

Opinion – The Impact of an Indecisive America on the Indo-Pacific

Written by Julian McBride

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JULIAN MCBRIDE, MAR 14 2025

During the past several years, the world has been going through turbulent conflicts that have intertwined in some ways and heightened the fears of a Third World War. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Israeli-Hamas War, and tensions in the Indo-Pacific emphasized the need for valuable deterrence for countries that border growing threats. Against the backdrop of slow-tricking military aid, a lack of strategy by the United States under then-President Biden, and open diplomatic conflicts with European allies under current President Trump, East Asia is watching closely. Questions remain on whether Indo-Pacific countries should pursue their strategic autonomy and nuclear proliferation to combat rising threats and American indecisiveness.

The Indo-Pacific currently has several brewing conflicts that have wider regional implications and potential escalation factors. Russia's belligerent movements have not only been allocated to Ukraine but also Japan as the Kremlin withdrew from the WWII-era treaty with Tokyo over the Kuril Islands dispute. The withdrawal threatens the delicate power balance between Moscow and Tokyo as the suspension of the treaty could open hostilities in the future. Japan also faces threats from China's growing amphibious force, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). China's ambitions have far-reaching consequences for the Japanese archipelago and Luzon Strait, a lifeline of Japan's economy.

In the South China Sea, the Philippines and Vietnam are enduring PLAN naval aggression, which violates their territorial sovereignty and the United Nations law of the sea (UNCLOS). Frequent Chinese naval ramming of the finishing vessels of Vietnam and the Philippines only grew the partnerships with the United States. Washington recently ratified its mutual defense pact with Manila, and under the Biden Administration, a strategic alliance was made with Hanoi.

The Korean Peninsula faces an even more aggressive and unpredictable North Korea under Kim Jong-un. Ending all diplomatic talks with South Korea, bolstering the Korean People's Army with even more missile launches, and sending troops to intervene in Russia's aggression in Ukraine, the Kim Regime is showing signs they are preparing for a renewed Korean War. Furthermore, South Korea is suffering from political turbulence under the failed coup of President Yoon. The United States ratified the US-ROK alliance and stated South Korea would be protected, even with nuclear weapons, amidst the heightened Kim regime's belligerent actions. However, South Korea watches American indecisiveness closely as the North becomes more emboldened by the day.

The Taiwan Strait currently has the world's attention out of all brewing Indo-Pacific conflicts, as China continues to hint they will eventually choose the military option of forcibly annexing Taiwan. Due to the rising threats, the United States military is prioritizing options of defending Taiwan and restructuring the Armed Forces to counter China, such as Force Design 2030. Furthermore, Taiwan is preparing several contingencies against a possible invasion or blockade by China, such as reinvigorating its military, major defense spending, or even asymmetrical warfare against the PLA to enact attrition. The Republic of China's (ROC) military can also benefit from Western military doctrines to defend islets, such as the British small team initiative.

During the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the United States initially stated a policy of supporting Ukraine for "as long

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as it takes.” However, the ambiguity never led to a clear policy of helping the war-battered country to fully expel Russian forces from the illegally annexed territory or a clear path of Kyiv’s ascension into NATO. Frustrations grew between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and then-President Biden, and after the 2024 American Presidential election, the Ukrainian government looked forward to working with President Trump. Instead, Trump is enacting a policy of extortion over not only Ukraine, but Europe as well.

Feeling Europe and the war is a burden on America, rumors have circulated that the Trump Administration will not only force Ukraine to cede its occupied territory to Russia but also that US forces could withdraw from countries that gained independence from the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the administration is enacting a policy of extortion over Ukraine’s minerals without concrete guarantees of security, even when the United States previously disarmed the war-battered country. Trump’s current policies could mirror what the administration could force in the Indo-Pacific over the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), as Washington claims Taipei “stole” its chip centers.

Growing unpredictability in American foreign policy is a rising concern and a wake-up call for Indo-Pacific allies and partners. Admitting rising threats from China, North Korea, and Russia, America’s top regional allies will need to prepare contingencies if prior commitments sour. Japan, currently undergoing a major reinvigoration of its self-defense forces (JSDF), vows to continue supporting Ukraine despite American digression at the G20 Summit. Furthermore, Japan has opened a discussion on further nuclear sharing with the United States, even though Tokyo advocated for global nuclear disarmament in previous decades. The wars in Europe and the Middle East and brewing threats in Asia have made Japan reassess its national security and deterrence, and turbulence in US politics would only heighten the reassessment. Tokyo will most likely continue to enhance its military capabilities with Tomahawk cruise missiles, the F-35 Bravo, and further dialogue over global arms control.

Manila, which also has a mutual defense pact with Washington, would feel nervous, as the lack of American willingness to hold great relations with its allies in 2025 would affect the South China Sea. As China grows man-made islands and continues provoking a conflict with the Philippines, America’s top Southeast Asian ally could be at the mercy of unfair agreements and movements by Beijing if the US does not act decisively.

Indecisiveness and Trump’s foreign policy ambiguity could restart talks in South Korea over potential nuclear weapons. Though Seoul has praised Trump for attempting to mend relations with Pyongyang, the Kim regime is even more unstable and emboldened thanks to the mutual defense pact with Moscow. According to the NYT and several polls, support for an independent nuclear weapons program in South Korea remained high in September 2024, and the ongoing tensions between the United States government and NATO will only heighten alarms that South Koreans see America unwilling to respond to a nuclear strike by the North.

Out of all American allies in the Indo-Pacific, Taiwan is most likely to face an armed conflict solely because the United States no longer has a mutual defense treaty with Taipei, along with Trump’s heightened rhetoric and tariffs on the republic. The ROC will have an ally in Japan to contain China, but even then, both countries would have to rely on American support to repel the PLA’s ambitions.

China will likely become the biggest winner if the United States becomes an unreliable ally and strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific. If American soft power and force projection were to wane, the Indo-Pacific partnerships would miss the United States’ tactful leadership, hindering a counterbalance to the PLA. Potential American disengagement and rewarding a belligerent Russia with the sovereign territory of Ukraine during negotiations would cause alarms in Asia as China also lays claims to disputed territories, which the Wall Street Journal recently reported.

Talks of nuclear proliferation and a new arms race not seen since the Cold War could become a reality if the international order created after World War Two, and defense treaties and obligations, were seen as useless. Nuclear deterrence with the understanding of mutually assured destruction (MAD) has kept countries such as India and Pakistan, the United States, and Russia from conducting total wars against each other. The current ambiguity of the United States on whether it will uphold defense cooperation, alliances, and international law is not strategic and arguably makes the world more unstable and unpredictable. With brewing conflicts in the Indo-Pacific that could have

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major war implications without concrete deterrence, America's allies in the region would have no choice but to pursue independent nuclear programs.

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