

Ukraine Will Not Happen in Asia: America Seeks to Check China through Taiwan Visit and Quad Initiatives

By Sarosh Bana

Sarosh Bana, Executive Editor of Business India in Mumbai and former board member of the East-West Centre (EWC) Association—an organization representing the more than 65,000 individuals who have participated in East-West Center programs, explains that "the Biden administration is demonstrating an exceptional readiness to take on both the bellicose powers of China and Russia at once."

After leading a sanction-blitz against Russia and providing \$8.7 billion worth of arms and equipment to Ukraine—including M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and M777 155mm Howitzers—the United States opened a pointed tactical political flank against China through the Quadrilateral Dialogue, or Quad, summit held in Tokyo in May.

China vehemently condemned US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's August trip to Taiwan and conducted military drills and missile tests in the waters and airspace around the island, even as it warned of retaliatory "targeted military operations." Subsequently, Washington raised the ante by dispatching four warships through the South China Sea to the east of Taiwan. The contingent included the USS Ronald Reagan, a 100,000-tonne nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. This unprecedented show of force was to deter any naval or aerial adventurism from China.

Echoing President Joe Biden's reassertion last October that the United States would defend Taiwan, Pelosi, a strident China critic, said her trip showed "an unwavering American commitment to the Chinese-claimed self-ruled island." Washington sells arms to it under its Taiwan Relations Act, which mandates providing the island with the means to defend itself. However, the United States has no official diplomatic ties with Taiwan and acknowledges Beijing's position that there is only one Chinese government.

China's foreign ministry said Pelosi's visit "has a severe impact on the political foundation of China-US relations, and seriously infringes upon China's sovereignty and territorial integrity." By its willingness to overtly challenge Beijing's forward forays, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, the Biden administration is demonstrating an exceptional readiness to take on both the bellicose powers of China and Russia at once.

The Tokyo Quad summit—the fourth such interaction Biden convened since the first virtual meeting in March last year, two months after he assumed office—for once transcended its business-as-usual routine and went beyond rhetoric to launch a number of initiatives that aimed at checking Beijing's looming profile in the Indo-Pacific. A key initiative was to secure and coordinate over \$50 billion of infrastructure assistance to the Indo-Pacific over the next five years.

Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said the "Russian invasion into Ukraine squarely challenges the principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter," and "We should never ever allow a similar incident to happen in the Indo-Pacific," in his opening remarks to his Quad partners, Biden and Indian and Australian Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Anthony Albanese. China expectedly condemned the Quad meeting. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi singled out the United States, commenting that Washington's "Indo-Pacific Strategy" was "bound to fail" as it was being vigorously promoted to "contain" Beijing.

However, Beijing did not rest at such bluster this time. As the four leaders confabulated in Tokyo, China and Russia conducted joint strategic air patrols above the Sea of Japan, the East China Sea and the western Pacific in what Japan's Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi called an "increased level of provocation" and a threat to the Quad. In their first military drill since Russia's "military operation" in Ukraine, Chinese H-6s—The People's Liberation Army Air Force's (PLAAF) Russian-made twin-engine jet bomber—flew alongside the

Russian Long-range Aviation Command's hulking four-engine turboprop Tu-95 strategic bombers, though without violating Japanese airspace. According to Kishi, Tokyo had conveyed "serious concern" to both Beijing and Moscow.

Established in the wake of the devastating 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami for coordinating humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), the Quad has since evolved into a regional partnership committed to "a free and open Indo-Pacific through practical cooperation on diverse 21st-century challenges," a euphemism for containing China's regional and global overreach. The Quad's efforts at checking Chinese power include the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), efforts to advance interoperability and telecommunications cybersecurity through the Memorandum of Cooperation on 5G Supplier Diversification and Open RAN, a Quad Satellite Data Portal for providing capacity-building support to countries in the region, and the Quad Cybersecurity Partnership for building resilience across the four partner countries in response to cybersecurity vulnerabilities and cyber threats.

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The Quad Infrastructure Coordination Group, set up to extend the \$50 billion of infrastructure assistance, seeks to deepen collaboration and pursue complementary actions in critical sectors such as healthcare, clean energy and climate, digital connectivity, sustainable infrastructure, and supply chains. This high-level effort will be supported by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Export Finance Australia, India's EXIM, Japan Bank for International Cooperation, and the US International Development Finance Corporation.

The IPMDA will closely cooperate with regional partners to offer a near-real-time, integrated, and cost-effective maritime domain awareness picture. Information-sharing will be extended across existing regional fusion centers, such as the India-based Information Fusion Centre-IOR, Singapore's Information Fusion Centre, Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency, based in the Solomon Islands, and the Pacific Fusion Centre, located in Vanuatu, the last two receiving support from Australia. As a result, partners in the Pacific Islands, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) will be able to fully monitor the waters on their shores and thereby better uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific.

It is clear that China is forging ahead on multiple fronts from the fact that the Quad's five-year \$50 billion infrastructure program comes nowhere close to the scale and scope of Beijing's prodigious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments. The Quad's largesse nevertheless underscores its endeavor to cultivate partnerships within the Indo-Pacific littoral.

While some economic forecasts estimate China's total global BRI spending will reach \$1.3 trillion by 2027, others anticipate combined investments of \$3.7 trillion in over 2,600 projects. Most BRI funding is by China's major state-owned banks. Beijing has, in fact, extended the geographical scale of its BRI alongside its Maritime Silk Road to include more than 140 countries, across Africa, West and South Asia, and Latin America. Reports speak of a further BRI expansion via a Digital Silk Road, a Polar Silk Road (for developing arctic shipping routes and offshore arctic fossil fuel production and mineral mining), a Health Silk Road, and a 5G-based Internet-of-Things (IoT) project. It is believed they will shape economics and geopolitics for decades to come, with wide-ranging implications for international security.

All these advances presage turbulent times for the Indo-Pacific. While the US-led Western alliance and its partners justifiably commit to balancing China's, and Russia's, powerplay, development funds globally will be increasingly diverted to defense and security. The international community will need to strive to the utmost to avoid setting off any military flashpoints.

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