

Team Biden says America is back. But is Asia ready to welcome it?

As U.S. looks to repair old alliances, democracy faces a crisis of credibility

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NEW YORK/TOKYO -- "America is back," Joe Biden said on Nov. 24 as he introduced his foreign policy team at a press conference in Delaware: "Ready to lead the world, not retreat from it."

Arrayed behind him, standing a sensible, socially distanced 2 meters apart, were the cream of the crop of a generation of foreign policy professionals. To the left, Antony Blinken, incoming secretary of state, a longtime adviser whose history with Biden dates back to his chairmanship of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Further along, Jake Sullivan, national security adviser and formerly Biden's top security aide, and four others.

America's international mission, Biden made clear, was back in the sure hands of the establishment: Harvard and Yale degrees, Dupont Circle think tanks, and decades of experience in government, steeped in the liberal internationalism of their forebears.

He has promised a reversal of the "America First" foreign policy of the Donald Trump era, which he called "America Alone." The strong-arming of allies, the coddling of dictators, the enabling of populists and the withdrawal from international commitments would end. In its place would be a return to a more traditional post-Cold War policy, emphasizing allies and multilateralism, with democracy as its core organizing principle.

"First and foremost, we must repair and reinvigorate our own democracy," Biden wrote in the journal *Foreign Affairs* in March, "even as we strengthen the coalition of democracies that stand with us around the world."

But, just as with previous administrations, high ideals are about to meet messy reality. Over four years of Trump, the world has moved on, and now geopolitical power, rather than idealism, increasingly dictates the global order. The three pillars of America's mission -- multilateralism, alliances and democracy -- have been so badly undermined that they may be irretrievable.

Nowhere is this more true than in Asia, where the zeitgeist of U.S. policy is primarily focused on competing with a newly emerged superpower. China is "robbing" U.S. companies of their technology, bullying its neighbors, and extending its global reach, Biden wrote in *Foreign Affairs*. The answer is "to build a united front of U.S. allies and partners to confront China's abusive behaviors ... even as we seek to cooperate with Beijing on issues where our interests converge, such as climate change, nonproliferation, and global health security."

But building such a united front is complicated. The U.S. under Biden "returns to the region with a bruised ego," Kavi Chongkittavorn, a columnist and commentator on Southeast Asian affairs based in Bangkok, told *Nikkei Asia*. "The U.S. can either be more humble or more assertive. Whichever way it proceeds, it will have implications for the Indo-Pacific region."

For starters, the traditional reliance on multilateral institutions is hampered by China's increasing weight in those very same organizations, said Paul Haenle, director of the Beijing-based Carnegie Tsinghua Center for Global Policy. "The Biden administration will be in an uphill battle on Day One."

Just in November, China stole a march on the U.S. by signing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a multilateral Asia free trade deal seen by many as a China-led alternative to the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership, which Trump left in 2017.

The second pillar, the alliance system, is also in disarray. Trump drew down U.S. troops in Germany and openly questioned America's commitment to defend allies in the event of a war. Many have reacted predictably by hedging: Japan, for example, has placed a side bet on strengthening economic cooperation with China. In November, both countries agreed to resume business travel by the end of the month and to forge ahead with multilateral trade deals.

"It is the art of diplomacy to pursue these seemingly different goals at the same time," said Ichiro Fujisaki, Japan's ambassador to Washington during Barack Obama's first term.

Meanwhile, global enthusiasm for democracy is at a low ebb. The ability of the U.S. to set an example has been crippled by police brutality against peaceful protesters in America's cities and election chaos, but, above all, the dysfunction of Washington's response to COVID-19.

The deterioration of U.S. democracy and institutions was "confirmation of our worst fears about the downsides of American-style democracy," said Bilahari Kausikan, former permanent secretary of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Those of us who know America know that it is capable of great generosity and great intolerance, and that both stem from the same set of values," he said.

Despite the setback in democracy's reputation, it remains the centerpiece of the Biden-Blinken worldview. "The best initial, foundational answer to those challenges is, in fact, democracy. Because it is, when it's functioning, the foundation of our strength at home, but also abroad," said Blinken, in a published conversation with Walter Russell Mead, a noted academic, in July.

In the writings of Biden and his team, the idea looms large. According to the "Biden Plan for Leading the Democratic World to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century," he promises to host a "global Summit for Democracy to renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the Free World."

"To win the competition for the future against China or anyone else, we must sharpen our innovative edge and unite the economic might of democracies around the world to counter abusive economic practices," the plan said.

And in a Washington Post op-ed Blinken co-authored last year with Robert Kagan, a leading neoconservative, they championed the concept of forming a "league of democracies" or a "democratic cooperative network" to counter China's influence outreach.

"The United States has European allies and Asian allies, but no institution links the Asian and European democracies," Blinken and Kagan wrote. "As China's Belt and Road initiative draws Asia, Europe, and the Middle East closer together in ways that serve Beijing's interests, the democracies also need a global perspective -- and new institutions to forge a common strategic, economic and political vision." They were referring to Chinese President Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy of bolstering transport infrastructure, as well as Chinese influence, across Eurasia.

Antony Blinken *(Secretary of state)*

Born in New York and partially raised in France, Blinken is a Europhile and fluent French speaker. His stepfather was a Holocaust survivor. He joined Bill Clinton's National Security Council staff in 1994 and has stayed in politics since, working for Joe Biden as an adviser during his presidential campaign in 2008 and later in the State Department under Barack Obama. A committed liberal internationalist, he had advocated a "league of democracies" together with Robert Kagan, the neoconservative intellectual.

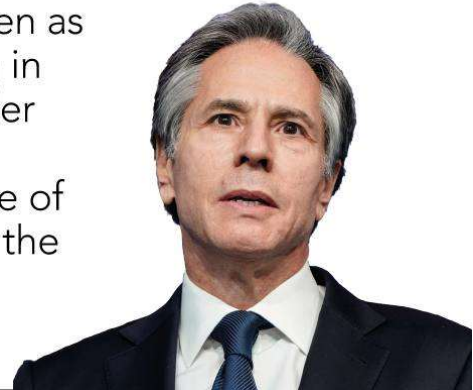


Photo by Reuters

Dan Fried, a former U.S. ambassador, told the Atlantic Council Nov. 23 that "in core views, Tony [Blinken] may be closer to [former U.S. President Bill Clinton's Secretary of State] Madeleine Albright -- for whom America is also a personal beacon of liberty -- than to the cooler outlook Obama brought to America's foreign-policy purposes."

In his first speech as Biden's pick for secretary of state, Blinken recounted the story of how his stepfather, a Holocaust survivor, was lifted into freedom by an African-American soldier during World War II and how the U.S. still represents "the last best hope on Earth," however imperfectly.

The idea of an alliance or "league" of democracies remains vague -- though much the same could be said of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. However, there is no political litmus test for Beijing. In contrast, conditioning political relations on democracy could be alienating to exactly those states that the U.S. would like to rally to its banner in the regional competition with China: states like the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand.

"Much will depend on what they mean by a 'revived commitment to democratization,'" said Kausikan, who has argued that Trump did more than his Democratic predecessor Obama to restore the credibility of U.S. power in Asia.

"If this is just a means of differentiating itself from Trump, that's fine. But if this is a policy that they intend to actively pursue, they should understand that not everyone -- not even American friends and allies -- shares the American definition of democracy or all American values. ... Unless such a policy is implemented with an appreciation of such nuances, not only will it fail, but could push the region into China's arms".

"If they really make this [democratization] a priority, I wonder if they have any sense of strategy" Kausikan told Nikkei.

Countries in the region already fall all over on the democratic spectrum. Vietnam is a communist regime, while this year, Thailand saw mass pro-democracy protests that were met with a violent

government crackdown. The pandemic has also provided cover for leaders such as Indonesian President Joko Widodo and Rodrigo Duterte, president of the Philippines, to inch closer to authoritarianism.

Duterte infamously told Obama to "go to hell" after receiving criticism of his violent war on drugs. Until November, Duterte waffled on extending the Philippines' Visiting Forces Agreement with the U.S., a critical deterrent to China's intrusions in the South China Sea.

The Trump administration did little to stem the backsliding of much of the Southeast Asia region into authoritarian rule and even invited Duterte and Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, a former junta leader, to Washington in 2017 (Duterte didn't go). Myanmar, meanwhile, made a transition to democracy under Obama but has steadily slid back into authoritarian rule under Trump.

"Across the region, the one thing that was welcomed by regional leaders was the move away from democracy promotion" under Trump, said Ann Marie Murphy, a specialist on Southeast Asia at Seton Hall University.

Blinken has made clear he is aware of the possible contradiction between finding partners and upholding democratic ideals. "There are countries that we need to work with, clearly, including in Asia, that may not fit the Jeffersonian democracy ideal that we may have," he told Mead. "Obviously, we don't either at this point," he added. "But when you shore up your democratic base, when you get democracies working together, that creates a foundation upon which to bring in others on different issues."

Joshua Kurlantzick, senior fellow for Southeast Asia at the Council on Foreign Relations, said the focus on China may mean a certain amount of compromise with the democracy agenda. "The need to corral a lot of regional support in Southeast Asia ... may prod human rights and democracy to the back burner," he said to Nikkei.

'Those days are over'

A statue of a girl, placidly sitting in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, was standing in Tony Blinken's way.

It was April 2015, and he was four months into his appointment as the new deputy secretary of state. He had convened his Japanese and South Korean counterparts in Washington, and the inaugural deputies' meeting had gone swimmingly, discussing issues from maritime security to climate change. But then a Japanese reporter asked whether Japan and South Korea's deep-running differences over war reparations hampered trilateral cooperation between the allies.

It was a pointed question. Blinken deftly skirted it. And by the end of that year, with U.S. encouragement, an agreement was reached in which Japan would donate funds to women forced into sex work during World War II. In exchange, South Korea would remove the statue commemorating so-called comfort women from the Japanese Embassy.

But as soon as Blinken left the Obama administration in 2017, a similar statue sprang up in the South Korean city of Busan. Japan, affronted, recalled diplomats and withdrew from the agreement.

The episode illustrates the tangled history and multiple agendas of countries the U.S. would like to rely on in the front ranks of Asia's democracies. Today, as Blinken returns to the state department, relations between Japan and South Korea have hit a low -- just one sore point in a region bristling with grievances. China is growing assertive about border disputes with India and Japan, and pressuring Taiwan; North Korea remains volatile; and the line demarcating Hong Kong from the mainland grows ever fainter.

Blinken is a "problem-solver," said Daniel Russel, former assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, describing his old colleague. Sitting in on meetings, Russel said, he was always struck by Blinken's clarity -- his ability to articulate U.S. policy and rationale, as well as to "elicit from the other side what their priorities are, what reservations they might have about what we were suggesting, how that fit in with narrowed interests."

Russel recalled one incident well: During TPP negotiations, Blinken and others brought Vietnam into the pact by pinning down pragmatic reforms for the country to meet international standards - - despite its undemocratic government.

His counterpart as national security adviser, Sullivan, is a former Rhodes scholar, who is seen as a rising star in the Democratic Party. Less prolific in foreign policy journals than Blinken, Sullivan is a skilled political operator and credited with helping to negotiate the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, from which Trump withdrew in 2018.

But the leader of the Biden foreign policy team is clearly Biden, who brings more international experience to job than anyone since George H.W. Bush. According to Japan's former U.S. ambassador Fujisaki, nominating Blinken signals that Biden's intention to keep foreign policy up his own sleeve, compared with Obama, who came to the White House as a relative novice.

"I think Mr. Biden decided to have foreign policy in his grip by appointing his former staffer and assistants," said Fujisaki. "It's different from Obama, who appointed Hillary Clinton and John Kerry as secretaries of state."

The issues of the region have changed exponentially since the team was last in power. The sprawling TPP agreement Blinken helped craft has gone on without the U.S., which effectively forfeited its leadership in regional trade when Trump abruptly withdrew. And the recent signing of the RCEP without American participation is seen as a wake-up call for Washington: The region is now comfortable reaching a multilateral pact without it.

In recent years, Indo-Pacific countries have tended to rely on the U.S. for security and on China for trade. But now, they increasingly see economic development as taking precedence over security concerns. And they are generally more worried about Chinese economic influence than Chinese military threats, said a recent report by Rand Corp., the federally funded U.S. think tank, based on interviews with over 100 U.S. and partner government officials and academic experts. For some, Biden and Blinken's renewed focus on democracy should be taken seriously but not interpreted too narrowly.

Conflicts, interests

CHINA

Aggrieved at U.S. trade sanctions; shows growing assertiveness over territorial claims as the rest of the world is distracted by the pandemic

NORTH KOREA

Under erratic leader Kim Jong Un, a sharp ramp-up in missile launches was paused only by dialogue with the Trump administration; a promise to denuclearize never yielded results

JAPAN

The "cornerstone" of the U.S. alliance in Asia is being tested by deep-running tensions over military purchases and hosting of bases

TAIWAN

Stepped-up military activity from mainland

HONG KONG

New security law threatens autonomy from China

SOUTHEAST ASIA

New beneficiaries of Chinese investment; growing dependence on China for trade and COVID-19 vaccines

Source: Nikkei Asia research

While democratic values are "a force multiplier for the United States, particularly in the form of soft power," Biden and Blinken "are not ideologues," said Russel, now vice president at the New York-based Asia Society Policy Institute. "This is not a democracy jihad. This is a practical and reality-based approach."

When it comes to longtime allies such as Japan and Australia, which share more strategic interests with the U.S. but rely on trade with China, talk of a democratic coalition "puts them in an awkward position, potentially." But at the end of the day, "these countries have to confront the reality of China's challenge," said John Lee, former national security adviser to Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and now a senior fellow at Washington think tank Hudson Institute. "That doesn't mean they have to go as far as the United States in rhetoric, or in policies."

But it does mean they do have choices to make about what kind of rules they want to exist under in the future" he told Nikkei.

As the linchpin of the U.S. alliance system in Asia, Japan would likely be a willing participant in a democratic coalition. Japan has kept the U.S. leadership seat warm, steering the TPP to completion while Trump withdrew from the pact. All the while however, Tokyo has also sought closer ties with China, due to trade tensions with the U.S. and jitters over the Washington's future commitment in Asia.

India, meanwhile, is an important pillar of the Indo-Pacific strategy espoused by the outgoing Trump administration, has historically been a hesitant joiner. The country not only reneged on the RCEP trade pact, which China dominates, but has also kept the Quad partnership with the U.S., Japan and Australia at arm's length.

"The feeling is that Biden and his team may seek nuanced changes, but it is unlikely that they would pull back from the support that they have provided vis-a-vis China," Gurjit Singh, former Indian ambassador to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, said to Nikkei.

A renewed U.S. focus on democracy is sure to antagonize China's leaders, who suspect Washington of often using democracy to destabilize rival governments. Blinken, for example, told CBS News that the greatest foreign policy failure of the Obama era was the decision not to intervene significantly in Syria, which is "something I will take with me for the rest of my days," he said.

But Leslie Vinjamuri, director of Chatham House's U.S. and Americas program, said that Blinken and Biden were unlikely to return to the "old ways" of promoting democracy.

"We're not going to see a return to the use of military force to push democracy in countries. I think those days are over. There's no appetite for it and there's no money for it," said Vinjamuri.

Jake Sullivan *(National security adviser)*

Raised in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and a former Rhodes Scholar, Sullivan has worked in various advisory roles for Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and Joe Biden. He conducted the talks that led to a cease-fire in Gaza in 2012, and the secret opening of negotiations with Iran that led to the 2015 nuclear deal. "He is a once-in-a-generation intellect with the experience and temperament for one of the toughest jobs in the world," Biden said.

Photo by Reuters



During a Chatham House webinar moderated by Vinjamuri in April, Blinken criticized Trump's approach. He pointed out that democratic countries represent more than half of the world's economy, which should cause Beijing to take them seriously.

"The U.S. showing up again and making clear that we will play a leadership role -- that makes a big difference, instead of going AWOL," said Blinken. "If we work together with our partners, we will get a lot further than this schizophrenia switching back and forth in the past few years."

Blinken also addressed the rising populism and extreme nationalism within the U.S., saying that foreign policy needs to be more inclusive and work better for the benefit of everyday people.

"People are desperately looking for simple answers and strength [in] this world that they don't understand, that's angering and frustrating them, it's not delivering for them," said Blinken.

"There's no going back. ... If we're not able to demonstrate, for example, in the conduct of our foreign policy, that is actually delivering for people in ways that make sense in their own lives, then we're not going to get their sustained support."

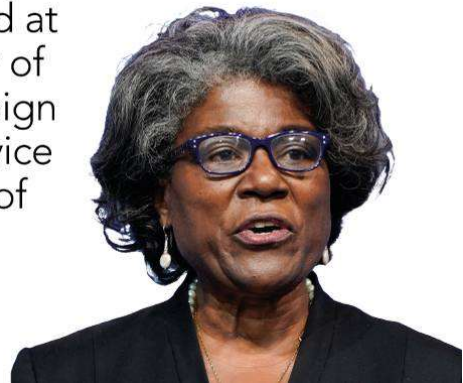
Chaos from order

On closer inspection, say some experts, Blinken and Biden's call for uniting democracies serves more than foreign policy. It may be a response to the crisis at home, where Americans are more divided than ever before. First of all, a focus on democracy as opposed to autocrats differentiates Biden from the Trump administration, for both domestic and overseas watchers.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield *(Ambassador to the United Nations)*

Born and raised in Louisiana, she has said her father was illiterate but "the smartest person I ever knew." Educated at Louisiana State University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, she joined the U.S. foreign service in 1982 and was a career foreign service officer until she was fired as part of a purge of the State Department by the Trump administration in 2017.

Photo by Reuters



Secondly, Blinken's focus on democracy may also be aimed at broadening the political consensus in Washington by bringing in a key group of Republicans, the neoconservatives and so-called "never Trumpers" who quit the party in the wake of Trump's election and who typically advocate democracy promotion and intervention abroad. Kagan, Blinken's co-author, for example, is a former Republican who quit the party in 2016. He had previously been adviser to Republican presidential candidates Mitt Romney and John McCain.

Biden has made it clear that his top priority is ending the pandemic, recovering the economy and restoring trust in the U.S. government. Nikkei reported in October that Biden will not likely make major trade deals in his first year because he needs to invest domestically first.

Many of these domestic goals, from climate change to public health, require China's cooperation and are both areas where Biden said he wants to seek common ground.

China, for its part, has said it welcomes "constructive" problem-solving, though the hostility of the Trump era remains. "Trump has built up some kind of bipartisan consensus against China. That's the challenge China will have in terms of how to continue to dialogue with the U.S. With Biden, it's better, as we have an urgent need to talk, but certainly, the structure of the problem remains," said Wang Huiyao, founder and president of Center for China & Globalization, a Beijing think tank.

Even though Blinken sends out a pro-democracy message, the Biden administration would not take an anti-China approach, said Clayton Dube, director of the U.S.-China Institute at the University of Southern California.

Dube said that Biden "is not blind" to how China operates today, he is not trying to curb China with a democracy crusade or to make China more democratic. Instead, Blinken's approach could reassure allies of the U.S.'s willingness to work together while Biden addresses domestic concerns first, such as the economy and the pandemic.

"Blinken is writing for a domestic audience, but he's also sending signals to those allies who have doubted American commitment to democracy, who have seen a creeping authoritarianism in the American way," said Dube. "I think that his essay should be understood in a way of reminding America of what it could and should be, [as well as] signaling to others, 'We know we need to get back in this direction and when we do, we want to work with you.'"

Vinjamuri from Chatham House also pointed out that the Biden team does not see China as an enemy even though it will take a hard stance on Beijing because of human rights issues. Biden's administration will not work to alienate China with "a league of democracies," she said.

"I think there's a very clear recognition that the U.S.-China cooperation is the key that unlocks the solution to all the major global challenges," said Vinjamuri. "Not just in climate [and] pandemic prevention, [but also] global economy, sending it in the direction of growth and managing the spread of technology."

"[Biden's people] are not Cold War warriors," Vinjamuri said.