

Resilience in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy

By Dhruva Jaishankar

The US Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) released by the Biden administration has elicited a fair degree of criticism. But critics often overlook two key factors. First, while the IPS is a strategic document, it is also a political one. As such, many of the strategy's features were designed to signal domestic audiences as much as foreign competitors, allies, and partners. Second, the timing of the Indo-Pacific Strategy shaped its contents. It was released before the Biden Administration's National Security Strategy but after the groundwork had already been prepared for many of the administration's key Indo-Pacific policies, such as the elevation and empowerment of the Quad. Moreover, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) was subsequently announced, adding more details to the administration's economic policies. The net effect of these two factors is that the IPS is an important, but insufficient basis to appreciate the Administration's approach to the Indo-Pacific region.

Dhruva Jaishankar, Executive Director of the Observer Research Foundation America (ORF America), explains that a "prominent feature of the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy is resilience in the face of '21st-century transnational threats,'" and how this theme relates to public health, supply chains, alliance structures, and more.

Transnational Resilience: Climate and Public Health

One prominent feature of the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy is resilience in the face of "21st-century transnational threats," primarily focusing on climate change and public health. The former places considerable emphasis on the South Pacific, where climate change is an existential concern. Despite the rhetorical support, the United States has suffered from a lack of national climate policy, which was partly mitigated by the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) in 2022. But questions still remain as to whether the US government can facilitate the exchange of climate financing and technology at an appropriate scale. At present, those resources lie primarily with the private sector. Furthermore, the sustainability of US climate policy under a future administration, especially a Republican one, remains questionable.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy also addresses resilience to transnational threats against public health, especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the release of IPS, there has been a slowdown in policies to address the pandemic. The shortages of vaccines, personal protective equipment (PPE), oxygen concentrators, and other equipment are no longer as acute. At the same time, international cooperation on public health—particularly involving US adversaries such as China and Russia—remains more troubled than it was pre-pandemic, including within international institutions.

Supply Chains, Technology, Economics, and Security

The theme of resilience is strongly featured in both IPS and IPEF beyond the topics of climate and public health. In many respects, the focus on economic and technological resilience reflects an understanding on the part of the Biden administration that state actors, notably China, present challenges to a resilient Indo-Pacific region. There are four areas in which resilience might translate into important policy shifts.

The first area is resilient supply chains. Making supply chains secure from shocks, whether from pandemics, trade wars, or active conflicts, has required governments to consider what some have called "right-shoring." In practice, this means a combination of reshoring certain essential elements of supply chains to the United States as well as "near-shoring" and "friend-shoring" other elements to more accessible and friendly countries. Commercial considerations will continue to incentivize the status quo on goods and services deemed less critical from a national security standpoint. Recent US legislation, export control restrictions, and regulatory measures are indicative of some of the steps being taken by the United States to encourage right-shoring and established production networks, and many other countries are following suit. If carefully balanced and carefully scoped,

such steps may not lead to protectionist or deglobalizing policies and may even open new prospects for cooperation.

The second area is resilient technology. A consistent theme in US Indo-Pacific strategy is the need for open and transparent technology policies. This begins with strengthening 5G telecommunications, specifically non-proprietary and interoperable Open Radio Access Network (ORAN) solutions. But it could well be a recurring theme when it comes to Artificial Intelligence (AI) standards, cybersecurity, digital trade, and even undersea cables and satellite communication systems. Ensuring both resilience through redundancy and open architecture will be a major thrust of US policy for the foreseeable future, preventing the undermining of these essential technologies by malicious state or non-state actors.

The third area is resilient economies. This facet of resilience covers sustainable debt, which in turn has significant political and geopolitical implications. Building contract transparency, accountability standards, anti-corruption efforts, and networks to fight tax havens are all steps that have been highlighted by the Biden administration in its own policies and in joint statements with key allies and partners. A related issue is ensuring the widespread harmonization of lending standards.

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A fourth and final theme is resilient security. This involves building capacities in partner countries to ensure they are better able to secure themselves against state and non-state threats. One major focus in the Indo-Pacific has been on maritime security. Projects such as the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) initiative is a prominent example of the Biden administration's focus on maritime issues. Another area, which receives less attention, involves counter-terrorism. While the primacy of terrorism in US national security has waned, recent activity, including in South and Southeast Asia, shows that the challenge has not dissipated entirely.

Alliances, Partnerships, and Challenges

In pursuing the objective of a resilient Indo-Pacific, the United States is likely to adopt a mix of approaches: unilateral, bilateral, quadrilateral, and multilateral. Indeed, the theme of resilience is already being reflected in US legislation and regulation; bilateral agreements with countries like Japan, Australia, and the Philippines;; the widening array of Quad working groups and initiatives; and through IPEF. These approaches generally find broad bipartisan consensus, with Republicans and Democrats equally invested in the challenges of burden sharing on security, predatory financing, technological competition, and supply chains. Political differences will be relegated to transnational issues such as climate change and the extent of cooperation with international institutions.

But challenges remain. The receptivity of US partner countries, particularly in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, is frequently in question. Despite the attractiveness of US support, there will always be alternatives to which these partners can turn. For near-term economic or domestic political reasons, some countries may choose to work with China or other alternative partners to address needs in these areas. Another question involves limited US capabilities. While the latent power of the United States remains immense, its ability to translate that into outbound capital or technological partnerships requires cooperation with the private sector. In other respects, such as with military or diplomatic resources, Indo-Pacific efforts may have to navigate a hidebound bureaucracy or competing priorities, including in Europe and the Middle East

While the Indo-Pacific Strategy, National Security Strategy, and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework comprise strong statements of intent to ensure a resilient Indo-Pacific, American leaders will still have to convince skeptical partners, non-governmental stakeholders, and the broader US government apparatus about the urgency and severity of the challenges ahead. And the U.S. will have to take actions commensurate with its stated priority on various facets of resilience in the Indo-Pacific.

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