Blinken’s Asia-Pacific Tour: Fighting the War by Other Means

Soon after releasing the new anti-China Indo-Pacific strategy, the US secretary of state Antony Blinken embarked upon a significant tour to countries in Asia and the Pacific to reassure these countries of the US commitment – and ability – to protect and defend them against an ‘aggressive’ China. Even though US officials have been saying, at least ever since Joe Biden became the US president, that they do not intend to start a new cold war with China and that they do not want countries in Asia and the Pacific to choose between Washington and Beijing, the fact that the US continues to officially project China as a threat to these countries means, directly and unambiguously, that Washington wants these countries to reject China and embrace Uncle Sam as part of its overall politics of global hegemony.

In other words, even though Washington does not say it in so many words, its politics aims to drag these countries into a confrontation with China to limit the latter’s global influence and support, as the latest Indo-Pacific strategy document says, a global system that suits the US interests. Thus, the US is already fighting a war with China by means other than warfare. The fact that the US is doing this at the same time as the on-going US-led politics of encircling Russia via expanding NATO to Ukraine means that the US intention is to force the whole world into geopolitical conflicts to maintain its own hegemony.

This was indeed pretty much the message the US officials gave before Blinken started his visit in the second week of
February. When asked if Blinken’s visit could be cancelled in the wake of growing tensions around Ukraine, the White House official said that “We are a big country. We are a big department. We have a lot of challenges on our plate” and that the United States is very much capable of “walking and chewing gum at the same time.” This assertion, when seen against the larger backdrop of the US’ anti-China and anti-Russia geo-politics, translates into an aggressive pursuit of policies that could eventually throw the world into a new era of absolutely hostile environment.

The Biden administration’s increasing focus on Asia and the Pacific is a revitalisation of what came to be known as ‘Asia Pivot’ during the Obama administration – a government that included Joe Biden as vice president. For the Biden administration, therefore, ‘Asia Pivot’ is not only an unfinished agenda, but the fact that China’s economic and military power and its influence have massively increased in past few years means that the ‘Asia Pivot’ has become pivotal for the US’ own survival as a superpower capable of unilaterally shaping global politics.

This is very much a reflection of what Hillary Clinton, who was Obama’s secretary of state and one of key articulators of the ‘Asia Pivot’ thought was necessary for securing “America’s Pacific Century” – a dream that can be realised only via an aggressive projection of American military and diplomatic vis-à-vis its rivals in Asia and the Pacific.

Part of the US project involves creating strong, multilateral alliances like QUAD and AUKUS in Asia and the Pacific. It is for this very reason that Blinken’s tour also included a QAUD ministerial level meeting in Australia – a country that is involved in both QUAD and AUKUS and symbolises how the US is seeking to converge more and more countries around a US-centric vision of global political system.

But the problem for the US is that not all countries in Asia and the Pacific are unwilling to jump onto the US bandwagon. Even though the US, as various media reports have highlighted, was keen to “inform” the QAUD and other Pacific nations of the “threat” from China – and Russia – the QAUD meeting failed to produce a joint statement that could show a sense of US-led unity against either Russia or China.

The QAUD joint statement, while it mentioned the imperative of tackling “challenges” to the region, failed to mention Russia or China even once. A crucial reason for this is the fact QAUD countries like India have no desire to become embroiled too deep in the US-led geo-political tensions. Even though New Delhi’s ties with China are far from friendly since past two years, there is no appetite in India with regards to escalating tensions with its neighbour just because it suits the US interests.

This barren statement was issued despite the fact Blinken spent a lot of time in Australia highlighting that the US/West has a “bit of a challenge with Ukraine and Russian aggression. We’re working 24/7 on that” and that “more than ever before, we need partnerships, we need alliances, we need coalitions of countries willing to put their efforts, their resources, their minds into tackling these problems.” Yet, Blinken’s invocations failed to produce a “shared vision” that he said was indispensable to preserve a “rule based” world under the US leadership.

The question, for the US, therefore, is: how far can it go in realising its agenda? Short of starting an actual war with China in the Pacific or Russia in Europe, the US has not, so far, been able to use the threat of Russian and Chinese aggression to build a truly global coalition against its strategic peers. A crucial problem for the US is that most of the relevant countries have different priorities. Although some of them may have some issues with China, these countries remain focused on stabilising their national economies in the seemingly post-COVID world – a recovery that they see could become impossible if they reject economic interdependence – and trade – with China in favour of an expanded military alliance with the US. Their concerns are exacerbated by the fact that the US’ anti-China plan has no economic component, let alone a major one; hence, the bleak prospects for Washington’s policy to succeed in building a global coalition under its leadership.

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