

PM TO ATTEND TOKYO LAUNCH OF U.S. TRADE INITIATIVE

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

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will participate in U.S. President Joseph Biden's unveiling of the 'Indo-Pacific Economic Framework' (IPEF) in Tokyo on Monday, a U.S. initiative for trade partnerships in the region, sources confirmed.

Mr. Modi's attendance of the event is a significant step towards building economic ties among Quad countries (India, the U.S., Australia and Japan) in the Indo-Pacific, although officials were hesitant to bill the IPEF as a counter to the 15-nation Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the 17-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that China is a member of.

Briefing the media ahead of the event, U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said the IPEF would have a "very wide-ranging membership", adding significantly, that the programme was "designed to put workers at the centre — American workers," with a focus on the digital economy, clean energy transition, infrastructure and resilient supply chains.

India has not taken a decision on joining the framework, but is keen to understand the "contours" of the American plan, said an official, confirming that Indian delegates would join the launch of negotiations expected on Monday as well. On Saturday, Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra said that "discussions and the conversations are still going on" on the IPEF draft.

After landing in Tokyo on Monday, Mr. Modi is expected to meet Japanese business leaders in one-on-one interactions, including heads of NEC Corporation, Uniqlo garments, Suzuki Motors, and the SoftBank Group, attend the IPEF event with Mr. Biden and other leaders, and also attend a business roundtable.

Quad summit

On Tuesday, he will meet with Mr. Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and the just-elected Australian PM Anthony Albanese for the Quad summit after which he will hold bilateral talks with each of them.

Though officials have said that the Quad focus is on areas of convergence such as trade, infrastructure, climate change and critical technologies, it is clear that divisions over the war in Ukraine, food security, the vaccine initiative and a number of other issues, including the U.S. push to bring Taiwan back as an observer at the World Health Assembly (WHA) this week, will also come up at the meeting.

"The second in-person Quad Leaders' Summit will provide an opportunity for the leaders of the four Quad countries to review the progress of Quad initiatives. We will also exchange views about developments in the Indo-Pacific region and global issues of mutual interest," said Mr. Modi in a departure statement.

Mr. Modi's reference to "developments in the Indo-Pacific" region indicates India's consistent policy that it would not include comments on Russia in its diplomatic engagements with other countries. The position was underlined during the Quad leaders' last interaction, a virtual

meeting in March, where the joint statement did not reflect sharp criticism of Russia that marked the statements made by the other three leaders.

Wheat export ban

In the past week, India has also run up against the U.S. and Japan at G-7 meetings, as well as at the UN Security Council over its decision to ban wheat exports amidst global shortages of Ukrainian wheat.

In a press briefing on Sunday, the U.S. NSA said Mr. Biden would continue to discuss the “impacts of Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine on a wider set of concerns in the world, including this food security concern,” in his conversations with Mr. Modi in Tokyo.

However, Mr. Kwatra said on Saturday that “there is a full understanding and appreciation of [India’s] policy [on Ukraine] in the world, including among [India’s] main partners”, and reiterated India’s food security needs were “paramount”, when asked about the U.S.’s call to reverse the government’s wheat export ban.

Mr. Kwatra said the Quad would organise a special session on the sidelines of the WHA on May 24, where the four countries would jointly tackle issues of disinformation during the pandemic and boosting vaccine confidence.

The grouping is also expected to discuss and possibly review its Quad Vaccine Initiative project to disburse U.S.-developed and funded, India-made vaccines with the support of Japan and Australia amongst Indo-Pacific countries that had been stuck due to what Mr. Sullivan called “regulatory issues” with India.

The first Quad interaction last year had committed to distributing one billion of the vaccines, made at Hyderabad-based Biological-E by the end of 2022, but have made no headway on the project yet.

Another issue the Quad is divided over is whether to support Taiwan’s request to be included as an observer at the WHA, something China opposes. While the U.S., Australia and Japan have backed the Taiwanese request, India has made no statement thus far, and MEA officials did not confirm whether India would endorse it.

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