



**WASHINGTON'S MYOPIA IS  
UNDERCUTTING ITS INDO-PACIFIC  
PARTNERS**

BY AKHIL RAMESH

*Akhil Ramesh ([akhil@pacforum.org](mailto:akhil@pacforum.org)) is a Senior Fellow at the Pacific Forum and author of the US-India chapter for [Comparative Connections: A Triannual E-Journal of Bilateral Relations in the Indo-Pacific](#).*

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*For more from this author, please see his recent chapter of [Comparative Connections](#).*

Over the last few weeks, Washington has been abuzz with everything India. On June 22, President Joe Biden, cabinet secretaries, and the U.S. Congress gave a [rousing reception](#) to the visiting Indian prime minister Narendra Modi. For his part, the prime minister cheered Republican and Democratic congressmen with his [quip](#) that he could “help them reach bipartisan consensus,” referring to the across-the-aisle support India enjoys in Washington.

It was certainly an apt decision to honor the Indian leader, given that the U.S.-India partnership has significantly expanded under President Biden. Both the White House and several members of the Biden administration, from the National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan to the Indo-Pacific Coordinator Kurt Campbell, have [characterized](#) it as the “most important bilateral [relationship of the twenty-first century](#).”

However, over the last few months, some of the Biden administration’s regional policies in the Indo-Pacific have done more harm to its partners, particularly India and its geopolitical leverage in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Biden administration’s foreign policy cut a significant departure from its predecessors until last

month, returning to Washington’s old ways: myopic democratic interventions, benevolent outreach to adversarial nations, and partisan bickering. Over the last few weeks, Washington’s primary Indo-Pacific partners, India and Japan, have borne the brunt of these missteps.

President Biden, in a last-minute change of plans, [canceled](#) his scheduled trip to Papua New Guinea and Australia to address the debt-ceiling crisis in Washington, with Republicans stalling the Democrats from raising the debt ceiling levels. While Secretary of State Anthony Blinken went ahead with his trip to Papua New Guinea and signed a [crucial defense agreement](#) with the Pacific Island nation, Biden canceling that leg of the tour was not the best messaging to a region increasingly falling under China’s orbit.

Nonetheless, Prime Minister Modi went ahead with his travel itinerary as scheduled and turned it into an opportunity to showcase India’s position on the global stage. New Guinea’s president hailed Modi as the leader of the Global South. Taking an implicit jab at the United States and China, [the island-nation leader said](#), “we are victims of global powerplay, and you [Modi] are the leader of Global South. We will rally behind your leadership at global forums.” Prior to Biden’s cancellation, the Indian government had decided to accommodate his visit and cut short their visits as a courtesy to the incoming American presidential delegation.

While this was a minor setback for a coordinated approach toward Chinese expansionism in the Pacific, the Indian Ocean challenge is a more geopolitically complex Gordian knot.

In mid-May, Blinken threatened Bangladesh with [sanctions](#) if the Indian Ocean state did not host free and fair elections in the 2024 poll. Suppose the United States were to follow through with its threat. In that case, India and Japan will be in a quandary as they have consistently positioned Bangladesh as a gateway connecting the Indian subcontinent to Southeast Asia for supply chain and infrastructure connectivity initiatives. Geographically, Bangladesh is nestled between India’s state of Bengal to the west and India’s northeastern provinces to the east, bordering a thin strip of land

the connects the rest of India to the northeast (also known as the “chicken’s neck”). Thus the densely populated country’s interaction with the rest of the world is directed through India or the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean.

Both New Delhi and Tokyo have invested in infrastructure in the region and have long-term plans to invest in Dhaka’s growth. Recently, Japan and India agreed to jointly develop the [Matabari deep-sea](#) port in Bangladesh to serve as a “strategic anchor” in the Indian Ocean. Though often underreported, Japanese investment plays a vital role in South Asian development. It is also undeniably India’s Northeast region’s major infrastructure and development partner. Through the [Bay of Bengal-Northeast India Industrial Value Chain](#), the Japanese government envisions increased connectivity between India’s landlocked northeast and Southeast Asia, creating a single economic zone and an alternative trade connectivity project to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Japanese prime minister Fumio Kishida [articulating](#) his government’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy in New Delhi in early March this year, called for increased integration of India’s Northeast with Bangladesh to transform the region into a single economic zone.

Moreover, Japan is attempting to capture the businesses moving out of the pricier markets of Southeast Asia, using the Bay of Bengal region. Japan’s regional strategy has neatly complemented the Modi government’s policies. Modi transformed the older “Look East” policy into an [“Act East”](#) policy of increasing strategic and economic engagement with Southeast Asia as a countervailing force to China’s involvement in the region.

Tokyo has slowly and steadily supported this transformation. A case in point is Tokyo and New Delhi hosting the [India-Japan Act East](#) forum to discuss cooperation on a range of projects that will increase connectivity in India’s Northeast to Southeast Asia.

India’s Northeast has a history of civil unrest and strife, making it a challenging region for

development. Furthermore, its landlocked topography and poor infrastructure limited its connectivity to both its neighboring countries and the rest of India. Only parties interested in the long game or have a vision for the region could invest in that part of the world, and in this case, it is Japan.

Interestingly, as an extension, both [Japan](#) and India are engaging the immediate eastern neighbor to Bangladesh and India, Myanmar. [Sanctioned](#) by the United States, Myanmar has limited partners on the world stage. Nonetheless, Japan and India have continued engagement with the military junta to prevent the nation from falling entirely under China’s influence.

However, once again, Indo-Japanese interests are affected by America’s sanctions.

Earlier in May, India-Myanmar [inaugurated](#) the Sittwe port in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. India supported this port to enhance sea lane connectivity between India’s eastern states and Myanmar. However, since the sanctions, Indian companies have either had to depart Myanmar altogether or face global scrutiny for working with the military junta-led government.

As satellite images released earlier this year indicated, [increased activity](#) on the Great Coco Islands of Myanmar had the markings of Chinese military involvement. Situated less than thirty miles north of India’s Andaman and Nicobar Islands, any potential militarization of the Coco Islands by the Chinese could pose a significant threat to India’s security in the Indian Ocean. In this geopolitical equation, India cannot afford to disengage from Myanmar. And yet, America’s economic statecraft is undercutting India’s vital regional partnerships.

Henry Kissinger, who celebrated 100 years last May, summed up this dynamic well, “it may be dangerous to be America’s enemy, but to be America’s friend is fatal.” It is undoubtedly proving so for Japan and India, but more so for New Delhi in the Indian Ocean.

Against the backdrop of these measures comes the Biden administration's attempts at thawing relations with China. While Biden departs from his predecessors as the only recent president to not ask for Kissinger's advice, he is beginning to walk in the footsteps of a grand strategist by making attempts to mend ties with China.

From the [dialogue](#) in [Vienna](#) to Blinken [rescheduling](#) his trip to Beijing for last month to the official [abandonment](#) of economic "decoupling" for the less confrontational "de-risking," Washington's approach to China shows signs of softening. While members of IPEF agreed on moving ahead with a supply chain agreement in [Detroit](#), in the same week, on the sidelines of the APEC meeting, U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai [met](#) with her Chinese counterpart to discuss trade and economic ties. Washington's blow-hot and blow-cold approach does not assure allies and partners of the consistency of its priorities and policies, particularly partners that it courts for strategic competition with China.

Furthermore, Washington's skewed sanction policies toward democratic backsliding in a few states while calling for engagement with authoritarian China raise questions about the motives of such policies. While the United States has sanctioned Chinese officials allegedly involved in human rights abuses in Xinjiang, it continues to do massive business with Beijing. This selective condemnation only further isolates partners and strengthens Chinese engagement with the sanctioned nations.

Director for Regional Affairs at the Pacific Forum, Rob York, called this misbegotten strategy "a holdover from America's unipolar moment that we [America] need to outgrow. America's moral authority, and the benefits of aligning with Washington, are no longer assumed but must be competed for, and sanctions must be employed far more judiciously than they have been."

This type of awakening to multipolar realities of the world order should inform Washington of the pitfalls and shortsightedness of its foreign policies.

America's sanctions and other tools of economic statecraft should not be used for democratic interventions but to deter its enemies. If not, the United States will have few allies in its strategic competition with China.

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