

US Bill seeks to strengthen Quad to counter China

INDIA EMERGES AS AN IMPORTANT PARTNER FOR THE US IN INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

WASHINGTON

A bipartisan group of US senators has introduced legislation aimed at strengthening Washington's ability to counter what they describe as the People's Republic of China's "grey-zone" tactics in the Indo-Pacific, arguing that Beijing's coercive activities threaten regional stability, US national security and key allies across the region.

The legislation, introduced on Wednesday (local time) by Sena-tors Tammy Duckworth, a Democrat from Illinois, and Marsha Blackburn, a Republican from Tennessee, seeks to enhance co-operation between the US State Department and Indo-Pacific partners to better monitor, deter and respond to China's activities that fall short of open military conflict.

"Increasing PRC aggression in the Indo-Pacific doesn't just im-pact our partners in the region -- it threatens America's economic and national security," Duckworth said while announcing the bi-partisan measure.

"We are a Pacific nation, and we depend on a free and open In-do-Pacific. As the PRC works to undermine regional stability through its grey-zone tactics, our bipartisan Billwould help ensure the US better coordinates with our partners and deters these ef-forts that pose a real threat to our security," she added.

According to the senators, "grey-zone tactics" include actions designed to undermine stability without triggering conventional armed conflict. The press release cites cyberattacks, economic coercion and information warfare among the methods employed by China.

"Communist China is constantly devising ways to evade detec-tion and act maliciously towards our allies through cyberattacks, economic coercion, information warfare, and other 'grey-zone' tactics that undermine the US and our allies without using open military conflict," Blackburn said.

"This legislation would strengthen our ability to counter the CCP's malign geopolitical interests and its increasingly aggressive tactics in the Indo-Pacific," she added.

Under the bill, the Secretary of State would be re-



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quired to submit a strategy to improve monitoring of Chinese behaviour in the In-do-Pacific and identify government branches, programmes and actors that can strengthen oversight.

The legislation also calls for a task force to track, formulate and strengthen tools to counter and mitigate Chinese grey-zone op-erations. The task force would evaluate progress through performance indicators and report its findings to Congress.

In addition, the State Department would be instructed to identify new

areas of collaboration with Indo-Pacific allies, partners and private stakeholders to strengthen collective capabilities to deter Chinese coercion. The senators said the effort is intended to ad-vance US national interests, protect the global economy and im-prove regional security.

The announcement also highlighted Duckworth's broader legisla-tive efforts on Indo-Pacific security. Her office said she has sponsored measures including the Strategy for Crisis Management Act and the South China Sea Strategy Act, both of

which have cleared committee and await consideration by the full Sen-ate.

release further noted that provisions backed by Duckworth in this year's National Defence Authorisation Act are intended to improve crisis management, cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners, asymmetric operations and medical preparedness across the region.

India has emerged as an increasingly important partner in the US Indo-Pacific strategy through frameworks such as the Quad, which also includes Japan and Australia.

New Delhi and Washington have expanded defence cooperation, intelligence sharing and maritime coordination in recent years, while both governments have repeatedly stressed the importance of a free, open and rules-based Indo-Pacific.

Roadmap to 2030: PM Modi's visit takes India-NZ bilateral ties into new phase

NEW DELHI

INDIA's relationship with New Zealand has entered a new phase following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit, the first to the country by an Indian Premier in two decades, ac-cording to an article published by NZIIA (New Zealand Institute of International Affairs).

The article highlights that during the two-day visit, PM Modi and New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon upgraded the ties between the two countries to a full Strate-gic Partnership, backed by a four-year "Roadmap to 2030" spanning defence, trade, maritime security, agriculture, tourism, sports, culture and science.

India has gained importance in New Zealand's long-term strategy as the country is among the fastest-growing major economies and is projected to become the world's third-largest economy by 2030, with GDP estimated at around \$7 trillion (NZ\$12 trillion). India's middle class is expected to exceed 700 million people, creating one of the largest consumer markets on Earth, the article states.

During the Auckland visit, Modi and New Zealand counterpart Luxon set a for-



mal target to double bilateral trade to NZ\$7 billion (about \$4.2 billion) by 2030.

The article highlights that PM Modi's visit produced 18 outcomes, including 10 agree-ments and memorandums of understanding, that go well beyond trade. The centre piece, the 'Roadmap to 2030', sets a four-year framework for cooperation across defence, trade, maritime security, tourism, agriculture, sports, scientific research, people-to-people ex-changes and multilateral engagement.

Defence and maritime security dominated the agenda. India and New Zealand concl-uded a Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement enabling the Indian Navy and the New Zea-land Defence Force to access each

other's facilities for refueling, replenishment and maintenance during deployments.

The two countries also signed a Memorandum of Arrangement on Maritime Cooperation to strengthen dialogue, operational coordination and information-sharing across the In-do-Pacific.

They agreed to establish a Maritime Security Dialogue, and New Zealand will lead the maritime-security pillar of India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, focusing on illegal, unre-ported and unregulated fishing. A new Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism will deepen intelligence-sharing and coordination, the article observes.

India and New Zealand

announced negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) on March 16, 2025 and concluded in a record 9 months, making this the fastest concluded free trade agreement. The signing of FTA enhances market access and tariff prefer-ences for Indian exports to New Zealand, while serving as a gateway to the wid-er Oceania and Pacific Island markets. The agreement opens opportunities for India to emerge as a key supplier of skilled workforce, alongside prospects for future co-operation in areas such as AYUSH and services such as Yoga Instructors, Indian Chefs, and Mu-sic Teachers, and services under sector of interests like IT, Engineering, Healthcare, Education, and Construction.

The FTA signed with New Zealand marked a historic milestone in bilateral economic relations. It is a comprehensive framework encompassing market access, agricultural productivity, investment, talent mobility, collaboration in sports, tourism, and people-to-people ties. The FTA is designed to benefit manufacturers, farmers, MSMEs, women entrepreneurs, students, and skilled professionals across both nations.

IRGC warns harsh response to nations joining hands with US

TEHRAN

THE Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) on Thursday warned of a harsh and firm response to nations involved in the US attacks and crimes against Iran, local media re-ported.

In a statement released on Thursday, the IRGC's Public Relations warned the US' ac-complishes in West Asia and beyond to change their behaviour to avoid retaliation from Iran.

The IRGC said that Iran's determination and steadfastness have destroyed the enemy front. It also announced the explosion of two more oil tankers that were trying to pass through an unsafe ship-

ping route south of the Strait of Hormuz. It said that the two vessels turned back after fire erupted in one of them, Iran's official Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) reported.

Speaking about the US actions in the Strait of Hormuz, the IRGC said that the waterway is part of Iran and is in its full control and vowed to not allow a stranger from thousands of kilometres away to intervene.

The IRGC warned of a harsh response to nations that are involved in helping the US if they do not change their behaviour. It said that the Strait of Hormuz will not be opened until the threats and interference of US officials end



in maritime activities. The Strait of Hormuz connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. It is one of the world's most important energy corridors, carrying oil and liquefied natural gas exports from major Gulf producers to international markets. The IRGC's statement

comes amid renewed tensions in West Asia following the military exchanges between Iran and the US.

On Wednesday, the IRGC claimed that its Aerospace Force has attacked a US air base and the US Central Command (CENT-COM) headquarters in Jordan, lo-

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tical talks in Tehran to discuss arrangements for safe navigation through the Strait of Hormuz.

Speaking to reporters on July 26, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baqaei described the talks between Oman and Iran regarding safe navigation through the Strait of Hormuz as "useful and forward-looking" and noted that progress had been made.

Baqaei said the talks were held on July 24-25 at the level of Deputy Foreign Ministers, during which they discussed common principles and practical mechanisms for ensuring safe maritime traffic movement through the waterway while respecting the sovereign rights of the two littoral states.

As Iran war drags on, Trump's approval ratings drop to 28%

LINLEY SANDERS/
MIKE CATALINI
WASHINGTON

MOST Americans say the war in Iran has not been worth fighting, and President Donald Trump's approval rating on Iran has fallen slightly since last month, according to a new AP-NORC poll.

The results are a stark repudiation of Trump's approach to the conflict, which has dragged on far longer than he originally predicted.

About two-thirds of US adults say the war with Iran, which began February 28, has not been worthwhile, according to the new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Centre for Public Affairs Research. That includes the vast majority of Democrats and inde-pendents, as well as about 37 per cent of Republicans.

The poll was conducted July 23-27, as the US and Iran paused attacks following a near-ly two-week escalation in the war. During the escalation, the US targeted Iranian mili-tary and commercial sites while Iran attacked US military facilities in the Middle East, resulting in additional deaths of American service members. Since the war began, 18 US service members have been killed, but the Trump administration has sought to revise those numbers.

The survey reinforces how unpopular the Iran war has become at home, a potential problem for congressional

Even some Republican lawmakers opposing the prolonged West Asia conflict

Republicans up for reelection in November who have de-fended Trump's military actions.

Just 28 per cent of US adults now approve of how Trump is handling Iran, a slight decline from 34 per cent last month. Even Republicans appear to be increasingly unhappy with the prolonged conflict. Roughly 61 per cent of Republicans approve of how Trump is handling Iran, an apparent decline from 71 per cent in June.

The margin of sampling error for Republicans is 6 points, so the decline is considered slight, but it's still noteworthy given Republicans' much higher approval of how Trump is handling the presidency overall.

Trump's overall approval rating is at 33 per cent, slightly below where he stood at this point in his first term and similar to where former President Joe Biden stood about one and a half years into his presidency, when inflation peaked.

Robert McClary, a 52-year-old Republican from Sugar Grove, Ohio, is sceptical the war could be brought to an easy conclusion and disapproves of Trump's handling of it. McClary voted for the president once, in 2016, but recalls that during the last election, Trump campaigned on not starting new wars in the Middle East.

"I don't have any trust in this administration at all and



Republicans, in particular, say it's highly important to keep Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. About 8 in 10 say this is at least "very" important, compared to roughly 7 in 10 who say that about preventing oil and gas prices from rising and ne-gotiating a permanent ceasefire with Iran

to why they brought us into this war, why they're putting our soldiers at risk again," he said.

The findings also indicate that most Americans' goals for the conflict may not be aligned with Trump, who has repeatedly said the war was launched to keep a nuclear weapon out of Iran's hands. While about two-thirds of US adults say it's "extremely" or "very" important to keep Iran from gaining a nuclear weapon — with Republicans es-pecially likely to say this — even more Americans say it's highly important for the US to keep gasoline prices low or negotiate a permanent cease-fire with Iran.

McClary added: "I really don't know what you can do now. I mean, you've kind of got-ten yourself buried into this mess."

Relatively few want military action against Iran to continue

There's little appetite among Americans for a prolonged conflict. Only about 2 in 10 US adults want to continue military action in Iran, while about 3 in 10 say the US should pause military action and seek a renewed ceasefire through negotiations. About 2 in 10 want to completely stop military action in Iran and roughly one-quarter don't know enough to say.

About half of Republicans

say the US should continue military action against Iran, particularly those who identify as "very conservative." Republicans who identify as MAGA — part of Trump's Make America Great Again movement — are much likelier than non-MAGA Republicans to say the war should continue. Non-MAGA Republicans are more likely to want a ceasefire or a complete halt to the military action.

Jennifer Norton, a 71-year-old Republican from Crossville, Tennessee, supports mili-tary action in Iran but has been displeased to see prices rising for things like beef roasts and hamburgers. Norton lives on a "modest income," and things are getting expensive.

"I am getting a little impatient, but when I start to dwell on that for a minute, I remember Mr. President Trump is a brilliant businessman," she said. "He can't tell us exactly what he's doing, but I trust that he's doing something. I mean, he is doing fine."

Independents and Democrats are more likely than Republicans to want to stop military action against Iran immediately, although about 3 in 10 Republicans want either a pause or complete stop to military action.

Ryan Sloan, a 39-year-old Republican in Lakeland, Florida, has come to disapprove of the conflict in Iran recently because he wants

a better explanation from the Trump ad-ministration about why the war intensified in late July.

"Let's face it, not everybody's going to be happy with him," Sloan said. "I just wish I'd have had more transparency about why things were going on the way they were."

It's important to keep gas prices down

Many Americans continue to be concerned about the pocketbook impact of the Iran war. About 7 in 10 US adults — 72 per cent — say it's "extremely" or "very" important for the US to prevent domestic oil and gas prices from rising, up slightly from 67 per cent in March.

Oil topped \$100 a barrel last week, ending a brief period of lower prices when hostili-ties between the US and Iran eased in June. Gas prices rose above \$4 per gallon on av-erage, and the elevated fuel price is hitting consumers in other ways, too. Inflation cooled last month but remains elevated, and consumer spending has slowed, with signs that Americans are taking advantage of sales and other incentives.

There are also indications that fluctuating gasoline prices are an increasingly big prob-lem for many Americans. About 4 in 10 say the cost of gas for their car is a "major source" of stress in their life right now, compared to about 3 in 10 in February.

US must maintain its dominance over China in AI: Trump

WASHINGTON

PRESIDENT Donald Trump has said artificial intelligence would have a greater impact than the internet and stressed that the United States must maintain its lead over China while carefully weighing the need for regulation of the fast-evolving technology.

Trump said his administration was examining possible safeguards for AI development but warned against imposing restrictions that could undermine America's competitive advantage.

"We're looking at AI. We're looking at controls," Trump told reporters on Wednesday (lo-cal time) in response to a question about stronger regulation of artificial intelligence. "We're also making sure that we lead. So, we're leading China in AI by a lot."

Trump said China was pursuing AI development with few regulatory constraints, making it essential for the United States to strike the right balance between oversight and inno-



vation. "China has virtually no controls; it's freewheeling a little bit. So, we have to be careful in both ways."

He cautioned that excessive regulation could hand a strategic advantage to Beijing. "We don't want to restrict them where all of a sudden, we come in second to China."

The President described AI as a transformational technology whose significance would surpass previous technological revolutions. "Whoever wins with AI is going to win, that's how big it is. So, it's bigger than the internet ever was; it's bigger than anything ever was." Trump also made clear that he wanted American technology companies to continue advancing without unnecessary government intervention. "So, I don't want to restrict -- I know many of these people, I don't want to restrict them from doing great work."