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# Southeast Asia Seeks to Tiptoe Through U.S.-China Taiwan Minefield

Region's top diplomats are at pains to avoid taking sides as Washington-Beijing spat hijacks Asean forum



By Keith Zhai [Follow](#) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and Feliz Solomon [Follow](#) in Singapore

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Escalating tensions between Washington and Beijing over Taiwan stole the focus of last week's meeting of Southeast Asia's top diplomats in Cambodia, with the major powers using the forum to take swipes at each other as the region's foreign ministers struggled to maintain their ties with both sides.

Officials from member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, meeting face to face for the first time since the pandemic, had been expected to focus on efforts to end the crisis in Myanmar and other regional issues. But attention to the forum faded as China began four days of military drills encircling Taiwan after U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.) visited the self-governing island in defiance of warnings from Beijing, which claims it as part of its territory.

“Many countries raised concerns about the recent developments that could destabilize the

region and lead to miscalculations and unpredictable consequences among major powers,” Prak Sokhonn, Cambodia’s deputy prime minister and foreign minister, told a news conference Saturday.

After she touched down in Taipei late Tuesday, Mrs. Pelosi said that America’s support for Taiwan was “ironclad,” and that “the world faces a choice between democracy and autocracy.” China retaliated by firing missiles over Taiwan for the first time and conducting military drills near the island’s coastline and major ports, with some of the exercise areas intruding into what Taipei claims as its territorial waters. Five Chinese missiles also landed inside Japan’s exclusive economic zone, Tokyo’s Defense Ministry said.



China has taken “dangerous acts to a new level,” U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken told a news conference on the sidelines of the Asean gathering. His Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, blamed the rising tension on provocation by Washington. The two men had no direct contact with each other, despite spending two days in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh.

Alongside the danger of armed conflict on their doorsteps, Asean countries are wary of being caught in the diplomatic fallout should they be seen taking sides and as the U.S. and China both seek to solidify diplomatic alliances across a range of issues, including Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

When Japan’s foreign minister was due to speak on Friday, Mr. Wang and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov walked out and held a bilateral meeting. Mr. Wang also canceled a meeting with his Japanese counterpart after the Group of Seven, a club of wealthy nations that includes Japan, said Beijing had no justification to use Mrs. Pelosi’s visit as a pretext for aggressive military activity around Taiwan.

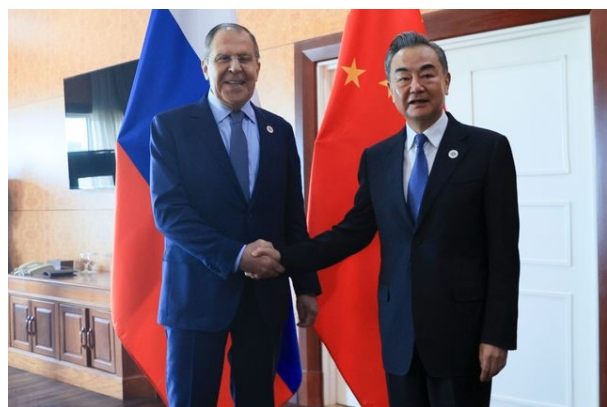
“This is a dangerous, dangerous moment for the whole world,” Singapore Foreign Affairs Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said Friday, adding that if the relationship between the U.S. and China breaks apart, “it means higher prices, it means less efficient supply chains, it means a more divided world, or more disrupted and dangerous world. So those are the stakes.”

While the major powers struck an increasingly bellicose tone against each other during the Asean forum, regional diplomats were careful not to cause offense to either China or the U.S.

Ministers at the closed-door talks had expressed hope that the two major powers would try “their best to de-escalate the tension,” Kung Phoak, Asean spokesman and Cambodia’s deputy foreign minister, said last week.

Malaysian Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah urged all parties to address the situation “in the best manner possible,” while Thai foreign ministry spokesman Tanee Sangrat urged “utmost restraint.”

Southeast Asian diplomats said the apparent hesitation to take sides over Taiwan underscored concern among governments that they risked being used as pawns by the U.S. and China in their contest for regional influence.



While most Southeast Asian countries are to varying degrees wary of Beijing’s growing influence and military power, China now ranks as their No. 1 trading partner. The region is also geographically close to China, to which it has longstanding cultural links. While some countries, such as Cambodia, are more closely aligned with Beijing, most also have strong security and economic ties to the U.S. Two

countries—Thailand and the Philippines—are U.S. treaty allies.

Short of conflict, further bifurcation of the Chinese and Western economies threatens the complicated supply chains that support the region’s export-driven markets. Some nations worry that, even in a cold conflict, they may be perceived as choosing sides and face economic retaliation.

Military conflict between the U.S. and China would force regional governments to make choices they would rather avoid, political analysts say. U.S. allies Thailand and the Philippines could be directly drawn into any conflict as they may be called upon to host military assets. Singapore, a strategic partner of Washington, may be forced to decide whether to continue supporting U.S. naval operations or allowing American surveillance

aircraft to rotate out of its Paya Lebar air base.

Other nations would face similar dilemmas, whereby single choices would place them firmly on one side or another. Indonesia could be faced with decisions such as whether to allow U.S. and allied warships to transit through its waters. Vietnam, which in recent years has hosted several U.S. Navy port calls, could be called upon for maritime support.

“There are all these discrete questions that Southeast Asian countries would immediately have to answer that would sort of reveal which way they lean between the United States and China, which is something they have long sought to avoid,” said Aaron Connelly, a Singapore-based researcher with the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a London-based think tank.

The recent dispute over Taiwan was a reminder for Asean officials that the threat of war is real. A statement by Asean foreign ministers, produced quickly and agreed on by all member states, sent a message to both Washington and Beijing that the region doesn’t want conflict, Mr. Connelly said. “It was a pretty loud signal to the United States and China to knock it off.”

Most Asean states want to have positive relations with both the U.S. and China, said Chong Ja Ian, a political scientist at the National University of Singapore. “However, what they want and what the world might become are two separate things.”

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