

Was Biden's Taiwan statement scripted? 5 takeaways from his Asia trip

Quad summit, new trade framework underscore region's importance to U.S.

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TOKYO/SEOUL -- U.S. President Joe Biden's five-day trip to Asia was an attempt to show the world, and especially China, that the Indo-Pacific is the priority region for his administration.

In a two-pronged approach, Biden sought to strengthen both security and economic ties during his visit. On the security front, whether intentionally or by a slip of tongue, he left nobody doubting he would use force to defend Taiwan if China attempts to invade. On the business front, he launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) as an alternative to Asian trade pacts that don't include the U.S.

But the reality is that Ukraine -- just like Afghanistan before it -- is also dominating the administration's attention. And while the attempt to refocus on the Indo-Pacific has been welcomed by many, some question whether the U.S. and its allies are doing enough to counter the perceived threat posed by China.

Here are five takeaways from Biden's tour.

U.S. highlights Indo-Pacific focus, especially on Taiwan

Two events reflected the Biden administration's renewed determination to engage with the Indo-Pacific region -- both happened on Monday afternoon in Tokyo.

The first came during Biden's joint news conference with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. Asked if he was willing to get involved militarily to defend Taiwan, Biden replied, "Yes," pausing briefly before adding, "It's a commitment we made."

Just before the question was asked, Biden had closed his briefing book on the podium, ready to end the event. But when this question was posed, he reopened the book and seemed to read from it. "The idea that it can be taken by force is just not appropriate. It will dislocate the entire region," he said.

The White House quickly followed up with a statement insisting that the policy on Taiwan has not changed, but the fact that Biden was relying on notes suggested that the administration was prepared to make a statement on Taiwan, emphasizing that an attempt by China to take the island by force will not be tolerated.

Deterring Chinese expansion of power is at the top of the Biden administration's agenda on Asia policy, and ensuring the stability of the Taiwan Strait is a high-priority issue. A joint statement by Kishida and Biden also reflected this, stepping up the wording from the leaders' statement of April 2021 to underline their increasing wariness of Beijing's actions in the area.

The second highlight occurred later that day with the launch of IPEF, a flagship policy of Biden's administration that signals its intention to take economic leadership in the region.

At an event in Tokyo, representatives from the 13 participating nations expressed their expectations for "new opportunities" through cooperation on four areas: supply chain resiliency, clean energy and decarbonization, tax and anti-corruption, and trade.

What advantages the IPEF will bring to participants, however, remains to be seen. It is not a traditional free trade agreement that lowers tariffs and allows access to foreign markets.

Richard Fontaine, CEO at Washington think tank Center for a New American Security, wrote in a note that IPEF was "better than nothing, but how much better remains unclear."

Japan pledges to boost defense spending

One notable outcome was Japan's clear expression of a desire to enhance the U.S.-Japan alliance. Kishida promised Biden that he would fundamentally strengthen Japan's defense capabilities and "secure a substantial increase in defense spending" to support this effort.

The perceived increase in threat from China in the Indo-Pacific has pushed the two nations' relationship to a new level of importance. The leaders' joint statement condemned Beijing's actions as "inconsistent with the international rules-based order" and "strongly opposed any unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the East China Sea."

Tellingly, after the Biden trip, the Chinese Foreign Ministry on Tuesday night summoned the deputy chief of mission of the Japanese Embassy in Beijing to protest against the "negative and mistaken words and actions about China" displayed during the meetings in Tokyo.

India signs on to China-bashing, but lays off Moscow

At a meeting of the so-called Quad nations held in Tokyo on Tuesday, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi joined the leaders of the U.S., Japan and Australia in strongly opposing coercive, provocative or unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo in the Indo-Pacific, an implicit criticism of China.

Tetsuo Kotani, a senior fellow at The Japan Institute of International Affairs and professor of global studies at Meikai University, said that India joining the call against changing the status quo was "a step forward."

The Quad joint statement stressed that the leaders "champion[ed] adherence to international law ... and the maintenance of freedom of navigation and overflight, to meet challenges to the maritime rules-based order, including in the East and South China Seas."

Meanwhile, the statement did not mention Russia by name, nor did it criticize actions taken in Ukraine, only portraying the situation there as a "tragic crisis."

Kazuhiro Maeshima, professor of political science at Japan's Sophia University, said the statement reflected an "agonizing effort by the U.S., Japan and Australia to keep India, who clearly takes a different position regarding China and Russia, on their side."

India has historically maintained a policy of strategic autonomy. Although territorial disputes with China have caused slight shifts, "it hasn't affected the policy that much," Maeshima told Nikkei Asia. Modi's neutral stance remains unchanged in the face of the Ukraine war, backed by its long-standing friendship with Moscow.

South Korea and Australia's new leaders join Indo-Pacific club

South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese both took their first stand in the diplomatic arena, quickly signing on to the concept of a free and open, rules-based Indo-Pacific.

On defense, Yoon suggested that the U.S. stretch its boundaries of extended deterrence, noting that "fighters, bombers and missiles" may be deployed closer to his country.

Down south, Australia's new leader Albanese jumped on a plane to Japan shortly after he was sworn in on Monday.

In his opening remarks at the Quad summit, he emphasized that the four nations shared "a commitment to representative democracy, the rule of law, and the right to live in peace." He said the partnership was "needed now more than ever to ... build a stronger, more cooperative Indo-Pacific region that respects sovereignty."

His nation is growing increasingly wary of China, which is moving closer to Pacific island nations. In April, China signed a security pact with the Solomon Islands, less than 2,000 km away from Australia's eastern coastline.

The Quad joint statement noted that the leaders would strengthen their cooperation with Pacific island countries and "reaffirmed [their] support for Pacific Islands Forum unity and Pacific regional security frameworks."

Kotani pointed out that "the statements on the Pacific island countries are more in-depth than past descriptions and mention security, most likely a response to the recent activity by China."

Autocracies strike back

Biden repeatedly described the current state of the world as "democracies versus autocracies." The countries categorized as autocracies -- North Korea, China and Russia -- quickly responded in their own ways.

South Korea's military said Wednesday that North Korea fired three ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan, a day after Biden departed the region. South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said that one of the three was estimated to be an intercontinental ballistic missile which flew 360 km with a maximum altitude of 540 km.

"North Korea's continuing provocations will end up making a united deterrence of the Republic of Korea and the United States stronger and quicker," the South Korean government said in a statement.

Moreover, a total of six Chinese and Russian bombers flew around Japan on Tuesday -- the day of the Quad -- according to Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi.

Meanwhile, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi is set to visit seven Pacific nations and East Timor from Thursday to June 4 -- reflecting a determination to ramp up ties with the likes of the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Fiji and Vanuatu.

That comes after the Quad launched a new maritime initiative on Tuesday to strengthen monitoring of the seas, by connecting existing surveillance centers in India, Singapore, the Solomons and Vanuatu