

Politics

Pelosi Trip Sets Back Biden's Effort to Woo Asia Against China

- South Korea, India stayed quiet on US speaker's landmark trip
- Regional leaders want to avoid being drawn into US-China spat



Nancy Pelosi in Taipei on Aug. 3. *Photographer: I-Hwa Cheng/Bloomberg*

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House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's swing through Asia aimed to convey the US's "strong and unshakable" support for the region. It ended up leaving many countries in stunned silence as China conducted unprecedented military drills around Taiwan.

The shockwaves from the highest-level US visit to Taiwan in a quarter century are still reverberating around the region days after she flew back to Washington. China's military has extended exercises designed to show an ability to encircle the island and cut off the Taiwan Strait, one of the world's busiest trade routes, days after launching missiles that likely flew over Taipei and into waters Japan claims as an exclusive economic zone.

On its own, such a display would normally generate widespread condemnation of China. But many governments also saw Pelosi's visit as a step too far -- and they don't want to get caught in the middle.

While longtime allies Japan and Australia joined the US in criticizing China's response, other security partners in the region stayed quiet. South Korea's leader sneaked Pelosi after the visit, India hasn't said a word and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations rushed to reaffirm that they only recognize One China -- a basic framework that Beijing requires for diplomatic relations, although interpretations vary across nations.

"Most Southeast Asian countries will view the United States as having provoked China's entirely predictable overreaction," said Shahrizan Lockman, a director at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies in Malaysia. "The lesson for Asean members here is that you will have to continuously hedge your bets. There is no telling whose actions might precipitate the next crisis in US-China relations."

Since taking office, President Joe Biden has sought to build a broad coalition in Asia to push back against Chinese overreach, in part, by telling smaller economies they don't need to pick sides. That marked a stark contrast with the Trump administration, which pressured countries in the region to ban Chinese telecoms giant Huawei Technologies Co. and take other steps that would effectively force them to choose between the world's biggest economies.

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The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, unveiled by Biden during a visit to South Korea in May, was emblematic of the approach. While the IPEF launch excluded China, the US managed to sign up seven

Southeast Asian countries as well as Fiji by insisting it was open to Beijing and leaving out Taiwan, even as the administration began parallel trade discussions with the island's government.

Those talks, while short of a full-fledged trade agreement sought by many in the region, signaled a more robust US leadership presence in Asia to counter China in a way that was palatable to nations that need strong trade ties with Beijing to boost their economies. They also complemented other US initiatives to counter China, including introducing an alternative to President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road investments, as well as a push for stronger ties on trade, public health and cybersecurity.

Yet all of a sudden, after months of trying to make it comfortable for countries to align with the US, Pelosi's visit forced Asia to take a stand on China's most sensitive issue of all. And many governments just put their heads down.



Supporters wait for the arrival of Pelosi in Taipei on Aug. 2. *Photographer: I-Hwa Cheng/Bloomberg*

Asean put out a statement urging “maximum restraint” and reaffirming its support for a “One-China Policy,” with Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn -- whose country is currently chairing the group -- indicating that Pelosi was to blame for triggering the tensions. Malaysia's special envoy to China condemned Pelosi for “fanning the fires of antagonism” in a statement backing Beijing, although the country's foreign minister later said it wasn't official government policy.

Over the weekend, Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan warned that rising tensions between the US and China presented a “dangerous, dangerous moment for the world,” adding: “I know you have to compete, maybe even confront, but we all have skin in this game.”

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Asean’s statement “is quite telling actually of the alarm in Southeast Asia about their own economic well-being being disrupted by a flashpoint developing in the Taiwan Strait,” said Alexander Neill, a Singapore-based adviser on geopolitical risk who previously worked for the US and UK governments. He said the number of countries referencing their One China policies was “a sort litmus test for Beijing’s burgeoning influence across the region.”

Balancing Act

While the White House hasn’t openly endorsed Pelosi’s trip, it has defended her right to visit Taiwan as consistent with years of American policy. The Biden administration has repeatedly said that Congress is an independent branch of government, and the president had no power to tell her to call off the trip.

Pelosi herself said the visit was meant to show US support for the island democracy, insisting that China “cannot prevent world leaders or anyone from traveling to Taiwan.” On Tuesday, she said her trip was meant to reinforce Biden’s focus on the region and blasted Xi’s response, saying he was “acting like a scared bully.”

In a sign of how both the US and China sought to shape the narrative over the visit, both sides cited Asean’s statement as affirmation of their position. When asked about the region’s response, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said “the total disproportion” between Pelosi’s visit and China’s drills was “very clear to countries throughout the region.”

Several days later, China’s Foreign Ministry counted Asean among what it said were 170 countries that “have voiced staunch support for China on the Taiwan question through various means.”

“They form an overwhelming majority versus the US and its few followers,” Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told reporters on Monday.

Some of the most telling reactions came from US partners in the region.

In South Asia, as countries including Bangladesh and Sri Lanka affirmed their support for the One China policy, India kept mum on the issue. Although India is a member of the Quad grouping with the US, Japan and Australia, its official silence shows the limits of how far it's ready to veer into the American orbit as it looks to manage its relationship with China.



Pelosi with and South Korea National Assembly Speaker Kim Jin-pyo on Aug. 4. *Photographer: Lee Young-ho/Sipa/Bloomberg*

“Not having a response is also kind of a response,” said Sana Hashmi, post-doctoral fellow at the Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation. “There is a feeling that India is shying away from taking a stand.”

South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol ended up in the most difficult position, avoiding Pelosi altogether after she flew from Taiwan to Seoul ostensibly due to a previously scheduled holiday. South Korea's foreign minister is paying an official visit to China this week, shortly after Beijing scrapped a meeting with Japan's top diplomat after the nation joined the Group of Seven in expressing concern about the military drills around Taiwan.

While Pelosi's visit helped show the US commitment to the region, it also put South Korea in an awkward position and highlighted general confusion over American policy toward China, according to Seong-hyon Lee, a visiting scholar at Harvard University's Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies. He cited recent US moves such as declaring "genocide" against mostly Muslim Uyghurs in the far west region of Xinjiang, even as America still wants to do business with China.

"What the US lacks is coherence and clarity in its China policy," Lee said. "It makes allies scratch their heads."

– *With assistance by Sudhi Ranjan Sen*

(Updates with Pelosi comments in 14th paragraph.)

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