

Modi in Tokyo: The Quad and More

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Summary

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Tokyo in May 2022 demonstrated successful Indian diplomacy to manage the differences with its Quad partners – Australia, Japan, and the United States (US) – on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While ducking the question of Russian aggression, Modi appears ready to engage more with the US and the Quad on the China challenge and actively contribute to the construction of a new regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific.

On the eve of the Quad summit in Tokyo in the last week of May 2022, many thought the deep differences over Russia's invasion of Ukraine between India and the other Quad members – Australia, Japan and the United States (US) – would [weaken the Indo-Pacific coalition](#). Belying the widespread pessimism, the Quad leaders demonstrated the ability to find some common ground on the issues relating to Ukraine and unveiled greater ambition to shape the future of the Indo-Pacific.

While the US and its allies would prefer to see Delhi lend its voice in condemning Moscow's aggression, they recognise India's deep dependence on Russian weapons and the long-standing strategic partnership between the two nations. In the last few weeks, the political focus of the US and its European and Asian allies has been on offering assistance to India in reducing its reliance on Russian military hardware. Delhi, in turn, is pitching for investment from the Western countries to produce weapons in India as part of India's programme for indigenisation of arms production and export to third countries.

In his bilateral meetings with US President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised the possibilities of joint defence industrial development in India. Simply put, the Western hopes to wean India away from Russian weapons are opening new doors for India's potential defence industrial policy.

India did not join its Quad partners in criticising Russia in the [joint statement](#) issued after the talks between the four leaders. However, Delhi endorsed, in a resounding fashion, the essential principles that the Ukraine invasion has brought to the forth – respect for territorial integrity, state sovereignty and peaceful resolution of disputes.

More importantly, the statement insisted that what happened in Ukraine cannot be permitted in Asia. Referring to likely Chinese calculus on repeating Ukraine-type of aggressions in the Indo-Pacific, the four leaders [expressed strong opposition](#) to “any coercive, provocative or unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo and increase tensions in the area”.

India, after all, has real concerns about China's muscular assertion of territorial claims based on historic rights, including in the Himalayas, and, more broadly, in the Western Pacific. To be sure, Delhi is silent on the Russian aggression; but it is ready to join its Quad partners in warning against "any unilateral attempt to change the status quo" by Beijing in the Indo-Pacific.

While finessing India's ambivalence on Russia, the Quad leaders were eager to focus on the strategic opportunities with India, which is so critical in reordering Asia destabilised by the rise of an assertive China. Modi's decision to be present at the launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) in Tokyo is of tactical as well as strategic significance.

By joining the launch, Modi was signalling strong political support for an important Biden initiative and is likely to deepen the personal rapport between the two leaders. At the strategic level, the IPEF offers India a way back into [economic engagement with Asia](#). India is not part of any major regional economic institutions in Asia. Delhi has never been a member of the forum for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation and had walked out of negotiations on the Asia-wide trade Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership at the very last moment in November 2019.

The main rationale for the decision was the Modi government's strategic judgement that India cannot afford to be part of a China-dominated Asian economic order. The IPEF offers a 'non-Chinese' approach to economic engagement with Asia. The flexible nature of the IPEF also offers India considerable time and space in the incipient negotiations on implementing the framework.

During his visit to Tokyo, Modi met bilaterally with the leaders of the Quad. With the new Australian prime minister rushing to participate in the Quad summit immediately after being sworn in, Modi had an opportunity to [sustain the positive momentum](#) in the bilateral relations with Australia that has emerged as a major partner for India in the last few years.

[Modi's engagement with his host](#), Kishida, was far more substantive. As Japan steps out to play a larger role in Asia in the aftermath of the Ukraine war, Modi focused on enhancing defence and security partnership with Tokyo, which has moved slower than India's military engagement with the US. Modi also pitched for Kishida's political support in promoting Japanese public and private investment worth ¥5 trillion (\$54 billion) over the next five years in India.

Modi's bilateral engagement with Biden underlined the growing personal bonhomie between the two leaders, who have met in four Quad summits in the last 15 months, two in-person meetings and a few virtual engagements. On his part, [Biden underlined his commitment](#) "to making the US-India partnership is among the closest we have on Earth".

Looking beyond the hyperbole, there is no doubt about the expansive strategic investment the Biden administration has made on India. If Biden is willing to overlook the divergence with India over Ukraine to advance US goals in the Indo-Pacific, Modi has moved Delhi closer than ever before to Washington – in the bilateral as well as multilateral levels – as part of the effort to retain a pivotal place for India in the Asian order. This essential convergence

between Delhi and Washington continues to trump the entrenched scepticism about the prospects for the bilateral relationship.

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