

## DEALING WITH THE INDO-PACIFIC IS NOT EASY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The leaders of Australia, the U.S., India and Japan at the Quad summit in Tokyo. | Photo Credit: AP

U.S. President Joseph Biden cannot forget his recent five-day visit to Asia. Hours after he left to return to the U.S., North Korea test-fired three ballistic missiles even as it is preoccupied with a 'fever' in the country. Japan's Defence Minister said [Chinese and Russian fighter jets carried out joint flights over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea](#) on May 24 as leaders of the Quad met in Tokyo. And when Air Force One landed in the U.S., Mr. Biden became witness to the sparring between Republicans and Democrats about gun control legislation in the aftermath of [a shooting at an elementary school in Texas](#) which claimed 21 lives, of which 19 were children.

Still, in the assessment of the Biden White House, the outcome of the Asian trip could not have been better. The new conservative South Korean government showed willingness to turn the heat on North Korea and said it would even expand the presence of a U.S. missile defence system in the country, which had earlier angered China. In Japan, the administration promised him that it was ready to do away with its long-standing 1% GDP ceiling for annual defence spending.

Against the backdrop of growing concern over Chinese military activity in the region, Mr. Biden said at a press conference that the U.S. would intervene militarily to defend Taiwan if it came under attack from China. The jury is still out on whether this unusually forceful statement by the President was a gaffe or a well-thought-out response. In any event, the President and members of his delegation were quick to walk back and clarify that there is no change in the substance of American foreign policy, which is still governed by the Taiwan Relations Act. As per the 1979 Congressional law, the U.S. "shall provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character" so that the region can defend itself; the law says nothing about the U.S. being required to step in militarily to defend Taiwan in the event of an invasion by China. But Mr. Biden made some folks happy in the region even if the primary purpose of his visit was not about clarifying 'strategic ambiguity'.

It is no secret that the Indo-Pacific region has been under pressure and East Asia, in particular, has had to weather repeated storms. South Korea and Japan face regular nuclear and missile threats from North Korea. China not only challenges international maritime laws in the South China Sea, but also confronts Japan over the Senkaku Islands. Six nations, including China and Taiwan, are involved in the dispute over the Spratly Islands, which are supposedly sitting on vast reserves of oil and natural gas. China has vigorously militarised some portions of the disputed isles, islets and coral reefs; and countries like Vietnam and the Philippines are anxious not to be left behind.

The buzzword in the Indo-Pacific that President Biden wanted to emphasise was China. Nearly every one of the nations in this part of the world recognises the assertiveness and aggressiveness of Beijing, which is seen as wanting to be at the centre of things and on its terms, but few are able to come up with a strategy to deal with China. And one way that the Biden administration has sought to get around this is by establishing [an Indo-Pacific Economic Framework \(IPEF\)](#) with Australia, Brunei, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. The IPEF will work on fine-tuning four major pillars: standards and rules for digital trade; resilient supply chains; green energy

commitments; and fair trade.

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But first indications are that while the IPEF may be a good idea, there is discontent that the framework does not address issues of trade and tariffs. The Biden administration would not want to touch this with a barge pole, especially with mid-term elections barely five months away. “I think what the U.S. has to offer, and the only thing the U.S. has to offer, is money. Which some, I think, will be forthcoming, particularly for clean energy, maybe even some for supply chain resilience, and anti-corruption,” Professor of Law and Trade Bryan Mercurio at the Chinese University of Hong Kong said. “But of course, what Asian partners really want is trade. I think they want market access. And the trade component of the IPEF is really lacking.”

There are two facets to the Asia Pacific/Indo-Pacific that any administration in Washington must pay attention to. One is that China’s neighbours would rather balance relations between Washington and Beijing. But as Michael Schuman said in a piece in *The Atlantic*, the message to Chinese President Xi Jinping should be loud and clear: “As in Europe, where Vladimir Putin’s aggression is uniting the rest of the region against him, so too in Asia is an aggressive China entrenching, not weakening, American power.”

On the other hand is the extent to which countries in the region will want to get on the anti-China bandwagon, economic or strategic. Whether it is in East, Southeast or South Asia, every country has its own unique relationship with Beijing. South Korea and Japan are part of a strong American security/strategic partnership but will be keen on maintaining their economic status with China. This is also true for the Association of South East Asian Nations. India may be a part of the Quad, but is quite mindful that it is the only country in the group that shares a land border with China which is laced with disputes.

It is useful to recall what Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said at the International Conference on the Future of Asia in Tokyo on May 26: “In response to geopolitical tensions, countries have increasingly emphasised resilience and national security considerations over the economic gains from free trade and investment flows but they should be very careful about taking extreme measures, pre-emptively before conflicts arise. Whether to disconnect themselves from global supply chains and strive for reshoring or to go for “friend-shoring” and to cut off countries that are not allies or friends... such actions shut off avenues for regional growth and cooperation, deepen divisions between countries, and may precipitate the very conflicts that we all hope to avoid”.

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For all the tough talking prior to the bilateral talks or at the time of the Quad summit, the four leaders of the Quad did not mention Russia or China in the Joint Statement, for each of them understands the sensitivities. Further, President Biden is perceptive and aware of the vagaries of U.S. lawmakers. As it is, foreign policy has little traction and with Democrats expected to perform poorly on November 8, legislation, especially pertaining to funding for external initiatives, is going to be an uphill task.

Sridhar Krishnaswami is a former senior journalist in Washington who covered North America and the United Nations

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