Constitution has not been promulgated. He said 134 weapons looted from the police armoury since May 3 have been recovered.

A defence spokesperson said over 25,000 people have been shifted from the conflict zones to the operating bases of the security forces and military garrisons, while surveillance in the riot-hit districts has been enhanced.

WITH COVID-19 'OVER', APPLYING THE LESSONS LEARNT

Approximately 1,192 days since January 30, 2020, when COVID-19 was announced as a 'public health emergency of international concern', the World Health Organization, on May 5, 2023, declared that COVID-19 was no longer a public health emergency of international concern. In simpler terms, COVID-19 has acquired the status of other endemic diseases. India, arguably, reached the COVID-19 endemic stage a year ago.

Even so, there have been 'knee-jerk' and unscientific responses to spikes in COVID-19 cases in India, the most recent example being the response in March-April 2023, when there was an uptick in viral flu and SARS-CoV-2 cases, which led to the closure of schools in some Indian cities and States. In instances where schools were not closed, their managements made mask wearing a mandatory condition for children to attend classes. This, in some instances, happened without a formal government directive, indicating implicit endorsement.

Misinformation during the second wave

In April-May 2021, there was a COVID-19 misinformation blitzkrieg: that a 'third wave in India would affect children'. Since then, there has been a tragic tale — of children being deprived of schooling and learning, and repeatedly being asked to mask-up. Two years later, in April 2023, school closure and making masks mandatory for schoolchildren had their origin in nearly identical challenges of actions not being supported by scientific evidence, misinformation, and social media influencers (not necessarily subject experts) shaping the public discourse, which was again not effectively addressed by governments.

In late April 2023, the not-for-profit Foundation for People-Centric Health Systems, which is based in Delhi, analysed the trends and stance of influencers and experts on social media platforms and in newspaper reports on the COVID-19 linked mask enforcement for schoolchildren.

Those based out of India were analysed into three sub-groups: trained or practising public health experts and epidemiologists (including those with a medical degree); other medical doctors (excluding those already in first group) and super-specialists such as hepatologists, cardiologists/cardiac surgeons and

endocrinologists; and everyone else including media personalities, parents and those affiliated with schools. The fourth group was of those who had had an opinion about India but living abroad, irrespective of their education.

In the subgroup of trained public health experts and epidemiologists were concerned, there was near consensus that schools should not be closed, and, further, that there was no role in making mask wearing mandatory for children. Most clinicians and infectious diseases were a bit more supportive of masking, but very few supported universal masking for any age group. In the sub-group of super-specialists, there was greater endorsement of mask wearing for children and of school closure. Even though there was no pattern among mediapersons and parents, news stories and headlines often had a tangent of 'playing to the gallery' of the core readership of that platform. Interestingly, 'experts' and influencers living outside India were making more definitive and stronger arguments for school closure and mask wearing for children in India. As a matter of fact, the countries where they lived did not have, to a large extent, any restrictions. These disparate viewpoints existed despite cumulative epidemiological evidence that children are least at risk of moderate to severe COVID-19, so they should be the last group (if at all) to wear a mask, only when everyone else was universally wearing a mask. In fact, at the endemic stage, there is no role of universal and mandated masking for any age-group. Just because masks are beneficial and there is the virus around, it does not mean that everyone should be made to wear a mask, mandatorily.

Local context matters

Second, in outbreaks and epidemics, policy interventions and preventive advice need to factor in the local context. The context determines the epidemiological pattern, spread of disease and proposed interventions thereof. China faced a wave in December 2022 but no other country did. Switzerland, in April 2023, decided not to continue with any more COVID-19 vaccination. Many countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States have decided to drop nearly all pandemic-related restrictions. None of those moves was/is wrong but those countries had/have made decisions based on the local context. However, that does not mean every other country should do exactly the same

thing. The sub-groups of super-specialists and those staying abroad failed to factor in the 'local context' while coming up with their opinions.

Third, an extremely worrying and unsettling trend has been the 'dogmatic stand' that many 'self-proclaimed experts' and influencers have adopted, and who are continuing to selectively and conveniently use emerging evidence and published literature to support their stand. A few influencers have positioned themselves as 'super-reviewers' of scientific studies and use social media platforms to find limitations and criticise even the most robust studies, thereby misguiding gullible followers, as academic researchers do not get the opportunity to write rebuttals to such tweets that are often biased and serve as echo-chambers for the influencers. What these self-proclaimed experts and influencers (most often with no formal training to interpret such data) often fail to factor in is that no scientific study is ideal. The findings of a new scientific study should always be interpreted in the overall context of the cumulative body of evidence and not in isolation.

Fourth, if there were the 'COVID deniers' at the beginning of the pandemic posing a challenge, it is now the 'COVID-foreverers', i.e., a group of disparate individuals and social media groups that keep insisting on the enforcement of restrictions such as universal masking at 'the drop of the hat', often on frivolous grounds. Misinformation, irrespective of the origin, is likely to

be an ongoing challenge even in the COVID-19 endemic period and there is a need for sustained efforts to tackle such misinformation.

Looking ahead

With the WHO announcement, COVID-19 has 'officially' transitioned from a population-level challenge to more of an individual health concern. It is time for calm assessment, to shift the gears and also apply the lessons from the last three years. One, considering the immense interest in epidemiology, the government should offer formal training courses on the principles and practice of epidemiology to prepare India for more nuanced responses to outbreaks and epidemics and to curb misinformation. Two, the government needs to integrate the COVID-19 response to general health services. There is no role of universal measures against COVID-19 to be enforced. Three, India's response to surges, outbreaks, and epidemics (of any infectious disease and not just COVID-19) should be guided by a nuanced understanding of epidemiology and not unduly derailed by 'social media influencers'. Four, children were never at risk from moderate to severe COVID-19. Therefore, in future, schools should not be closed for a COVID-19 uptick. And wearing masks in order to attend school should never again be made mandatory. Most importantly, it is time to drop the COVID-19 fixation and move on to tackle other more pressing health challenges in the country.

A POSITION PAPER, CHINA'S IMAGE, AND WHAT IT MEANS

In early April this year (12-13), the Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China (PRC) Qin Gang, along with his counterparts from Russia, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan met in Samarkand for the meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries. The meeting coincided with the release of a position paper by Beijing on its policy in Afghanistan. Titled, 'China's position on the Afghan Issue', the 11-point paper is important for two reasons, the first vis-à-vis China's involvement in Afghanistan, it gives a clear indication of Beijing's policy towards the crisis-ridden country and the areas it will prioritise in its engagement with the Taliban moving forward. Beyond Afghanistan, the paper is reflective of China's recent efforts to refashion how it is viewed internationally — from a country bent on disrupting the current world order to one which is heavily invested in addressing 'international hot button issues' objectively with no motivations to further its vested interests, unlike America.

The context of the policy choices

The paper first delineates the core principles which inform Beijing's policy choices — the 'Three Respects' and 'Three Nevers', i.e., China respects the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Afghanistan and the 'independent choice', religious sentiments and national customs of the Afghan people. These principles are put in opposition to the policies followed by the West which, according to Beijing, are informed more by geopolitics and their vested interests.

As per China, Afghanistan is currently transitioning from a period of turbulence under a United States-backed government to relative stability under the Taliban. A consistent trope throughout the paper is the West's failure in fulfilling its commitments to the country. Its decision to intervene militarily and enforce its conception of democracy without taking into account the distinct characteristics of Afghanistan is blamed for starting the crisis in the first place. Deriding the U.S. for imposing unilateral sanctions and illegally freezing Afghanistan's foreign reserves, China calls for a reversal of these actions. In response to Washington's failure to introspect, Beijing commits to help Afghanistan move towards a more sustainable form of economy.

Using groupings without the U.S., its allies

Urging the international community to view the Afghan issue in a 'comprehensive, balanced and objective manner', China advocates using alternative regional groupings which do not include the U.S. and its allies, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Moscow Format Dialogue, the Foreign Ministers' group which just met, and the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue, for

discussing the Afghan issue. This will help Beijing in promoting an alternative model as opposed to the battered approach of the West, allowing it to focus more on its priorities and form a consensus among Afghanistan's neighbours. Framing its involvement in purely humanitarian terms, good neighbourliness and mutual respect for its neighbours, Beijing has avoided acknowledging its own interests in the country. It blames the current turmoil in the world, with the presence of multiple crises and renewed competition, for forcing it to adopt a 'proactive approach', arguing how countries are urging China to take charge as the U.S. has abdicated its responsibility. This characterisation of its actions is done to mask how stability in Afghanistan is also important for Beijing to attain its own security and economic interests in the country and to present a counter to U.S. hegemony, both politically and financially.

For China, the threat of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan and its potential to harm Chinese interests and personnel are very real. Calling for a bilateral and multilateral approach to respond to the 'Three Forces' of terrorism, extremism and separatism, China urges the Taliban, regional countries and the international community to crack down on terror groups, specifically the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, and help Afghanistan in augmenting its counterterrorism capabilities. The question of refugees and narcotics and their cross-border trafficking are also highlighted. Owing to its strategic location, Afghanistan is also economically very important for China: for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and due to the presence of vast mineral resources.

Since the beginning of 2023, China has taken incremental steps to entrench its image as a major country playing a crucial role in ensuring global governance and providing a 'moderate and pluralistic environment' for dialogue. The release of the concept paper on the Global security initiative and the peace proposal on Ukraine which preceded the position paper on Afghanistan signal Beijing's quest to modify its image and solidify its role as a responsible mediator. Its apparent success in bringing Iran and Saudi Arabia to the negotiating table and the visits by leaders from Europe are projected as an indicator of Beijing's growing influence.

While the Taliban have welcomed the paper and China's 'long-term political support' to the country, China's success in Afghanistan will remain contingent on what it could offer to the Taliban. China's high-sounding rhetoric on the linkages between Afghanistan and China has failed to materialise into an increased footprint on the ground. For India, China's continued engagement with Russia and Iran, along with the Central Asian countries will be consequential in understanding how their policies will shape and what it would mean for India's interests in Afghanistan.

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INDIA'S FIRST NATIONAL WATER-BODY CENSUS

EXPLAINER

The story so far:

The findings of the first-ever water body census, conducted by the Ministry of Jal Shakti, was published recently.

Why is a water body census necessary?

India is facing a water crisis with groundwater decline, biodiversity loss, and climate change increasing the frequency of floods and droughts. In this context, water bodies are important. They buffer against climate variability, holding flood waters for use in dry periods. They contribute to food and water security as well as livelihoods by recharging groundwater and providing water for irrigation and livestock. They also have cultural and ecological significance. However, water bodies are increasingly under threat from pollution, encroachment, urbanisation, and drying. If they are to be conserved and managed effectively, we need action plans which require baseline data. As water bodies are managed by different agencies from State to local to private entities, the data must be uniform and easily accessible. To actually manage water bodies, we need contextual and traditional knowledge of communities which are to be integrated with formal data. While data on reservoirs and rivers has been available on the India Water Resources Information System (WRIS) for the last few years, there has been no data on smaller water bodies that are the lifeline of rural India and critical cultural, flood-control and recreational spaces in cities.

How was the census conducted?

The massive effort expended in the first-ever water body census was much needed. The census's objective was to develop a national database with information on the size, purpose, ownership, status, and conditions of water bodies. It covered all natural and human-made units bounded on all sides for storing water, irrespective of condition or use.

A software for data entry and a mobile app for capturing the location and visual of the water bodies were developed, and data-processing workshops were conducted to train the surveyors in all States and Union territories.

The census was built on existing and publicly available satellite-derived datasets. These datasets are extremely rich, allowing citizens to hone in on a specific village and download the historical time series data on each water body. However, they only include attributes that can be observed from space. The water body census thus, extends this to social characteristics including ownership, use and condition.

What does the data show?

Such a large national effort allows us to compare spatial and temporal trends of water bodies across the country. These are some of the observations based on the data:-

(a) Most water bodies in the country are very small — the vast majority of India's water bodies are less than one hectare (ha) large. This means locating and keeping track of them is likely to remain a challenge. The traditional way to map these water bodies, using satellites, may not work, which is why the mammoth effort expended in ground-based tracking is very welcome.

(b) The water bodies show regional patterns that correlate with rainfall — in general, in drier States like Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan, water bodies tend to be larger and publicly held. In the wetter parts of the country, like Kerala, West Bengal, and States in the northeast, more than three-quarters of the water bodies are privately owned. In drier States, the water bodies are primarily used for irrigation and groundwater recharge while in wetter States, domestic use and pisciculture dominate. Mid-sized water bodies are largely panchayat-owned.

(c) Most water bodies have never been repaired or rejuvenated — several water bodies were classified "not in use", meaning despite the recent interest in rejuvenating water bodies, most of them have never been repaired or revived.

How can the census improve?

While the census was a clearly Herculean effort, we must take care when interpreting the data.

First, there are some clear gaps. Water bodies have an important role in supporting biodiversity. They harbour fish that birds feed on and provide roosting and breeding spaces for resident and migratory birds. These ecological functions are related to the size and location of the water bodies. But the latest water body census does not address any questions about this. The report itself noted in its preamble that water bodies "support healthy ecosystems", yet the focus was exclusively on human use, which means only pisciculture or fish farming, which is seeded and does not reflect natural biodiversity.

In classifying water bodies in terms of reasons of abandonment or disuse, "others" emerged as a significant reason, on par with "drying up" in a few States, but far ahead of other specific categories such as industrial pollution,



Monitoring waters: A fisherman casts his net at Madhure Kere lake on the outskirts of Bengaluru on April 1. AFP

What is the importance of a water-body census? How has the census thrown light on rainfall patterns? What are some of the shortcomings with respect to the data collected? Does the data give insight into natural ecosystems and how water bodies sustain them?

construction, and salinity. One possibility is that the census questionnaire may have left out the most common reasons like eutrophication, sewage pollution, and solid waste dumping.

Secondly, there are inconsistencies in the census. The census groups water bodies into five types: ponds, tanks, lakes, reservoirs, and water conservation schemes. Its glossary defines a pond as a smaller water body than a tank, while "water conservation structures" might include check dams and percolation tanks. However, these categories are not mutually exclusive — many tanks that were traditionally used directly for irrigation serve primarily as recharge structures today. Based on the data, it appears that in Karnataka, these were classified as ponds and tanks serving the purpose of irrigation, whereas in Maharashtra these were classified as water conservation structures, primarily serving the purpose of groundwater recharge. The sources of irrigation statistics for the two States suggest neither State has much tank irrigation. Third, the data was not standardised across States. Some States like Gujarat do not show any water bodies not being in use, whereas Karnataka reports almost 80% of its water bodies as being in a state of disuse. This suggests differences in interpretation by the enumerators.

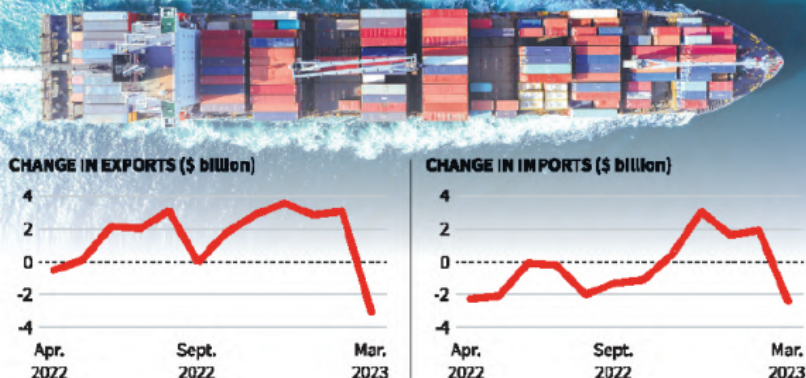
There are some other concerns as well. For example, the map for north Karnataka seems suspiciously empty. Since the original geotagged data does not seem to have been made available yet, it is unclear if some districts were skipped or if they genuinely had a lower water-body density.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, it is crucial that the government continue such nationwide censuses of a vital resource, with modifications. This first edition itself provides high-level indications on the way forward by detailing ownership, state of use, and the costs of construction and repair. It points to how and why water bodies must be restored, which agency's capacities need to be strengthened, where and how much funds are needed, and who will benefit from such efforts. If such censuses are conducted every five or 10 years, over time, they will accurately represent emerging trends and the state of water in the country as a whole.

FRESH DATA REJIGS DRAG DOWN 2022-23 EXPORT-IMPORT TALLY BY \$3 BILLION

Major revisions

The graphs show the month-wise revised exports and imports figures for the last fiscal. India's merchandise trade numbers for the last two months of FY23 have been revised by over \$10 billion



Numbers for February and March were revised by over \$10 billion, with trade deficit for the year rising 40.8% to \$267.45 billion, a little more than the estimated 40%; experts say revisions amounting to over \$500 million a month are not normal

India's goods trade numbers for February and March have been revised by over \$10 billion from initial estimates, and the overall export-import figures for last year have been scaled down by around \$3 billion dollars each, with experts flagging petroleum shipments as the main driver for the extraordinarily high revisions of recent export data.

While exports were earlier reckoned to have grown 6% in 2022-23 to hit \$447.46 billion, that number has now been pared to \$444.4 billion, reflecting a 5.3% rise from 2021-22. The import bill for last year has also been scaled down from \$714.24 billion to \$711.85 billion, indicating a growth of 16.1%.

SC STATUS FOR DALIT CONVERTS: FORMER CJI SAYS INQUIRY COMMISSION CAN FINISH TASK IN A YEAR

Former Chief Justice K.G. Balakrishnan, who heads the Inquiry Commission into whether Dalit converts to religions other than Sikhism or Buddhism should get Scheduled Caste status, on Sunday said his panel could deliver its report in a year, and that too before the election year of 2024. At the same time, the retired judge said the Inquiry Commission had not yet been provided with "all the facilities".

"All the facilities have not been provided... Office space has been provided, other things are not... If work starts, it [the report] will take only a year, that is what I feel. It will finish before 2024," Justice Balakrishnan told The Hindu in a phone interaction on Sunday.

However, Justice Balakrishnan denied any delay on the part of the government in providing the facilities. "The government is moving," he said. The commission has been given two years to complete its task.

The former Chief Justice's confidence in finishing the assigned task in a year may be significant in a debate that rages in the Supreme Court on whether it should wait for the Justice Balakrishnan Commission report to come out before deciding a series of petitions seeking Scheduled Caste status for Dalit converts to Christianity.

These petitions have been pending in the court for 19 years. The government has asked the Supreme Court to stall till the Justice Balakrishnan Commission report is out. However, the court sounded sceptical in the last hearing on April 12.

"You may have one commission today and another tomorrow. Different

In numbers

The trade deficit for the year has risen 40.8% to \$267.45 bn, slightly higher than the 40% estimated earlier.

For February, goods exports have been revised higher by almost \$3.1 billion from the initial estimate of \$33.9 billion to about \$37 billion. The month's import bill was raised by over \$1.93 billion, the second-highest upward revision for a month, after a \$3.08 billion uptick from December's initial estimate.

For March, by contrast, exports seem to have been scaled down by \$3.03 billion from the initial \$38.38 billion estimate to \$35.35 billion, translating into a sharp 20.7% dip year-on-year, pegging outbound shipments' value at almost the same level as March 2021. Imports for the last month of 2022-23 have also been revised downward by around \$2.4 billion to \$55.72 billion. 'Not normal'

"Data revisions amounting to over \$500 million a month are not normal, but we have been seeing significantly higher revisions over the past year and a half compared to the period before that," Vivek Kumar, economist at QuantEco Research told The Hindu.

Interestingly, the revisions in the export numbers are largely dominated by changes in the figures for petroleum exports, Mr. Kumar said. The revisions in core export items or segments like gems and jewellery have been insignificant by contrast.

That India's oil imports from Russia went up after the Ukraine conflict may be part of the trigger for the fluctuating petroleum trade numbers. However, Mr. Kumar pointed out that the sharp revisions on the petroleum exports front had begun four-five months before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022.

"It is very puzzling and raises uncertainty on the outlook for India's current account deficit and thereby rupee. With average monthly upward revision in net trade deficit to the tune of \$1.5 bn, the cumulative for the year could add up to \$18 bn. Such sizeable revision in trade deficit data turns analysis somewhat challenging," the economist said.

"One would appreciate greater understanding of the trigger for the higher data revisions in recent months and the context for greater concentration of these revisions in the petroleum sector," he stressed.

political dispensations may come and bring different political ideologies to the issue. Twenty years have gone by. So much material has been collected through the years. Now, you constitute a new Commission. Tomorrow, this commission may also end up with the same scenario," Justice Sanjay Kishan Kaul had told the government.

"Let us hear this case which has been pending for 19 years. Why shy away?" Justice Ahsanuddin Amanullah, the other judge on the Bench, had observed.

He had disagreed with the government's assessment that the 2007 report of the Justice Ranganath Misra Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities was "flawed". "Are you sure? You probably need to re-check. It is not that perfunctory. You are making a generalised statement on this report," he had said in court.

The 2007 report had recommended that Dalits who converted to Islam and Christianity to escape caste oppression in the Hindu religion should be permitted to avail SC reservation benefits in government jobs and educational institutions. The government had argued that the Ranganath Misra report was "myopic" and composed within the "four walls of a room".

The petitioners' lawyers, including senior advocates C.U. Singh and Colin Gonsalves and advocates Prashant Bhushan, Franklin Caesar Thomas, had urged the court to not wait for the Justice Balakrishnan report. They said the Ranganath Mishra Commission had provided enough "authoritative empirical data".

WE AIM TO INSPIRE YOU

JAPAN, SOUTH KOREA AGREE TO TAKE TIES FORWARD IN A LANDMARK REGIONAL SHIFT

Japan and South Korea on Sunday agreed to take forward ties and move past lingering historical disputes, pledging to transform a relationship that could have broad implications for the region.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on Sunday became the first Japanese leader to visit Seoul in 12 years. The visit followed a trip to Japan in March by South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol.

What has been dubbed "shuttle diplomacy" promises to transform ties between two U.S. allies that have been bogged down over historical issues, chiefly Japan's reluctance to apologise for atrocities committed during its occupation. Both have, however, been brought together by shared concerns not only over North Korea's nuclear programme but over China's regional muscle-flexing.

Domestic fallout

Despite differences over Japan's wartime actions, which remain an emotive issue in South Korea and China, President Yoon has risked domestic political fallout by making a case for moving forward and arguing that while historical issues continue to be resolved, relations still needed to look to the future.

To that end, both sides in March agreed to come up with a fund to compensate South Koreans who suffered under Japanese forced labour programmes.

"For me personally, my heart hurts when I think of the many people who endured terrible suffering and grief under the difficult circumstances of the time," Mr. Kishida said on Sunday, expressing regret but stopping short of an apology, which many Koreans have been expecting.

Mr. Yoon has faced some criticism at home for moving forward on the history question without extracting more from Japan, either by way of compensation from its companies or with deeper apologies from Tokyo. Japanese leaders have themselves been wary of agreeing to either, considering their own domestic political considerations, with persisting strands of wartime denialism among some Japanese conservatives.

Under the March agreement, the compensation will be paid by a joint fund, and not, as many in South Korea had demanded, funded entirely by Japanese companies, two of which had, in 2018, faced legal action in South Korea over their record during the 1910-45 occupation. Tens of thousands of Korean women were also forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese Army.

First step by Yoon

Mr. Yoon's March trip broke the ice, and took forward a rapprochement that both leaders have backed strongly. The current visit has seen both sides explore closer economic and defence ties. The Japanese leader also invited Mr. Yoon to the G-7 Summit to be hosted in Tokyo later this month, which would have been an unlikely prospect in the recent past.

Given the weight of history, however, hurdles remain. "Japanese leaders have long repeated the mantra that everything had already been settled



Moving forward: Fumio Kishida, left, and Yoon Suk Yeol during their meeting at the presidential office in Seoul on Sunday. REUTERS

Fumio Kishida becomes the first Japanese Prime Minister to visit Seoul in 12 years; relations have been thorny over Japan's reluctance to apologise for its occupation of Korea; both countries have come together after concerns over N. Korea, China

through the 1965 deal and refused to offer a formal apology in specific terms about Japan's wartime crimes against Koreans," the Korea Herald said in a Sunday editorial.

In unanimous decision, Arab League readmits Syria after 11-year absence

The Arab League on Sunday welcomed back Syria's government, ending a more than decade-long suspension and securing President Bashar al-Assad's return to the Arab fold after years of isolation.

In November 2011, the 22-member body suspended Damascus over its crackdown on peaceful protests which began earlier that year and which spiralled into a civil conflict that has killed more than 5,00,000 people, displaced millions and battered the country's infrastructure and industry.

While the front lines have mostly quietened, large parts of the country's north remain outside government control, and no political solution has yet been reached to the 12-year-old conflict.

"Government delegations from the Syrian Arab Republic will resume their participation in Arab League meetings" starting Sunday, said a unanimous decision by the group's Foreign Ministers.

The ministers emphasised their "keenness to launch a leading Arab role in efforts to resolve" the Syria crisis and its "humanitarian, and political consequences", noting that humanitarian aid must reach "all those in need".



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