

Asian Fault Lines of Biden's War on Russia

As relations with Tokyo sour, Moscow beefs up the coastal defence systems on the Kuril Islands that Japan claims as its own

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The tremors of the United States' tensions with Russia playing out in Europe are being felt in different ways already in Asia. The hypothesis of Ukraine being in Europe and the conflict being all about European security is delusional.

From Kazakhstan to Myanmar, from Solomon Islands to the Kuril Islands, from North Korea to Cambodia, from China to India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, the fault lines are appearing.

To be sure, extra-regional powers had a hand in the failed colour revolution recently to overthrow the established government in Kazakhstan, a hotly contested geopolitical landmass two-thirds the size of India, bordering both China and Russia, Washington's sworn adversaries. Thanks to swift Russian intervention, supported by China, a regime change was averted.

Equally, the Anglo-American project to embroil Myanmar, bordering China, in an armed insurgency has floundered for want of a sanctuary in India's northeastern region and due to the perceived congruence of interests among the surrounding countries in Myanmar's stability.

In comparison, the North Korean fault line has aggravated. North Korea moves on its own timetable and has probably decided that the Ukraine crisis offers useful cover while it ramps up its testing program. Pyongyang explicitly supports Russia's special operation in Ukraine, commenting that "the basic cause of the Ukraine incident lies in the high-handedness and arbitrariness of the United States, which has ignored Russia's legitimate calls for security guarantees and only sought a global hegemony and military dominance while clinging to its sanctions campaigns."

North Korea's objective is to enhance its security and leverage by increasing the quality and

quantity of its deterrent capabilities and strengthening its bargaining position.

On another plane, the Ukraine crisis injected a new urgency into the US efforts to cultivate new Asian partners. But Washington has run into headwinds and had to indefinitely postpone a special summit with the ten member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that was initially scheduled for end-March. No new date has been proposed, although the US had hyped up the summit as “a top priority.”

Showing some ire, Washington has since sanctioned Cambodia, currently the ASEAN Chair. Clearly, the southeast Asian countries are chary of taking sides between the US and China or of voicing criticism against Russia.

Perhaps, the most direct fallout of the Ukraine crisis in Asia so far is the sharp deterioration in Japan's ties with Russia. It is an unwarranted development insofar as Tokyo simply did a cut and paste job, copying all the US sanctions against Russia (including against President Putin). Prime Minister Kishida wantonly destroyed what his predecessor Shinzo Abe had carefully cultivated as a cordial, friendly relationship.

Japan now openly refers to Russian “occupation” of the Kuril Islands — something it hasn't been doing in the past. Moscow retaliated by designating Japan as an “unfriendly” country. Yet, analysts were estimating until recently that Russia and Japan had congruent interests in blocking China's Arctic ambitions and were, therefore, moving toward solving their dispute over Kuril.

Suffice to say, Kishida's motivations in an abrupt turnaround to make an Kuril a potential flashpoint in relations with Russia are, to say the least, to be traced to the broader US strategy to isolate Russia.

Meanwhile, a contrarian development has also appeared in China's challenge to the US' Island Chain strategy in the Western Pacific by negotiating a new security deal with Solomon Islands. This game-changing development may have extensive consequences and is dangerously interwoven with the Taiwan issue. Biden is reportedly dispatching a top White House official to Solomon Islands to scuttle the deal with China.

The Biden administration is now doubling down on India to roll back its ties with Russia as well. That becomes a fault line in the US-Indian strategic partnership. What must be particularly galling for Washington is the likelihood of India pursuing its trade and economic cooperation with Russia in local currencies. Indeed, China and India have taken a somewhat similar stance on the Ukraine crisis.

Given the size of the Chinese economy and the high potential of growth for the Indian economy, their inclination to bypass the dollar would be a trend-setter for other countries. Russia, hit by Western sanctions, has called on the BRICS group of emerging economies to extend the use of national currencies and integrate payment systems.

Suffice to say, the “weaponised dollar” and the West's abrasive move to freeze Russia's reserves sends a chill down the spine of most developing countries. Nepal caved in to ratify the Millennium Challenge Corporation agreement following threat by a middle ranking US official!

There is no conceivable reason why the NATO should become the provider of security for the Asian region. That is why Afghanistan's future is of crucial importance. Without doubt, the

regime change in Pakistan is partly at least related to Afghanistan. The Russian Foreign Ministry has disclosed certain details of the US interference in Pakistan's internal affairs and its pressure on former Prime Minister Imran Khan.

But time will show how realistic are Washington's expectations of inducting Pakistan into the US orbit and making it a surrogate to leverage the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Russia and China are making sure that the door remains closed to NATO's return to Afghanistan. They have undercut Washington's recent efforts to co-opt the Taliban leadership in Kabul. (See my blog [US pips regional states at race for Kabul.](#))

The message out of the recent Foreign Ministers' Meeting on the Afghan Issue Among the Neighbouring Countries of Afghanistan in Tunxi, China, is that in that country's transition from chaos to order, the regional states hope to undertake a lead role. Thus, the regional states have incrementally marked their distance from the West's exceptionalism and are instead adopting a persuasive track through constructive engagement. The [joint statement](#) issued at Tunxi reflects this new thinking.

The developments over Afghanistan provide a signpost that any attempt at imposing Western dominance over Asia will be resisted by the regional states. Most Asian countries have had bitter experiences with colonialism in their history. (See my blog [India's dilemma over West vs. Russia](#))

Although the American analysts underplay it, the fact remains that the conflict in Ukraine is bound to impact the "Asian Century" very significantly. The US is determined to transform the NATO as the global security organisation that will act beyond the purview of the United Nations to enforce the West's "rules-based order."

The West's desperate push to weaken Russia and tilt the global strategic balance in the US' favour aims to clear the pathway leading to a unipolar world order in the 21st century. In a recent [interview](#), Hal Brands, Henry Kissinger distinguished professor of global affairs at Johns Hopkins, put across the US strategy behind the war in Ukraine as very logical:

"Well, there's long been a debate in the United States over whether we should prioritise competing with Russia or China or treat them as co-equals. And that debate has flared up again in the context of this war. I think what the war indicates, though, is that the best way of putting pressure on China, which is the more dangerous and the more powerful of the two rivals, is actually to ensure that Russia is defeated, that it does not achieve its objectives in this war, because that will result in a weaker Russia, one that is less capable of putting pressure on the United States and its allies in Europe and thus less useful as a strategic partner for Beijing.

"The United States simply can't avoid the reality that it has to contain both Russia and China simultaneously."

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