

International

US, Japan show united front on China in Biden's first summit

Washington, Tokyo to step up joint development of 5G internet

WASHINGTON: The United States and Japan vowed Friday to stand firm together against an assertive China and to step up cooperation on climate change and next-generation technology as President Joe Biden made his first summit a show of alliance unity. After waiting nearly three months for his first foreign guest due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Biden told Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga that Japan enjoyed the United States' "iron-clad support" on security issues and beyond. "We're going to work together to prove that democracies can still compete and win in the 21st century," Biden, affectionately calling the Japanese leader "Yoshi," told a socially distanced news conference in the White House Rose Garden.

A joint statement called for "candid conversations" with China and did not hold back, raising concerns over Beijing's growing maritime moves, its clampdowns in Hong Kong and Xinjiang and growing tension over Taiwan. The statement reiterated that the US-Japan Security Treaty covers the Japanese-administered Senkaku islands—one of several areas in the region where Beijing, which calls them the Diaoyu, has increasingly shown its might.

The United States and Japan "recognize the importance of deterrence to maintain peace and stability in the region," the statement said. "We oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the East China Sea," read one line highlighted by Suga.

The Chinese embassy in the United States hit back on Saturday, expressing "strong concern and firm opposition" to the comments. "It cannot be more ironic that such an attempt at stoking division and building blocs against other countries is put under the banner of 'free and open,'" a statement by the embassy said, referring to a US pledge to build a "free and open" Indo-Pacific region.

The matters raised "bear on China's fundamental interests and allow no interference," it added. Biden and Suga also emphasized "the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait" and encouraged "the peaceful resolution of cross-strait

issues," as Beijing steps up air incursions in Taiwan.

While cautiously worded, it was the first time a Japanese leader has joined a US president in a statement on Taiwan since the allies separately switched recognition from Taipei to Beijing in the 1970s. Taiwan is an especially sensitive issue for Beijing, which claims the self-governing democracy.

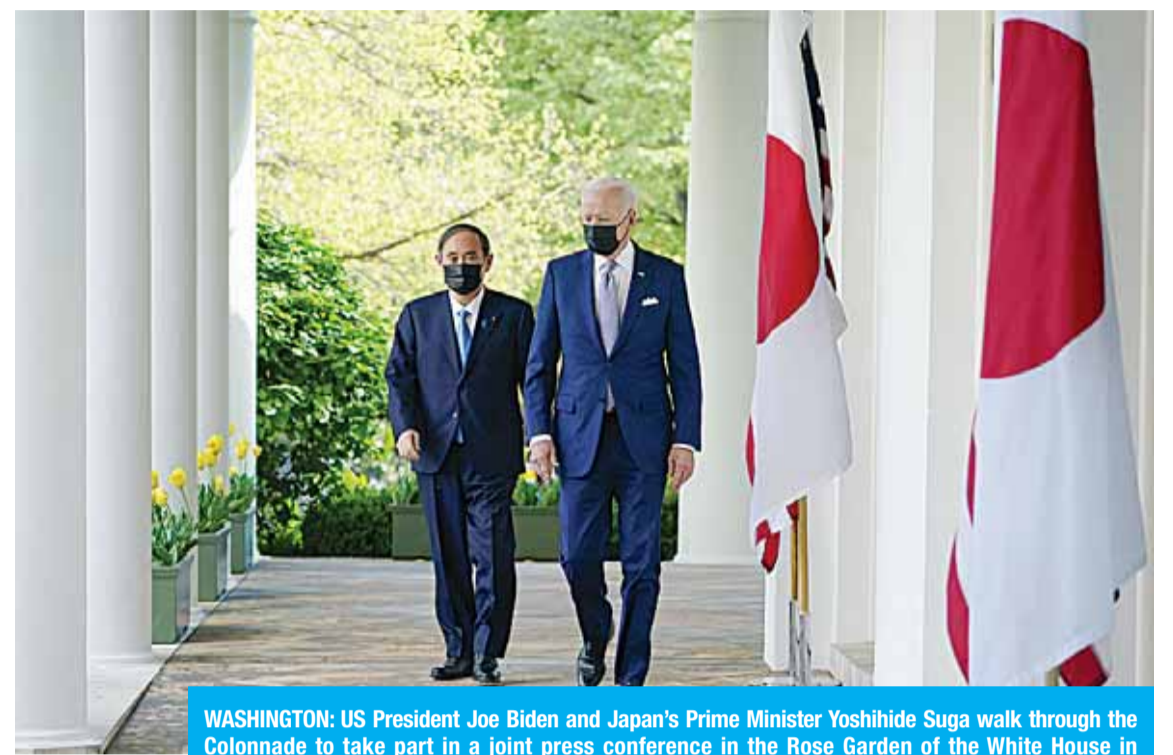
'Universal values'

The forthright statement comes despite Japan's efforts in recent years not to antagonize China, its top trading partner, including by not joining Western nations in sanctions over human rights. Suga echoed Biden's themes as he described the US-Japan alliance as the "foundation of peace and stability" in the region. "Freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law are the universal values that link our alliance," Suga said. In a highly unusual comment by a Japanese leader on the US domestic scene, Suga also voiced concern over a wave of attacks in the United States against people of Asian descent. Biden's second in-person summit will take place next month with South Korean President Moon Jae-in, part of the new administration's strategy of shoring up alliances as it zeroes in on China as America's most pressing challenge.

On another of his key priorities, Biden said he and Suga agreed on the need for "ambitious" climate commitments and indicated that both nations would soon announce goals by 2030. Biden will lead a virtual summit next week in hopes of rallying climate pledges amid growing evidence of a planetary crisis as average temperatures hit record highs and natural disasters become more frequent. Japan, the world's third-largest economy, promised under the Paris accord to reduce emissions by 26 percent by 2030 but from 2013 levels—a goal that experts say is not bold enough to meet Suga's goal of a carbon-neutral Japan in 2050. "We confirmed that Japan and the US will lead global decarbonization," Suga said.

Alliance on 5G

Biden and Suga said they would step up joint



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden and Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga walk through the Colonnade to take part in a joint press conference in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington, DC on Friday. —AFP

development and testing of fifth-generation internet-as well as the sixth-generation technologies of the future. The United States and Japan must "maintain and sharpen our competitive edge" and ensure that "those technologies are governed by shared democratic norms that we both share—norms set by democracies, not by autocracies," Biden said.

China's Huawei has taken an early dominant role in 5G, which is becoming a crucial part of the global economy, despite heavy US pressure on the company, which Washington argues poses threats to security and privacy.

A joint statement said the United States had

committed \$2.5 billion and Japan another \$2 billion. Masashi Adachi, a special advisor to Suga, told reporters that the agreement was more about joint development than fresh funding, pointing to several projects underway in Japan on 5G development. Suga in September succeeded Shinzo Abe, Japan's longest-serving prime minister, who was one of the few democratic allies to manage to preserve stable relations with Biden's volatile predecessor Donald Trump.

Biden and Suga also recommitted to the denuclearization of North Korea and discussed next moves following Trump's unusually personal diplomacy with the totalitarian state. —AFP

Myanmar junta leader set to join ASEAN summit

YANGON: Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing will join a special ASEAN summit next week, the Thai foreign ministry said yesterday, his first official trip since masterminding a coup which deposed civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The February 1 putsch triggered a massive uprising, bringing hundreds of thousands of protesters to the streets to demand a return to democracy, while civil servants have boycotted work in a bid to shutter the junta's administration. The military has deployed lethal force to quell the anti-coup movement, killing more than 720 people and detaining some 3,100 activists, journalists and dissidents, according to a local monitoring group. The international community has largely condemned the generals for use of force against unarmed civilians—imposing targeted sanctions against top military brass, their families and army-linked businesses.

But regional leaders have sought to open communications with the regime, and yesterday Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that a summit of Southeast Asian leaders in Jakarta on Myanmar's situation will include the senior general. "Several leaders have confirmed their attendance including Myanmar's MAH

(Min Aung Hlaing)," said spokesman Tane Sangrat in a message to reporters.

The meeting of the 10-country bloc of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is expected to address the ongoing crisis in post-coup Myanmar, and will be on April 24 in Jakarta. The announcement drew dismay from activists, who have long beseeched foreign leaders not to recognize the junta. "#ASEAN do not legitimize the Myanmar Military junta as a government by inviting MAH to attend the summit," said prominent activist Wai Wai Nu on Twitter. "(The) Junta is illegitimate and illegal."

The military has consistently justified the putsch by alleging widespread fraud in November's elections, which Suu Kyi's party won in a landslide. They claim power will be handed back to a civilian administration after elections are held in about a year—though they recently extended the timeline to a two-year period.

New Year crackdown

Yesterday was the first day of Myanmar's traditional New Year, and hundreds in commercial hub Yangon visited the famed Shwedagon Pagoda to pray as soldiers patrolled the streets. Leading up to the Buddhist New Year, the Thingyan festivities were a somber affair—a far cry from previous years when revellers would take to the streets for city-wide water fights. Instead, activists sloshed crimson paint in Yangon to symbolize the bloodshed, while protesters wore red across the country in nationwide demonstrations. More violence erupted yes-

terday in the central gem-producing city of Mogok, when security forces cracked down on protesters. According to an AFP-verified video filmed by a resident, soldiers crouched on a street as their commanding officer shouted that he wanted "deaths".

A rescue worker told AFP at least one had died. "He was shot in the stomach," he said, adding that six others injured had to be rushed to the hospital. Despite the threat of violence, protesters have continued to gather across the country in defiance of the junta, carrying posters demanding for Suu Kyi to be freed. —AFP



YANGON: Relatives gather around a bus carrying prisoners to be released outside Insein Prison in Yangon yesterday as thousands of inmates were freed nationwide to mark the country's traditional Buddhist New Year holiday. —AFP

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Fugitive Indian jeweler Nirav Modi

intimidation and destroying evidence. In his February ruling Goozee dismissed submissions from his legal team that he would not be treated fairly in India, and said there was not enough evidence from doctors to believe he was a suicide risk. —AFP



NEW DELHI: People are seen on a partially deserted road near the Jama Masjid mosque as a lockdown is in effect wherein only those catering to essential services were allowed to commute as directed by the Delhi state government to curb the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus infections yesterday. —AFP

UK approves extradition of Indian jeweler

LONDON: Britain's interior ministry said Friday it had approved the extradition of fugitive Indian jeweller Nirav Modi to his homeland, where he is accused of defrauding one of the largest banks of \$1.8 billion. Modi, dubbed a jeweller to the stars thanks to celebrity customers in Hollywood and Bollywood, lost his legal bid to avoid extradition from the UK in February. He fled India in February 2018 after being accused of having a central role in defrauding Punjab National Bank, one of India's largest lenders, of \$1.8 billion (1.5 billion euros).

COVID lockdown empties Delhi streets amid surge

NEW DELHI: New Delhi led major cities across India into a weekend lockdown yesterday as the country confronts a fierce new coronavirus wave, with more than 230,000 fresh daily cases and families clamoring for drugs and hospital beds. Hopes that South Asia might have beaten the pandemic have been dashed with India seeing over two million new cases this month alone and Bangladesh and Pakistan also imposing shutdowns.

India added another record 234,000 cases yesterday to pass 14.5 million overall and 1,341 deaths took its pandemic total to 175,649 deaths.

The per-capita rates remain low by international comparison, but the speed at which cases are rising led

the international Red Cross to call the South Asian surge "truly frightening". India now has three times the daily cases of the United States, the world's worst-hit country. After a national lockdown a year ago led to an economic slump, the Indian government is desperate to avoid a second stoppage. But Delhi joined Mumbai in ordering all but essential services to close. Landmarks such as the historic Red Fort where tens of thousands of people would normally gather were deserted. "Not one person has turned up," said security guard Anil Dayan. Police checked many of the cars that strayed onto the streets.

The city of more than 20 million people now has the most daily cases in India and restaurants, malls and gyms were all closed. Weddings can go ahead with guests limited to 50 people, while only 20 can attend funerals.

"Don't panic. All essential services will be available through the weekend," Delhi's chief minister Arvind Kejriwal said. Maharashtra, which includes Mumbai, Gujarat and IT hub Bangalore's home state Karnataka have also imposed restrictions on movement. —AFP

News in brief

Five shot dead in Bangladesh

CHITTAGONG, Bangladesh: At least five people were shot dead and dozens injured when Bangladesh police opened fire yesterday on demonstrating workers at the construction site of a Chinese-financed power plant, officials said. Police started shooting after workers became violent, said Saiduazzman Chowdhury, government administrator in the southern coastal town of Banskhali. They were protesting over unpaid wages, working hours and alleged discrimination. Azizul Islam, Banskhali police chief, said about 2,000 protesters threw rocks and bricks at police, who responded with gunfire. The 2.5 billion-dollar, 1,200-megawatt coal power plant, 30 percent owned by Chinese engineering giant SIEPCOIII, has been at the center of other deadly protests in recent years. —AFP

Russia detains Ukraine diplomat

SAINT PETERSBURG: Russia's FSB security service said yesterday it had detained a Ukrainian diplomat, accusing him of receiving sensitive information from a Russian national. In recent years Russia has detained a number of Ukrainian nationals on suspicion of spying but the detention of a diplomat is rare and seen as a sign of sharply rising tensions. "A Ukrainian diplomat, a consul of Ukraine's Consulate General in Saint Petersburg, Alexander Sosonyuk, has been detained by Russia's FSB," the security service said in a statement, using the Russian language spelling of his name. He had been detained on Friday, the security service said. —AFP

Bangkok virus spike fuels actions

BANGKOK: Hundreds waited in grim silence at a Bangkok stadium to get free COVID-19 tests yesterday as a spiraling infection rate gripped Thailand, on a fourth consecutive day of more than 1,000 new cases. The capital appears to be the epicenter of the kingdom's third wave, after infections were traced back to a nightlife district earlier this month. In the past 10 days, the national infection total has jumped from 29,900 to more than 40,500 — the sharp increase probably due to a highly infectious variant of the virus originally found in Britain. —AFP

Member of FIN7 group sentenced

SAN FRANCISCO: A Ukrainian national arrested for his role in a hacking group that compromised millions of financial accounts was sentenced to a decade in prison, US prosecutors said Friday. Fedir Hladyr, 35, had a high-level role as a manager and systems administrator for a hacking group known as FIN7, authorities said. He was one of three Ukrainians arrested in mid-2018 for hacking more than 100 US companies and stealing millions of credit and debit card numbers, according to the Justice Department. —AFP

Pompeo 'violated ethics rules'

WASHINGTON: Former US secretary of state Mike Pompeo and his wife violated ethics rules by asking staff to conduct personal errands including walking their dog and making restaurant reservations, a long-awaited internal review said Friday. Then president Donald Trump last year fired the State Department's inspector general on behalf of Pompeo after the internal watchdog began reviewing the complaint. But the inspector general's office went ahead with the review, which found that Pompeo and his wife, Susan, made more than 100 requests that appeared to be of a personal nature. —AFP