Blinken-Lloyd Duo Returns to Asia

At the end of July US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin returned to Asia to resolve one of the key foreign policy challenges facing all the US administrations of the last 10 years - the continuous growth of China’s influence, both in the region and globally. It is possible that the joint presence in the region of the heads of foreign policy and defense may be a concrete sign of what President Biden (as well as his predecessors) has referred to as the principle of providing “military support” for US foreign policy.

In fact, their first joint trip to the region took place just four months previously, a month and a half into the new US president’s term of office. On that occasion, they both visited Japan and South Korea, after which their paths separated. Anthony Blinken went on to Anchorage for a meeting with his Chinese counterparts. Meanwhile Lloyd Austin visited India as part of the US’s latest attempt to involve the other of the two Asian giants in its maneuvers against China - something it has been trying to do for years.

India was also one of the destinations on their current Asian tour. This time it was Anthony Blinken’s turn to woo Delhi, while Lloyd Austin focused on South East Asia - a region which is playing an ever larger role in the major powers’ geopolitical intrigues - visiting Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines.

In Delhi Anthony Blinken was received by India’s Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, and National Security Advisor, Ajit
Doval, but the main negotiations, on a wide range of issues, were conducted in meetings between Anthony Blinken
and his Indian counterpart, Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. One significant aspect of Anthony Blinken’s
visit to India was the focus on human rights, which he discussed in a preliminary meeting with representatives of
Indian civil society. This issue is a priority for the current US administration but a sore point for India, as the subject
immediately raises the issue of what is happening in the Jammu and Kashmir union territory.

Confining the sensitive issue of human rights to a preliminary meeting meant that there was no need to raise it in the
main talks. That had been Lloyd Austin’s mistake in his trip to India four months previously, and it had almost
spoiled the impression made by the new US administration in a country which it sees as a very important partner.

As for the contents of the talks between Anthony Blinken and Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, commentators have
focused on three main areas: the problems caused by COVID-19, the situation in Afghanistan, and the status and
possible future development of the Quad project - a proposed partnership between the US, India, Japan and
Australia.

The first of these issues is particularly important for India, and for the rest of the world (if only because of the new,
highly dangerous variant that first appeared in India), and it was one of the key focuses of Subrahmanyam
Jaishankar’s trip to the US at the end of May. As we have pointed out before, according to Indian media the real
COVID-19 situation in the country may be much worse - even several times worse - than the already very sobering
official figures indicate, and these are sobering enough.

Certainly, the USA now sees providing India with help in mitigating the consequences of COVID-19 as perhaps the
most important part of its “battle for India”.

Given the Washington’s general policy of withdrawing from “unnecessary” conflicts, Afghanistan will become less of
a preoccupation, while India grows in importance - almost as if there were an inverse correlation between the two
countries. After all, India has long been seen as the main claimant to the position once held by the US, as the main
monitor of the political situation in Central and South Asia.

This region is a troublesome one, and India is still weighing up the pros and cons of taking on such a role. For
example Subrahmanyam Jaishankar considered this issue during talks on relations between these two regions during
his recent visit to Moscow and then, shortly afterwards, in the most recent ministerial-level meeting of the Shanghai
Cooperation Organization, in Tashkent.

The Afghan problem was one of the main issues addressed by the US Secretary of State and his Indian counterpart
in a speech they made to staff and students at the Jawaharlal Nehru University following the end of the talks. Both of
the guests also touched on the subject of the Quad project in their addresses to the university. Subrahmanyam
Jaishankar referred to the recent video summit dedicated to the proposed grouping, which was conceived back in the
2000s as a kind of Asian NATO, and which now seems to be getting more and more nebulous and further and further
from the original concept.

The key message of Anthony Blinken’s speech can be described as yet another reiteration of Washington’s
commitment to “one of its main foreign policy priorities - the strengthening of its partnership with India”. He also
mentioned the Quad project, and “other multilateral partnerships”. We will just highlight another reference to the
USA’s positioning itself on the global stage as an Indo-Pacific nation.

Anthony Blinken also raised the issue of India’s most recent arms deal with Russia. But he didn’t stress the point too
much, wishing not to annoy his hosts (who were, on the whole, remarkably patient).

In the speeches he made during his trip to the three S.E. Asian nations, the US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin
focused on the issue of setting up a military and political alliance against an unspecified opponent (clearly
understood to be China). His first stop was Singapore, where he gave the Fullerton Lecture (named after a hotel in
the city-state), one of the two annual events held in Singapore by the London-based International Institute for
Strategic Studies (IISS). The first Fullerton Lecture was given in 2012 by the then Secretary General of the UN, Ban
Ki-moon.

On this occasion, the Fullerton Lecture was a more significant event than usual, as, for the first time in many years,
the main annual event organized by the IISS, the Shangri-La Dialogue (named after another Singapore hotel) was
cancelled this year. The Shangri-La Dialogue is a prestigious forum for the discussion of issues relating to regional
and global security, at which a number of countries (including both Australia and the USA) are generally represented
by senior politicians, both current and retired.
The official reason given for the cancellation was the COVID-19 pandemic. But the present author suspects that in reality the organizers of the Shangri-La Dialogue considered (quite rightly) that in view of the current high level of animosity between the two major global powers - the main initiators of the Dialogues - to hold it this year would risk further damaging international relations. After all, those relations are tense enough as it is.

Apparently, it was intended that Lloyd Austin would have made a speech on the USA’s strategy in the Indo-Pacific region in the Shangri-La Dialogue, which was to have been held at the beginning of July. In the event, he addressed the same subject in his Fullerton Lecture. The audience in the Fullerton Hotel consisted mainly of representatives of Singapore’s administration, who had no particular reasons for asking the speaker to clarify any of his points, whereas the participants in a higher-profile international forum, such as the Shangri-La Dialogue, would have had a much more pressing interest in the contents of the speech.

Nevertheless (again, this is the present author’s view) the contents of a lecture given by the Defense Secretary of the leading global power, and clearly prepared by high-level speechwriters, must be considered as fairly authoritative. That is to say, one would not expect it to contain any new initiatives having a negative impact on the key issue in international global politics today, such as the political, economic and military stand-off between the US and China which we have already referred to. The general message of the Lecture is consistent with the main statements made by Joe Biden in addresses to the Department of State and Defense Ministry two weeks after his inauguration as US President.

And everything Lloyd Austin said and did in Vietnam and the Philippines can be found in the address he gave in Singapore, which was clearly, as we have already stated, planned in advance.

As for the key issue in international global politics, referred to above, the two US Ministers’ trip to Asia may have the effect of keeping open the door for dialogue with China. Even though many figures in the US political establishment are doing their best to barricade the road to rapprochement with all kinds of political rubbish.

That is just one of the factors that makes it difficult, at present, to make any kind of reasoned forecast concerning the further development of relations between the two leading world powers. All we can do is to keep a watchful eye on events as they unfold.

Vladimir Terekhov, expert on the issues of the Asia-Pacific region, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”. 