

NIAS Global Politics Brief

East Asia in 2021: New era of hegemonic competition

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Introduction

The emerging regional military-security trends in the East Asia in 2021 calls for a greater concern. Despite the second-wave of COVID-19 pandemic and economic slowdown, China leadership is determined to go forward with the military exercise in the Taiwan Straits has created huge tension in the region. The South China Sea and East China Sea also witnessed an increasing number of activity of People Liberation Army – Navy (PLA-Navy), on the Himalayan borders PLA military stand-off with Indian troops in the Galwan Valley as the China and India failed to reach an agreement on the border issues. Chinese military build-up in the region pose serious security threat to neighboring countries than any other activity in the region. Strategics experts have cautioned China that the militaristic approach to resolve the Taiwan issues and various other issues in the Indo-pacific will lead to potential military conflict in the region. This ascribes to rising tension between the US – China bilateral relationship, Japan and South Korea is also keen to expand their defence cooperation with the US and other like-minded countries in the Indo-pacific to balance Chinese military threat in the region. On the other hand, two major economies of East Asia – Japan and South Korea relationship is undergoing profound changes due to the domestic politics over the historical issues, which has emerged into major economic and trade issues. As the two countries are facing major domestic crisis due to economic slowdown the strain in the bilateral relationship is causing major damage to the US alliance system in East Asia. Given the dynamic situation in the East Asia the article will look into some of the major development and trends in the 2021.

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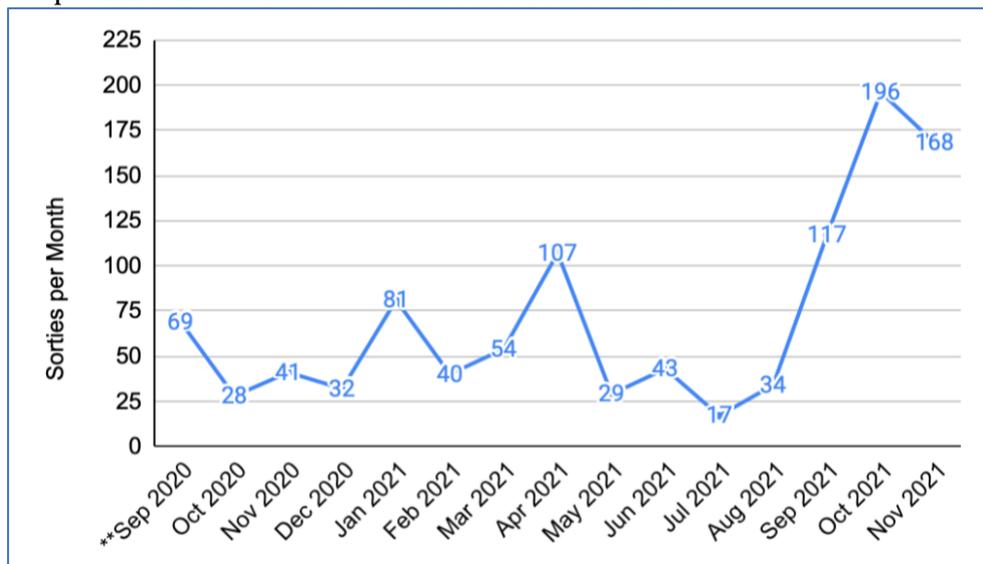
Major Developments and trends in Africa in 2021

Taiwan Crisis: Chinese Assertive Military Policy

In the last one year, PLA air incursion into the Taiwan Air-Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) has drastically increased, and the incursion have become a near-daily occurrence says, former Deputy Director of the Asia Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute Mr. Thomas J. Shattuck. The graph (1.1) indicates that surge in PLA-Airforce incursion into the Taiwan's ADIZ in the last one year. Particularly, during October and November 2021, the unprecedented number of warplane flew challenging Taiwan airspace. The outgoing U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Philip Davidson, said that China could invade Taiwan in next six years. According to Admiral Philip Davidson, Taiwan is the top priority of China, and in next few years Chinese leadership

may well in position to launch military strike across straits to annex Taiwan. For those aligning with Admiral Davidson's view, the latest Air-incursion into Taiwan air space is the latest proof that something is afoot. The US military expert view that China will use all means including military force to prevent Taiwan declaring independence. Moreover, Chinese military operates some advanced weapon systems and well-trained PLA soldiers will be difficult to defeat in a full-fledge war with the US. At the same time, any war-kind of scenario would seriously affect Chinese reputation being a global economic super power. China also fears that any attempt to annex Taiwan could lead to recognition of Taiwan as an independent sovereign country by western countries.

Graph 1.1: PLA Air Incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ



Source: Thomas J. Shattuck, Assessing One Year of PLA Air Incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ, Global Taiwan Institute

However, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposes "peaceful reunification," but he also indicated that China will use all the means possible to achieve the reunification. Speaking at the 110th anniversary of the Chinese revolution that overthrew China's last imperial dynasty in 1911, President Xi said unification in a "peaceful manner" was "most in line with the overall interest of the Chinese nation, including Taiwan compatriots". In midst of raising tension in the region, President Biden met virtually President Xi Jinping on November 15, 2021 to discuss 'complex nature of relations between the two countries and the importance of managing competition responsibly.'

Taiwan Crisis: The US Approach

The US has maintained, what is called "Strategic ambiguity," when it comes to China – Taiwan relationship, but it maintained diplomatic contacts, arms sales and economic cooperation. But, the US – Taiwan doesn't share no military agreement or security arrangement, which doesn't guarantee that the Taiwan will be protected by the US force during Chinese invasion of the island. However, the assumption is that the US will defend/help if the China launched an unproved invasion. This understanding stems from the 1979 congressional law which stat that "any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means" would be threat to the peace and "security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States." The US President Biden has raised the Taiwan issue with Primer Xi Jinping during virtual meeting on November

15, 2021. In the meeting, President Biden underscored that “the United States remains committed to the “one China” policy, guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, the three Joint Communiques, and the Six Assurances, and that the United States strongly opposes unilateral efforts to change the status quo or undermine peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.” President Xi Jinping warned that the US’s Taiwan Policy will escalate tension in the region and criticized Taiwanese leadership for pressuring the US administration. The Biden Administration have a tough choice in dealing with Taiwan crisis and maintaining close-relationship with the China on the economic and trade aspects.

The US Alliance in East Asia Reponses to Taiwan crisis: Newly elected Japanese Prime Minister Kishida has expressed his concern over growing tension in Taiwan straits. At the same time, Prime Minister Kishida is unlikely to make any policy changes to towards China and Taiwan. In fact, Professor Madoka Fukuda, Hosei University argues that Japan has no choice but to emphasise deterrence against Chinese threats while continuing dialogue with China. The South Korea takes a soft stance to the China – Taiwan relations has called for peace and stability in Taiwan straits. President Biden and President Moon emphasize the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait during the bilateral talk in May 21, 2021. The South Korea and Taiwan also share deep economic and trade view the Chinese provocation will impact the trade cooperation between two countries.

United States and China Relations in 2021: The Goals of Biden Administration

The US – China competition has entered new era of hegemonic competition amidst of growing tension in the Taiwan Straits. The US and China’s relations will be looked into two broad dimensions namely Economy and Security dimensions. President Biden has set his target to make America the face of global economic power and to compete with China globally in commerce and trade. President Biden in his opening remarks to congress reaffirmed that “we will work with Beijing when it is America’s interest do so,” but we as a Nation will compete in the position of strength by building back better at home working with our allies and partners, renewing our role in international institutions and reclaiming our credibility and moral authority. President Biden reaffirms America’s recommitment towards restoration of peace and stability in the Indo – Pacific region and the US President has signalled about “competition not conflict “with China will be the top priority in the United States Foreign Policy agenda. The trade and economic cooperation are vital for two nations to maintain stability in the bilateral relationship. China has now shown interest to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) would entice the United States back into the pact. This would create a positive environment in the Indo-pacific region.

On the geopolitical front, President Biden strategic engagement policies with the Quad members, G7 members and the United States newly formed alliance with Australia and United Kingdom (AUKUS) has intensified the strategic competition with China. The Biden administration views Chinese assertive militaristic policy to change the status quo unilaterally in the region is a threat to peace and stability of the Indo-pacific.

US – Japan Defence Cooperation: The US – Japan cooperation in security sphere rests upon the firm protection of sovereignty of Senkaku Island. The Biden Administration

has expressed his firm stance with the Japanese counterparts to enhance defence partnership and strengthening of defence capabilities in order to face the dangers posed by China in the region. The defence cooperation between US and Japan counterparts have set a new tone in the strategic arena. On November 16, 2021, US and Japan counterparts conducted Joint Bilateral Exercise. JMSDF Submarine JS Kaga and JS Murasame from IDP unit 21 and the. US Navy USS Milius conducted Anti – Submarine exercise in the South China Sea region. The exercise demonstrated on the firm commitment of US and Japan in resorting peace and stability in the region. The high-level bilateral exercises between JMSDF and US Navy in the South China Sea, East China Sea and Sea of Japan that the Biden administration will firmly support Japanese security in the region against the military provocation from China and North Korean.

AUKUS and East Asia

On September 15, 2021, the US, U.K and Australia jointly announced Trilateral Security partnership known as “AUKUS.” Under this new partnership the US and UK will develop nuclear-powered submarine for the Australian Navy and towards enhancement of joint defence capabilities and interoperability. This treaty will also foster deeper integration of security and defense-related science, technology, industrial bases, and supply chains. The AUKUS came as a surprise to many who thought the Quad was the de-facto grouping to counterbalance China in Indo-Pacific. But Quad is taking a nuance approach to regional balance and stability. Whereas AUKUS is primarily focused on security aspect of the Indo-pacific region.

US’s Alliance Partners - Japan and South: The US, Japan and South Korea and United States of America who share of common objective towards restoration of peace and stability in the region. In 2021, the strategic competition has stepped up new era of improved defence cooperation and partnership among Japan, South Korea and United States of America. In March 2021, United States and Republic of Korea jointly held the Foreign and Defence Ministerial (2+2) Meeting. The leaders of the three countries agreed North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile is a threat to east Asian security environment and reaffirmed the shared commitments to address and resolve the issues. The National Security advisors reaffirmed the US commitment towards working together to protect and advance their shared security goals through a concert trilateral cooperation towards denuclearization and to resolve issue which are greatly affecting our security partners in the region.

The US and South Korea cooperation expands much beyond the security dimensions. Tackling climate change and providing aid in times of the pandemic driven security landscape are some of the few initiatives of the US-South Korea cooperation. US and South Korea have entered into partnership with respect to meeting the Covid 19 health challenges and two countries have agreed to establish a comprehensive KORUS Global Vaccine partnership with the aim to develop joint response capabilities for infectious disease through international vaccine cooperation.

Japan – South Korea Relationship

In 2021, Japan and South Korea engaged in the high-level talks between Japan and ROK Foreign Ministers. The talk was focused on the resolving the ongoing issues regarding the Comfort Women since 2015, which has deeply affected their bilateral ties. Japanese foreign minister further urged the ROK Foreign minister to come to a conscience and

with respect to breaches of international law as the comfort women issue was resolved with Japan and ROK agreement in 2015 . Furthermore the Foreign Ministers of Japan and ROK reaffirmed the importance of Japan – USA and the Japan – South Korea Security cooperation for regional peace and stability, including dealing with North Korea, exchange of views of bilateral issues and including the issues concerning Japan and ROK.

Colonial Past: Historical issue remains a major stumbling block in the bilateral relationship between the two nations. The Comfort Women issue and the South Korean Supreme Court ruling in favour of forced labourers in 2018 have severely disrupted trade and commercial ties between the two nations as the relationship reached its lowest point in post-war history. As the situation is getting back to normalcy, after several rounds of political consultation from both sides, the rising sun flag issue during Tokyo Olympic Games – 2021 has once again cast a shadow on the question of Japanese colonial legacy.

Rising Sun Flag issue during Tokyo Olympic Game

The Kyokujitsuki (Rising Sun Flag of Japan) has become sensational news during Tokyo Olympic Game 2021 when South Korean players raised objection to flying the flag in the stadium. For many Koreans, the flag represents the scars of struggle and the pain of the Japanese invasion of the peninsula during the early 20th century. Even in the past, Koreans have raised objection to the rising sun flag due to its linkage with Japanese Imperial Army. They associate the flag with Japanese atrocities during World War II and condemn its contemporary use in public spheres. South Korean Foreign Ministry describes the flag as a symbol of militarism and imperialism. In fact, South Korea raised objection to the JMSDF Vessel for flying its rising sun flag as an ensign in 2018 Naval Fleet Review. The latest such condemnation came during the Tokyo Olympics 2021. This raises severe concern over the bilateral relationship between Japan and South Korea.

Moving beyond: Politicizing the Rising Sun Flag will only limit and restrict the resetting of ties between both countries. It is leading to moral decay in their leadership and people to people engagement. The South Korean government under President Moon, nearing its completion of term, is facing tough economic and domestic challenges induced by the COVID-19. Similarly, the new Prime Minister of Japan Fumio Kishida, also being challenged by tough economic and foreign policy decisions should lead from the front in building strong cooperation between Japan and South Korea. From Japan's point of view building trust is the most important aspect; the politicization of rising sun flag will only deteriorate the political relationship between the two countries. The common interests of both nations are best met when cordial and cooperative relations are maintained between them.

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Forecasts

The ever-changing global dynamics in the Indo-Pacific poses new challenges to the two nations that will need mutual trust and respect to tackle. Japan and South Korea should deepen the economic cooperation. Japan should take a lead in inviting South Korea to join the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) along with India and Australia for the revival of economy in post-pandemic era. Economic cooperation and strong political ties

are the only way forward for both Japan and South Korea to overcome the impasse created by historical issues. In the light of dwindling support from Washington and rising tension from Chinese militaristic tendency towards Taiwan, South Korea and Japan need to work harder to ease tension and keep their presence relevant in global politics.

The US – China heightened tension and strategic competition forcing the region into the blink of strategic dilemma. The China's recent test of hypersonic missile and Fractional Orbital Bombardment System (FOBS) is a 'wakeup call' for the US strategic command. This will accelerate arms race in nuclear domain and outer-space. Moreover, the US – China competition to control the 'global common' – Maritime, Space and Cyber, will have significant impact on the global trade, technology, commerce related activity. Japan and other like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific region have raised concern over the safety and security of maritime domain, which is a major artery of global trade and commerce. Japan and South Korea trade relationships has picked up pace in 2021 is faced with multiple political and diplomatic challenges over the colonial past and trade related issues. The two countries leadership pledged to resolve the issue in amicable way to smoothen the trade and commerce relationship between two countries.

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