



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



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Cover Image:

Prime Minister Narendra Modi meeting US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III during the fifth India-U.S. 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in New Delhi on November 10, 2023. Source: [X/@DrSJaishankar](#)

India's External Affairs Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh hosting Australia's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Richard Marles and Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong for the India-Australia 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in New Delhi on November 18, 2023. Source: [X/@RichardMarlesMP](#)

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meeting US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken in Jerusalem on November 30, 2023. Source: [X/@SecretaryAnthonyBlinken](#)

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Global Horizons

by

Nalin Surie

The situation arising out of the Israel-Hamas war continued to be the focus of attention, to the neglect of other ongoing crises including the war in Ukraine. Notwithstanding the limited exchange of hostages and the related humanitarian pause, the situation remained dangerous as Israel resumed its onslaught to destroy Hamas and its leadership, irrespective of the rising death toll of Palestinians caught in between. The hostilities were resumed by Israel ostensibly because of backtracking by Hamas on further hostage exchanges. Collateral damage has assumed new dimensions. Things may get worse as Israeli military operations in south Gaza come into focus and announced safe havens become inadvertent targets.

There was frantic diplomacy, especially by the US, to ensure that the war does not spread and that civilian casualties are avoided. Qatar and Egypt are playing their part in the process; so too are the other major Gulf states. The role of Turkey and Iran remained obscure. Fortunately, the Lebanon front has remained relatively quiet, but could heat up, as could the Houthi attacks.

Pressure was built up by the BRICS nations, the Arab countries, and the EU to remind Israel and the US that this horrendous and longstanding conflict cannot come to an end till the two-state solution is achieved. The US seems to accept this, but its immediate focus appears to be to contain the conflict, complete the return of hostages held by Hamas, minimise civilian casualties and ensure the steady supply of humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians. It has the ability to exercise pressure on Israel, but hopes that may not have to be done beyond a point. It also wants to ensure that ultimately it remains the final guarantor of peace in the critical Middle East region. The US also has to demonstrate that notwithstanding the danger in the Middle East, it has not taken its eyes off the war in Ukraine and the growing challenges it faces in the Indo-Pacific, especially from China.

Following the end of the humanitarian pauses and the limited exchange of hostages, Israel has resumed its military campaign against Hamas in full earnest and made it clear that there will be no respite till its objectives are fulfilled. So-called safe areas have been designated. The reality, though, is that thousands of innocent civilian Palestinians are likely to be killed. Can Israel justify this to its own inner conscience? Does it realise that this approach may

make future peace in the region virtually impossible to achieve? These questions no doubt seriously burden the minds of decision makers in Washington, and in Europe too. The pressure on Israel and Hamas to seek a negotiated solution will have to be sustained.

Militarily, the war in Ukraine has not gone well for either Ukraine or Russia. Talk of compromise solutions, weakening support in the US and some EU countries, and the inability to cause any meaningful damage to the Russian forces were no doubt a cause of serious concern in Kiev. So too the continuing resilience of the Russian economy and the ability to withstand the extensive Western sanctions. However, reassurances were forthcoming from the US, EU and NATO that they are with Ukraine for the long haul. For instance, the NATO Foreign Ministers at their meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Council on November 28 stressed that the alliance remains steadfast in its "commitment to further step up political and practical support to Ukraine as it continues to defend its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders, and will continue their support for as long as it takes. A strong, independent Ukraine is vital for the stability of the Euro-Atlantic area."

At their meeting on November 8, the G7 Foreign Ministers had already underlined the above, namely that support for Ukraine will never waver including for its immediate, medium and long-term recovery and reconstruction.

During the month, there were continued serious moves by the US, China, Japan, Indonesia and Vietnam in the Indo-Pacific region in an effort to seek greater room for manoeuvre. The highlight undoubtedly was the meeting, long sought by China's President Xi, with President Biden. It was held on November 15 separately, but on the sidelines of the APEC summit in San Francisco. The two leaders were meeting face to face after almost exactly a year. Since their last meeting, bilateral relations had gone into a tailspin for a variety of reasons, and both sides were looking to restore basic normalcy in relations. The US especially for restoring communication, including on military affairs, climate change, illicit drugs, matters pertaining to AI, and P2P exchanges. China was essentially seeking reassurance that the US was not intending to contain it and its development. Also, that it was an equal of the US. The meeting happened in the backdrop of China's slowing economy, its no-limits partnership with Russia, its aggressive and expansionist behaviour in the Indo-Pacific and impediments to its economic growth, including due to technology denial and reciprocity regimes put in place in recent years by the US and its allies. Importantly, Xi also wanted the opportunity to meet face to face with US industry, financial and technology leaders to reassure them that the Chinese

market remains open and welcoming, and also to use their influence as leverage against the US government. Their continued participation in the Chinese market is significant for China's growth going forward.

A careful study of the outcomes would suggest that China needed the meeting more than the US. President Biden made it clear that the US would always stand up for its interests, its values and its allies and partners. President Xi for his part seems to have also been seeking reassurance that the world is big enough to accommodate both the US and China; a reassurance that does not appear to have been forthcoming.

Prior to the Biden-Xi summit, the US President received Indonesian President Widodo in Washington on November 13. During that visit, the two countries elevated their relations to the level of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership that covers a broad range of issues, including furthering the economic partnership, the Indo-Pacific, and regional stability through deeper security cooperation including in the cyber, maritime security and defence domains. Indonesia is the driving force in ASEAN, and the latter's approach to the Indo-Pacific. It is also an important economic partner of China. The signalling would not have been lost on Beijing.

The meeting on the sidelines of the APEC Summit on November 16 (after a gap of about one year) between Chinese President Xi and Japanese PM Kishida was part of the recent moves by China to mend fences with Japan and ROK. Japan is also seeking ways to restore normalcy in its relations with China, and safeguarding its territorial integrity. Kishida described his talks with Xi as "frank and constructive from a broad perspective". He conveyed concerns over China's collaboration with Russia and over peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait; and raised the issue of the situation in the East China Sea, including the Senkakus. He said that both sides have the will to comprehensively promote a mutually beneficial relationship based on "common strategic interests" and reaffirmed the common objective of a constructive and stable relationship. Economic issues were also discussed. He said, "We had an extremely meaningful meeting indeed."

For its part, the Chinese MFA reported that there was political consensus that the two sides should be "partners not threats", and that this must be translated into concrete policies and actions. Xi reminded Kishida that history and the Taiwan question are vital to the political foundation of bilateral relations, and that Japan must honour its commitment to ensure that this foundation is not damaged or shaken. Economic decoupling will not do anyone any good. The issue of water discharges from Fukushima was also red flagged.

The China-Japan dialogue has resumed, but the bridging will be complicated and impacted by the overall relationship the two have with the US.

Japanese PM Kishida was also proactive in the ASEAN region. He visited Malaysia and the Philippines early in the month and hosted the President of Vietnam in late November. All three are important economic partners and critically located in the South China Sea from the defence and security perspectives. Kishida described Malaysia as a geopolitical strategic partner and the Philippines as an "indispensable partner". With Vietnam, the partnership was upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and covering a very wide range of sectors for cooperation.

Australia for its part restored the substance, especially of its economic partnership with China, following the visit of PM Albanese to China from November 4-7; the first such visit since 2016, following the serious deterioration in bilateral relations ostensibly on account of China's unacceptable interference in Australia's internal affairs. Australia, while remaining a loyal ally of the US, appears to have concluded that the US is no longer the preeminent power in the Indo-Pacific, and hence it must be willing to work with the second most powerful country in the region.

Given the renewed focus by the US, allies and partners, including India, on the crucially located Pacific island nations, in the context of Chinese inroads in the region, it was perhaps no accident that President Xi Jinping also met with the PM of Fiji on the sidelines of the APEC summit on November 16. He recalled, according to the Chinese MFA, the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries and conveyed that "China expects Fiji to continue providing firm support on issues of China's core interests and major concerns".

The incessant China-related activities and jockeying during the month included the tenth trilateral meeting of the Foreign Ministers of China, Japan and ROK on November 26 in Busan, ROK, held after a gap of four years. It was agreed to swiftly restore and continue efforts to normalise trilateral relations. To start, the focus will be on P2P relations, S&T and digital transition, sustainable development and climate change, health and ageing population, economy and trade, and peace and security. Dates for the next summit were not announced, although the consensus to hold the summit at the earliest convenient time was reaffirmed, as also to continue efforts to hold a summit on a regular basis.

The top priority, according to Chinese FM Wang Yi, should be "to continue to follow the spirit of facing history squarely and being forward-looking, respect

each other's development path and core interests, properly handle sensitive issues and maintain sound bilateral relations, so as to lay a solid foundation for promoting a comprehensive restart of trilateral cooperation featuring steady and long-term progress". This would no doubt have raised some eyebrows at the meeting.

It was a busy month for Indian diplomacy. The King of Bhutan visited India from November 3-10. The visit enabled both sides to reaffirm their commitment to the very special partnership between them and for India to reiterate its full resolve to assist Bhutan, in accordance with its own identified priorities, with its development and other requirements.

The fifth 2+2 meeting of the Foreign and Defence Ministers of India and the United States was held on November 10 in Delhi, the outcome of which was described as "very rewarding and substantive" (Foreign Secretary's briefing on November 10). Ground covered included defence and security cooperation, trade and investment, technology partnerships, critical and emerging technologies, value and supply chains, space, minerals security, regional developments and connectivity projects. The Defence Secretary suggested that "in a sense, defence cooperation has become a rock solid support to the bilateral relations".

Interestingly, the second 2+2 meeting of the Foreign and Defence Ministers of India and Australia was held in Delhi on 20 November and was followed by the India-Australia Framework Dialogue between the Foreign Ministers on 21 December. The full gamut of the relationship seems to have been covered in the discussions. This is reflective of the new momentum in bilateral relations and the growing partnership in the QUAD context. Importantly, India now has a 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministers dialogue with all QUAD partners.

Australia's Foreign Minister Wong (November 21) described 2023 as "This has been a milestone year in our partnership and it's critical for the net region". She spoke of both countries having a shared interest in an Indo-Pacific where "all countries can benefit from strategic equilibrium".

In an important follow up of the agreement to strengthen partnership in trade and technology collaboration with the EU, the Ministerial co-chairs of the India-EU Trade and Technology Council met online on November 24 to take stock of progress in the three subgroups set up earlier in the year, following the first meeting of the Council in April in Brussels. India was represented by the Ministers of External Affairs, Commerce & Industry and MEITY. The sub-groups of the India-EU Council cover strategic technologies and digital connectivity,

clean and green energy technologies, and trade, investment and resilient supply chains. Progress has been reported in respect of semiconductors.

The establishment of the Council reflects the determination of the two sides to effectively leverage technology and innovation as a pillar of the partnership going forward.

To conclude its Presidency of the G20, India hosted two important online summits to ensure that as the baton passes, the momentum is sustained on agreements arrived at during its stewardship, and the focus on meeting the needs of the developing countries remains clear. The fact that the G20 Presidency will pass on to Brazil and then to South Africa should be reassuring in this context.

The second Voice of the Global South Summit was held on November 17, and the follow-up Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit on November 22, 2023.

India can take considerable satisfaction at having been able to ensure that the war in Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas war notwithstanding, the focus on development, especially of developing countries, on reform of international institutions and reformed multilateralism, on the strengthening of multipolarity, on unitedly addressing global challenges, and focusing on dialogue and diplomacy to resolve disputes, is not diluted.

Going forward, though, the challenges are not going to disappear or fade away. International peace and security remains seriously challenged and the threat of conflicts getting entrenched is very serious.

COP28 is currently underway in Abu Dhabi, where India is a key participant and PM Modi has already spoken on December 1. Positive outcomes, well financed and resourced, on effectively addressing climate change could provide a silver lining in an otherwise complex and dangerous international environment.



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