

As Biden makes his first presidential trip to Asia, war in Europe looms large

The four-day journey to South Korea and Japan, intended to counter Chinese influence, will now highlight concerns connected to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

SEOUL — President Joe Biden on Friday begins his first trip to Asia since he took office amid some of his lowest domestic approval numbers as he looks to make strides in countering China's saber-rattling and economic influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

Biden is scheduled to spend two days in South Korea, where he'll showcase new economic investments in the U.S. by some of the country's top companies, including Hyundai's plans to open a plant in Georgia.

He then plans to fly to Tokyo for a meeting of an alliance among the U.S., Australia, Japan and India that's aimed at checking China's increasing military might.

The war in Ukraine looms over Biden's four-day trip to the other side of the globe, with leaders planning to press Indian President Narendra Modi to take a firm position against Russia's invasion and the U.S. hoping the global response to Moscow's aggression might deter China from moving on Taiwan.

"The message we're trying to send on this trip is a message of an affirmative vision of what the world can look like if the democracies and open societies of the world stand together," Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, told reporters Wednesday. "We think that message will be heard everywhere. We think it will be heard in Beijing."

Also potentially overshadowing Biden's trip is growing concern within the administration that North Korea could conduct a nuclear test or launch an intercontinental ballistic missile to coincide with his visit. U.S. officials have said intelligence shows that either or both is possible. If either happens, it would be the first time North Korea has taken such a step in several years.

Sullivan told reporters before Biden's departure that the administration was prepared "to make both short- and longer-term adjustments to our military posture as necessary" to try to deter Pyongyang from further provocation and defend U.S. allies in the region.

At the same time, the U.S. is keeping open the possibility for diplomatic dialogue with North Korea while noting that there has been scant contact, and it could extend an offer to assist with a Covid outbreak in the isolated country, including by providing vaccines.

Biden, notably, isn't scheduled to visit the demilitarized zone that divides North Korea and South Korea. The White House didn't explain why. White House officials said the focus of the trip is economic initiatives, pointing out that Biden did visit the demilitarized zone as vice president.

Biden does plan to visit with U.S. troops in the region.

While he is in Seoul, Biden is scheduled to meet with South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, who was recently elected, and attend a state dinner. He's expected to visit a Samsung factory as part of his emphasis on efforts in South Korea's technology and manufacturing industries to take more of their operations — and jobs — to the U.S.

Biden also plans to announce a new economic initiative, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, which the White House says is aimed at expanding trade, fortifying supply chains and tackling climate change.

The Asia tour kicks off by highlighting new foreign investments in the U.S. economy as the administration looks to stress an economic message when the overwhelming majority of Americans — 75 percent in the latest NBC News poll — believe the country is on the wrong track.

Only 33 percent of all respondents and just 20 percent of independents in that poll said they approved of Biden's handling of the economy.

A significant part of the visit to Tokyo is expected to be a meeting with the leaders of the so-called Quad, an alliance of the U.S., India, Australia and Japan. In addition to meeting with his host, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, Biden is also expected to hold one-on-one meetings with Modi and the winner of

Saturday's Australian election.

Biden officials have worked to grow the Quad into a more substantive economic and military force that, coupled with new economic initiatives, is designed to send a message to China.

Michael Green, an Asia expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, told reporters before Biden's trip that "the subtext of the Quad is that this is a powerful alignment of maritime democracies concerned about security and stability and the balance of power as China asserts itself."

Biden has repeatedly argued that the 21st century will be defined by the contest between democracies like the U.S. and autocracies like Russia and China.

His trip to Asia is designed to illustrate that, just as he has intensively worked this year to maintain unity among European allies in the face of Russia's aggression in Ukraine, he can build a similar network of partners in the Eastern Hemisphere as a buffer against China — particularly any considerations of exercising its expanding military might.

China, even more than Russia, has been central to Biden's foreign policy approach over the past decade, since he traveled to Beijing as vice president to hold the first extensive meetings with China's future president, Xi Jinping.

And as the administration has considered the joint actions against Russia that have dominated its foreign policy agenda this year, it has done so mindful that China would be watching every move.

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