

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/bidens-asia-trip-shows-challenges-in-uniting-region-11653388431>

WORLDASIA

# Biden's Asia Trip Shows Challenges in Uniting Region

President pleases some with tough talk on Taiwan, but nations differ on trade, Russia



By [Andrew Restuccia](#) [Follow](#) , [Peter Landers](#) [Follow](#) and [Ken Thomas](#) [Follow](#)

Updated May 24, 2022 3:37 pm ET

TOKYO—President Biden came to Asia to show the world the U.S. is united with its regional allies, and with a few tough words on Taiwan he galvanized hawks who want a stronger stand against China.

But as he departed Tuesday for Washington after his first visit to the region as commander in chief, there were signs that the solidarity on display here will face serious tests, with Indo-Pacific countries holding divergent priorities on trade and security.

The divide was highlighted when Mr. Biden publicly denounced Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a catastrophe during the trip but couldn't get the word Russia into a joint statement with India, Japan and Australia.

At the same time, the signature economic platform Mr. Biden unveiled this week, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, was met with skepticism by some governments in the region,

who were disappointed that it didn't include the kind of tariff reductions and expanded market access they have sought.

"I'm worried it's going to end in nothing more than beautiful words," said Yoritumi Watanabe, a former Japanese trade negotiator who teaches at Kansai University of International Studies. Prof. Watanabe said Mr. Biden's ability to bring the region together might lessen further if the president's Democratic Party loses midterm elections.



Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida endorsed the new framework but reminded Mr. Biden that he had other trade priorities on his mind. Mr. Kishida urged the U.S. to rejoin the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade group linking Pacific Rim nations that is politically dead in Washington.

Disagreements with allies risk undercutting a central element in the Biden strategy for countering China—using the U.S.'s alliances to limit Beijing's influence on global rules and organizations. Mr. Biden and his aides have worked to revitalize these alliances, resolving disputes over trade tariffs that had caused ill-will, coordinating closely and, with the U.K., arranging for Australia to acquire nuclear submarines.

Beijing has stiffened its response, leveraging its clout among developing nations, drawing closer to Russia and amping up criticism of U.S. policies world-wide in international forums and on social and mainstream media. While Mr. Biden was in Tokyo, China and Russia conducted a joint exercise Tuesday, flying strategic bombers near Japan, the Japanese Defense Ministry said.

Japanese and South Korean militaries scrambled jets in response. A senior Biden

administration official pointed to the exercise as an example of Beijing's continuing military cooperation with Moscow to carve out spheres of influence and dominate their neighbors. "They are working together to advance that vision," the official said.

India's ties to Russia hung over Tuesday's in-person meeting of the leaders of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, which brings together the U.S., Japan, Australia and India. In his public remarks at the meeting, Mr. Biden, sitting across the room from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, excoriated Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"This is more than just a European issue. It's a global issue," the U.S. president said. "The fact is that when you turn on the television and see what Russia's doing now, it appears to me that Putin is trying to extinguish a culture." Mr. Biden addressed the war again during a bilateral meeting with Mr. Modi. The Indian leader, in his public remarks, made no mention of the crisis.

A joint statement released by the four Quad nations following the meeting referred to "a tragic conflict raging in Ukraine," without saying who was to blame. India has remained neutral, abstaining from United Nations votes to condemn Russia's action and declining to join other U.S. allies in imposing sanctions on Moscow. Russia is India's largest arms supplier.

U.S. officials have sought to persuade India to take a more forceful stance against Russia with limited success, though Mr. Modi has condemned killings of Ukrainian civilians and provided humanitarian aid to the country.



On China, Mr. Biden gave encouragement to Japanese conservatives with comments

Monday that the U.S. would respond militarily if China invaded Taiwan. Allies and foes alike interpreted his comments as effectively overturning the “strategic ambiguity” doctrine that has guided the U.S. for decades, under which Washington has refrained from saying whether it would intervene in a China-Taiwan conflict.

For his part, Mr. Biden said Tuesday, “My policy has not changed at all.” U.S. officials echoed that denial, saying the president was merely repeating longstanding commitments to help Taiwan defend itself.

Masahisa Sato, the head of the foreign-affairs committee in Japan’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party, praised Mr. Biden’s statement as an “excellent gaffe.” Mr. Sato said it would spur Japan to beef up its own military forces and diplomatic influence to defend Taiwan.

For the leaders of the closest U.S. allies in the region—Japan, South Korea and Australia—Mr. Biden’s presence alone was enough to provide a lift. He met South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol days into Mr. Yoon’s five-year term and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese just one day after he took office.

Mr. Kishida, the Japanese leader, bolstered his already high popularity by showing his rapport with Mr. Biden, entertaining his guest with a dinner of Japanese delicacies including dried sea cucumber ovaries.

Still, the Taiwan comments raised concern among those who worry about provoking Beijing or believe that trade ties with China should get priority over geopolitical disputes.

In recent years, the U.S. has often had trouble rallying nations behind an anti-China stance. The outgoing president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, whose country signed on to the economic framework, steered his country closer to Beijing despite territorial and maritime disputes and threatened to renege on a military pact with the U.S.

Japan’s southern island of Okinawa, which hosts the majority of U.S. troops in Japan, would be close to the front lines of a Taiwan conflict. “If the tension level gets raised this high” through the Biden comments, “the chance of an explosive clash rises,” said Manabu Sato, a professor at Okinawa International University.

Beijing appeared inclined not to make too much of Mr. Biden’s remarks. While officials criticized the president, state media gave the issue modest play and stressed other

American statements that nothing had changed.

The Taiwan dust-up dominated news coverage at home and abroad, drowning out the announcement that the U.S. and 12 other countries had signed on to the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.

With the U.S. unwilling to offer measures to open its market further to imports from Asian nations, the framework was a hard sell for less-developed nations. Many of these countries, with their hefty reliance on the Chinese economy, have also been reluctant to join a group that is portrayed as an effort to confront Beijing.

U.S. officials pointed to the fact that they were able to get buy-in from a dozen countries, including seven nations in the 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations, as a victory.

But the president's advisers made concessions to win that support. Countries can pick and choose which parts of the agreement they will participate in, according to a U.S. official. That accommodation allows members to opt out of negotiations on politically complicated issues such as anticorruption efforts.

The agreement also doesn't directly mention China, though U.S. officials said it was intended in part to counter Beijing's influence. Several world leaders who endorsed the framework didn't participate in a Monday event unveiling the new agreement, assigning lower-level officials to speak via video link in their place.

—*Chieko Tsuneoka contributed to this article.*

**Write to** Andrew Restuccia at [andrew.restuccia@wsj.com](mailto:andrew.restuccia@wsj.com), Peter Landers at [peter.landiers@wsj.com](mailto:peter.landiers@wsj.com) and Ken Thomas at [ken.thomas@wsj.com](mailto:ken.thomas@wsj.com)

*Appeared in the May 25, 2022, print edition as 'Biden's Asia Trip Exposes Hurdles'.*