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Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Reality Check for India's China Policy

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SYNOPSIS

President Joe Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy is aimed at supporting India's continued rise as one part of the action plan. Far from counting it as a windfall gain, Delhi may have to deal with the likely complications in its policy towards China.

COMMENTARY

THE UNITED STATES took a significant first step in 2005 to promote India's rise to counter the ascending China. Launched by the then American President George W Bush, the US-India Civil Nuclear Initiative gained the enabling international approvals by 2008.

Beijing acquiesced in that process, and India gained recognition as a responsible rising power. China's meteoric rise thereafter nullified the prospect of a Sino-Indian balance of composite national power (CNP). More comprehensive than Gross Domestic Product (GDP), CNP reflects the blending of a nation's economic, military, technology and social indices.

Sub-Regional Role for India?

US President Joe Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy, released in February 2022, may, therefore, appear designed to rebalance the Sino-Indian power equation under Washington's purview. However, with Beijing challenging Washington's global leadership, a US-encouraged Sino-Indian rebalancing is a tough call today.

Under Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy, the [US seeks to "support India's continued rise and regional leadership"](#). Overarching this promised effort is Washington's view of

Delhi as “a like-minded partner and leader in South Asia and the Indian Ocean” sub-regions of the Indo-Pacific.

A proposal in the Indo-Pacific Strategy is US-India collaboration, in both bilateral and regional forums, in “new domains such as health, space, and cyber space”. The deepening of US-India “economic and technology cooperation” is also identified to boost India as “an engine for regional growth”.

Two implicit caveats moderate the US commitments to India. Firstly, America’s external (non-interventionist) support means that India will be largely left to its own devices. Secondly, it gets relegated to sub-regional roles in South Asia and the Indian Ocean theatre. Delhi cannot perhaps complain because of its penchant for strategic autonomy.

A Complicated Goal

For Biden, the crux of the US-India strategic partnership is to “[work together and through regional groupings to promote stability in South Asia](#)”. But China’s multi-dimensional connections with Pakistan, India’s key South Asian neighbour, complicate this goal, given also the deep-seated Sino-Indian animosities.

Any US-India venture to stabilise South Asia will be vulnerable to potential Chinese counter-moves. Beijing’s full-spectrum military help to Islamabad, well known through geostrategic narratives, can trigger and sustain Sino-Pakistani resistance. The Sino-American and Sino-Indian tensions, at a high pitch today, may actually fuel such resistance.

A paradoxical convergence of Chinese and Indian preferences for bilateralism is also likely to complicate any effort to attain Biden’s goal of South Asian stability. India has consistently preferred purely bilateral approaches in dealing with Pakistan and China, respectively.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passes through some disputed areas in South Asia that Delhi deems as its sovereign domain. But there is nothing in the Indo-Pacific Strategy to suggest a joint US-India diplomatic or military offensive for Delhi to have those areas restored to it.

Above all, Beijing too prefers bilateral negotiations to resolve its boundary disputes with Delhi. Reacting to the recent US interest in these disputes, China’s Defence Ministry emphasised the [Sino-Indian congruence in favour of bilateralism](#) to resolve them. America was asked to keep off this issue, which has an overarching impact on South Asian stability.

China Ridicules Indo-Pacific Strategy

More broadly, [Beijing views the Indo-Pacific Strategy as an ill-intentioned worldview](#) triggered by a mirage – “the pretext of the ‘China threat’”. Washington is also accused of “forming an exclusive [anti-China] clique through AUKUS and Quad”.

China sees the AUKUS – comprising Australia, the United Kingdom and the US – as

having the potential for greater military agility than America's alliance with 'pacifist' Japan. Separately, the Quad consists of the US, Japan, India and Australia, with Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy describing Delhi as "a driving force of the Quad".

Furthermore, the [Quad is portrayed in the Indo-Pacific Strategy as a purveyor of smart power](#), thereby contradicting the Chinese view of this group as a hard power clique. The Quad's focal areas are said to include critical and emerging technologies, supply-chain cooperation, maritime domain awareness, high-standards infrastructure, and cyber capacity.

Aware of the dual-use potential of these focal areas, China criticises Biden for stoking "confrontation between regional countries". Hardly concealed is Beijing's critique of the US for its alleged attempt to set up India against China.

Facing China's Potential "Quad"?

In contrast, the US-led Quad can gain considerable traction if the Indo-Pacific Strategy is implemented. China may therefore float a competitive quad whose other members will be Russia, Pakistan and Iran. These four countries recently formed an informal coalition to discuss the Afghan situation.

Conceivably, China may seek to accelerate the creation of this competitive quad. For that to happen, the fallout of Russia's invasion of Ukraine may need to be managed in a manner that still leaves the Kremlin as a major power.

India's status as a "major defence partner" of the US since 2016, reflected in their military exercises and technology-related trade, is not that of an ally. Regardless of this reality, some argue that [China's thrust for "hegemony" in Asia](#) forces India to make common cause with the US and its democratic partners.

While Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy has certainly brought India into China's sharp focus, the two big neighbours have bilateral and other links that cannot be ignored.

For Delhi, its participation in the Russia-India-China (RIC) forum may still hold some value, depending on the stature of Moscow following its confrontation with Washington over Ukraine. But Russia, with which India has so far enjoyed beneficial defence-related and strategic ties, cannot easily influence the Sino-Indian engagement because of China's and India's sensitivities.

Beijing and Delhi are also prominent members of a few other forums which are larger than the RIC whose size is better suited for focused discussions. But the RIC has not evolved as either a problem-solving or an issue-based cooperative forum.

For any country in this global situation, the pursuit of absolute strategic autonomy, without adequate composite national power as the base, will be like skating on thin ice. This clear message is the reality alert in Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy for India's China policy.

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