

US foreign policy

Joe Biden bids to boost alliances in Asia and affirm commitment to region

US president visits South Korea and Japan as worries grow Ukraine war has diverted focus from China



Joe Biden hosted the first Asean summit in Washington last week ahead of his trip to Seoul and Tokyo © Pejabat Perdana Menteri/Bernama/dpa

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Joe Biden will send a clear message to US allies in Asia of his commitment to security in the region during a visit to South Korea and Japan this week despite his administration's focus on the war in Ukraine.

On his first trip to Asia as US president, Biden will spend five days in Seoul and Tokyo from Friday. His visit is designed to boost alliances and reassure countries that he has not diverted attention from China, which he has called his [top foreign policy challenge](#).

“The Ukraine crisis has raised questions about whether the US can handle two major contingencies on opposite sides of the world at the same time,” said Michael Green, a former top White House Asia adviser. “When Biden goes to Korea and Japan, he can demonstrate that foes on either side of the globe will increasingly face a global coalition of democracies.”

Some experts have voiced concerns that Russia's invasion of Ukraine would force Biden to shift his focus from Asia just as worries rise that an emboldened China could take military [action against Taiwan](#). Those fears have compounded frustrations that the president has not developed an economic component to his Indo-Pacific strategy.

Biden will try to address those frustrations during his trip, which will take place just

days after he hosted the leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations for their [first summit](#) in Washington.

In addition to seeing Japan's prime minister Fumio Kishida and [Yoon Suk-yeol](#), the new conservative South Korean president, Biden will join a meeting of the Quad, the security grouping that includes the US, Japan, Australia and India, in Tokyo. He will also unveil his first effort at an economic policy for the region known as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.

“The fact that Biden has kept engaged in diplomatic outreach with Asia, hosted the Asean summit and will visit South Korea and Japan and have the Quad leaders summit shows that the focus on the Indo-Pacific will remain,” said Mireya Solís, a Japan expert at the Brookings Institution think-tank.



Japanese foreign minister Yoshimasa Hayashi delivered a letter from Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to new South Korean president Yoon Suk-yeol. The US has been pushing the two countries to resolve historical disputes © Chung Sung-Jun/Reuters

US national security adviser Jake Sullivan said that Biden would “seize this pivotal moment to assert bold . . . leadership” in Asia and show how like-minded partners can “define the security architecture” in the region.

“It will send a powerful message,” he said. “We think that message will be heard everywhere. We think it will be heard in Beijing.”

For Japan, the show of unity will be critical to boosting the country's security against China. “In light of what is happening in Ukraine . . . it is critical to demonstrate to the

world that the US-Japan alliance is solid because that will serve as a deterrence,” said Mitoji Yabunaka, a former top Japanese foreign ministry official.

The US and Tokyo have grown closer over shared concerns about Beijing’s growing assertiveness. The Japanese government is particularly anxious about the implications of a conflict in Taiwan, which China claims as part of its territory. Kishida recently warned that “[Ukraine might be East Asia tomorrow](#)”, referring to Taiwan.

In South Korea, Biden hopes Yoon will be more willing to co-operate to counter China than his predecessor. Seoul has announced it will join the IPEF and there are signs it may engage in some non-military Quad activities.

But Hyun-wook Kim, a professor at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy, said Seoul was still scarred by the failure of former US president Donald Trump to provide adequate assistance after South Korea was hit by Chinese [economic sanctions](#) over the deployment of a US missile defence system in 2016.

Kim said Seoul was not prepared for Chinese economic coercion, adding: “South Korea still depends on the Chinese market - what alternative does it have?”

Jaewoo Choo, head of the China centre at the Korea Research Institute for National Security think-tank, said Yoon would be prepared to take a more assertive stance on China than his predecessor but there were limits to how far he would be willing to shift. “The biggest challenge for Yoon is whether he’s committed to being on the same page as Biden on human rights issues like Xinjiang,” he added.

But Biden may also face challenges on his trip. Ahead of his departure on Thursday, his team was trying to sign up more nations to the IPEF, according to people familiar with the talks. The [only Asean members](#) that have committed are Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines. India has also not given a firm response.

Holding the first Quad summit in Asia will be symbolic, but US-India ties have been marred by New Delhi’s [refusal to condemn](#) the Russian invasion. It also remains unclear if Australia will participate given that it will hold a general election on Saturday and there may not be a clear winner in time to travel to Tokyo for the meeting.

Biden would also like to nudge Japan and South Korea to resolve historical disputes that have hampered co-operation between the countries, but the prospects are not promising.

The US held talks about a trilateral summit with Kishida and Yoon. South Korea was more willing but Japan was wary and wants to see how Yoon will act in office, according to people familiar with the discussions.

Sullivan also warned that the US was preparing for the possibility that North Korea may be preparing to conduct a long-range missile or nuclear test during Biden's trip.

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