

## The return of the (North) Asian pivot: J. Biden visit to Seoul and Tokyo

Jean-Yves Colin

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## About the author:

Former student of the Ecole Nationale d'Administration, Jean-Yves Colin worked for the French Treasury, where he was Financial Advisor to the French Embassy in Japan (1987-1990). He then joined the Crédit Agricole Group, where he was Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the asset management subsidiary, now known as Amundi, and Director of Compliance for Crédit Agricole S.A. Since leaving the banking group in 2013, Jean-Yves Colin has joined Asia Centre, where he is a member of the Board of Directors and an expert on North Asia.

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While European officials and observers often fear that Washington is abandoning the European continent in favour of Asia and the Pacific Ocean, the launch of the Russian "special operation" in Ukraine and the three visits the US President has made to Europe since taking office have raised fears of the opposite in non-Chinese Asian capitals. These questions were reinforced by the hasty departure of American (and European) troops from Kabul and the current state of political and social tensions in the United States. Joe Biden's trip to Seoul and Tokyo from the 20th to the 24th of May - his first trip to Asia - aimed to convince people that this is not the case and that, as his advisor Jake Sullivan pointed out on the eve of the trip, the two approaches are complementary, even in "symbiosis".

In Seoul as in Tokyo, several subjects are common: the containment of China in the region now called Indo-Pacific, the nuclear threat of North Korea, the reactions to the Ukrainian crisis, its impact on the global macro-economic situation via difficulties in the supply chains, lower growth and a resurgence of inflation. However, the weighting of each of these issues is not necessarily the same in Seoul and Tokyo.

Firstly, in Seoul President Biden met the new Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol after having met Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida three times (in London at a climate meeting in November 2021, in a video link in January and in Brussels at a G7 meeting in March). The new Korean head of state who has only been in office since the 10th of May (elected in early March), has no political career as he was previously a prosecutor general, has a reputation for lacking international expertise. At this stage it is thus unclear whether he will be a 'Korean Trump' or just a conservative leader. South Korea is not out of the "election period", as local elections will be held on the 1st of June; President Yoon was no doubt relieved to learn during this presidential visit that the National Assembly had confirmed the nomination of his Prime Minister Han Duck-so. He may also have been flattered that Seoul, not Tokyo, was the first stop on the trip. A primary objective of the visit was therefore to get to know each other.

On the other hand, South Korea and Japan are the United States' main military bases in Asia, with 28,500 American troops on the peninsula and about twice that number in the Japanese archipelago. They are therefore essential. They have consistently condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine and voted for sanctions against Russia and its representatives, but the positions of the two countries are nevertheless nuanced. Both are less dependent than European countries on energy and seek to preserve their economic and financial investments in Russia to prevent them from being bought out at knock-down prices. Moreover, under President Moon, South Korea, although an undisputed ally of the United States, has tried to maintain a certain balance with China, its main trading partner, and also with Russia, both of which can exert influence on Pyongyang, which is supposed to be in favour of a dialogue process; but it is still too early to know whether President Yoon will act differently. Japan, as a member of the G7, participates more closely in the decisive meetings on Ukraine than South Korea; moreover, the dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party despite changes in the Prime Minister's office makes Japan a particularly reliable ally for Washington.

In this context, more than the war in Ukraine, which may seem remote to the political world in Seoul, the response to the numerous missile tests of all categories -nearly twenty since the beginning of the year, and to a resumption of nuclear tests by North Korea is the priority of the new Korean President and his government.

Yoon-Biden meeting's final communiqué goes in the direction of strengthening strategic and military cooperation by referring to the expansion and intensification of joint military exercises. President Biden, during the joint press conference of the two presidents, said that "the alliance has never been stronger, more vibrant and - I might add - more vital". The two Presidents spoke of a comprehensive strategic alliance that goes beyond the military and includes in particular technological cooperation. President Yoon did not rule out the deployment of additional armaments, including bombers, to the peninsula, and agreed to take a more active part in peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait without mentioning China. On North Korea, the two Presidents stressed the need for a serious and sincere dialogue with the North Korean leader with a view to complete denuclearisation and, in response to reporters, the US President did not show great eagerness to meet with him. As for the Covid-19 crisis in North Korea, offers of medical aid from Seoul and Washington have so far gone unanswered; an acceptance by Pyongyang would without a doubt be seen as a humiliation. The US President's visit ended with a tour of the Air Force operations centre at Pyeontaek base, 70 km from Seoul, before Biden flew to Yokota base in Japan.

The relationship with North Korea is certainly also an important issue for Tokyo because numerous North Korea's missiles fall near Japanese waters and even in Japan's maritime zone. On the other hand, as Tokyo is very sensitive to the fate of Japanese nationals kidnapped by North Korea over the last few decades, a meeting between President Biden and their families was organised. However, this is more of a regional than an international matter.

Interestingly, the final communiqué of the US-Korea talks stresses the importance of trilateral cooperation between the US, South Korea and Japan, which is probably an indirect and courteous way for President Biden to emphasise the desirability of easing the tensions between Tokyo and Seoul that arose during the Moon presidency.

**In Tokyo**, relations with China are a fundamental issue. For several months, the Japanese government has been hardening its stance on the Taiwan issue. Former Prime Minister Abe, now even more outspoken than in the past, has not hesitated to talk about a formal strengthening of the US commitment to Taiwan. However, as important as Taiwan's future is in the face of Chinese ambitions, Japan also has territorial sovereignty concerns over the Senkaku Islands and the Yonaguni Island, located just 110 km from Taiwan and home to some 1,700 Japanese and 200 military personnel.

Containing China, both in the Taiwan Strait and in the whole Indo-Pacific region, was the main objective of the Quad meeting in Tokyo with the other two partners, India and Australia. In his opening speech the Japanese Prime Minister clearly drew a parallel between the situations in Ukraine and the Indo-Pacific: "Russian aggression in Ukraine is a direct threat to the principles of the United Nations. We must not let the same situation happen in the Indo-Pacific".

At the press conference with the Japanese Prime Minister, President Biden laconically replied "yes" to a journalist asking whether the United States would get involved militarily on Taiwan's behalf in the event of a conflict and, when the journalist was seen doubtful, then confirmed it by saying "that is the commitment we have made". He thus seemed to break out of the prevailing policy of strategic ambiguity, to the surprise of his aides... and some time later the White House, in a statement, declared the US position unchanged... which J. Biden confirmed the day after his first intervention!

Australia's recent election winner, Anthony Albanese, swiftly sworn in as Labor's successor to conservative Scott Morrison, physically attended the Quad meeting with his Chinese-Malaysian born Foreign Minister. The new Australian Prime Minister made sure to confirm his country's

commitment to its Quad partners.

In Seoul, the two presidents did not envisage South Korea joining the Quad in the form of a "Quad+", even though specific cooperation is possible. American diplomats preferred to talk about deepening the current arrangement: it is true that India is a partner that keeps its distance from the United States, as its stance on the Ukraine crisis and the absence of any reference to Ukraine in Narendra Modi's speech at the Quad meeting showed, and that the change in leadership, if not in the political era, in Australia invites caution.

The Quad has become an essential part of Japan's strategy in the face of repeated Chinese incursions by sea and air on its southern territorial limits, but also an asset in the face of renewed tensions in the North from Russia, which, in response to Japan's stance in the Ukraine crisis, has broken off dialogue on the four South Kuril Islands and is conducting military exercises in the Sea of Okhotsk or Sea of Japan, possibly with China.

Over the decades, Japan has moved from a foreign policy promoting pacifism, which can appear almost neutralist, or practising "chequebook diplomacy" while being a rear base for the United States, to a more assertive defence with increasingly reinforced means, without provoking overt hostility or rejection from a public opinion that is otherwise less and less favourable to China and Russia.

**In both North Asian capitals**, an important element of Biden's visit was the announcement of a new forum and thus a new acronym for the Indo-Pacific: the Indo-Pacific Economic Forum (IPEF). This new arrangement is in addition to the existing ones: the CPTPP, which brings together 11 countries including Japan and Australia, which China wishes to join and which succeeded the TPP from which the United States withdrew at the beginning of the Trump presidency, and the RCEP, which brings together the ASEAN countries, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand but not the United States. Japan would have preferred the US to join the CPTPP - Kishida reiterated this during Biden's visit - but, in keeping with its usual business pragmatism, is satisfied with the launch of the IPEF; in Seoul, President Yoon expressed his support for it.

The Democratic administration in Washington sought to explain the reasons for the IPEF's creation. It stressed that it would not be a free trade agreement (an FTA) that would be representative of the 20th century, not the current one, and that, by lowering tariffs, would penalise American industry and the middle classes. It would address the shortcomings of the TPP, which US officials have summarised as 'a foreign policy for the middle class'. The IPEF would in particular aim to secure agricultural supplies and digital logistics. For President Biden and his administration, the IPEF has a domestic policy dimension and aims to reassure voters who feel threatened by Asian economic development. In various Asian countries, reservations have been expressed about this project, either by referring to the vagueness of its content or by fearing that this mechanism will disrupt existing supply chains... or by questioning its durability beyond the Biden presidency. However, 13 nations are said to be ready to join the IPEF: in addition to the United States, Japan and South Korea, these include Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, India and Brunei. In order to avoid further embarrassment with Beijing and the Asian countries, Councillor Jake Sullivan made it clear that Taiwan would not be a signatory to the IPEF constitution.

Beyond the strategic issues, the economy played a part in President Biden's trip to North Asia. The announcement was made in Seoul of an investment of 5.5 billion USD by Hyundai Motor for the creation of a production plant for electric vehicles in Georgia, in conjunction with LG, which is responsible for the manufacture of batteries. The day after this announcement, Hyundai's president made a second announcement of a USD 5 billion investment in the US in

robotics and autonomous driving software, possibly via Boston Dynamics which his company acquired in 2021, helping to achieve a 12% share of the global electric vehicle market by 2030. A visit to a Samsung Electronics factory on Biden's arrival in South Korea was also a confirmation of the company's plan to set up a USD 17 billion semiconductor foundry in Texas.

As for the fight against inflation, the threat is widespread - in Japan its annual pace is 2.1%, exceeding Governor Kuroda's target since 2013 - but the tempo of Asian Central Banks is not exactly identical: the Bank of Korea has carried out several rate hikes, thus in line with the US Fed, while that of Japan remains on an accommodating policy so as not to plunge the archipelago into depression... and that of China has temporarily eased its monetary policy; as for their fiscal policies they are still in the context of the Covid-19, thus of a one-off support to the economy. The monetary and fiscal authorities in North Asia are therefore managing the economic situation in the light of a double constraint: the slowdown in global growth and the impact of the Covid-19 crisis.

If Seoul was Biden's first stop, the Japanese government took particular care in welcoming him. Even more so than in Seoul, despite a formal dinner at the National Museum, bringing together the top bosses of the Korean economy, the visit to Tokyo was marked by a ceremonial dimension to which the Japanese leaders are very attached for their foreign guests: An audience with Emperor Naruhito was organised, a dinner in a traditional restaurant (Happo-en in Shiroganedai in the heart of Tokyo) followed the game of golf between Donald Trump and Shinzo in Chiba, or Barrack Obama's dinner in a luxurious sushi restaurant in Ginza, and the joint press conference was held at the Akasaka palace, with its Versailles-like architecture.

**In conclusion**, the consolidation of strategic and military alliances in North Asia and the Indo-Pacific, but also the integration of the Korean and Japanese economies with that of the United States and the securing of supply chains dominated J. Biden's trip... before a return to American realities. In Washington, he will be confronted with the difficulties linked to the crisis in Ukraine, those due to a level of inflation not seen for more than 40 years and a drop in household consumption, or the torments arising from the Supreme Court's draft ruling on abortion rights or the racist massacres - one recent one, less publicised than those in Buffalo and Texas, concerned Americans of Korean origin - and of course the ups and downs of the mid-term election campaign in November. Korean and Japanese officials will act to ensure that he does not forget Asia, let alone North Asia, or else Kim Jong-un or Xi Jinping will do so.