

International

Biden swaps home tensions for foreign frustrations in summits

US president escapes bruising political turmoil at home

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden escapes bruising political turmoil at home for the more convivial world of diplomacy at twin summits in Europe this week - but the experience could be just as frustrating. To a veteran foreign policy expert like Biden, the G20 summit in Rome on the weekend and the United Nations' COP26 climate summit in Glasgow next Monday and Tuesday should be a respite, if not exactly a Roman holiday.

Instead of battling with his divided Democratic Party or trying to ignore insults thrown at him by embittered ex-president Donald Trump and his Republicans, Biden will rub shoulders largely with friends. The 78-year-old will have a perfect chance to push his mantra that "America is back." Yet for a president battling to turn those words into more than a slogan, the expected absences from Rome and Glasgow of Russian leader Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping will make it hard to achieve much.

Despite dubbing the US-Chinese relationship the most consequential on the planet, Biden has yet to meet Xi as president. Two phone calls and a planned video summit later this year are the best he can do. The G20 is usually a forum for bringing members of Western clubs, like NATO and the G7, together with more uncertain allies and even adversaries. This time, the White House isn't even announcing bilateral meetings with leaders of two top - if problematic - US allies: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

"We don't even know who's coming to represent Saudi Arabia," National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters. Instead, Biden will be mostly among friends, albeit friends wondering after the traumatic US exit from Afghanistan just how solid that relationship is. Biden's opening meeting, at the Vatican with Pope Francis on Friday, will see the second Catholic US president join forces with a

pontiff sharing much of his politics, whether on the environment or the need to care for the poor.

That same day, Biden will have one of his most closely watched meetings, with French President Emmanuel Macron. A major spat blew up between Washington and Paris in mid-September over the sudden announcement by Australia that it will acquire US nuclear-powered submarines, ditching an earlier deal for French conventional vessels.

But the Rome meeting will likely underline mostly that the two sides are ready to move on. And at the big summits, Biden will find himself mostly preaching to the converted, or at least to a sympathetic audience thankful that the man at the microphone is



Biden ignores insults from Trump, GOP

not his bruising predecessor Trump. He'll point out US leadership in global COVID vaccine donations and press for recognition that despite foot dragging in Congress back home, he has brought the United States back to the table on climate change action.

Biden will also take credit for an OECD-brokered agreement that sets a global minimum corporate tax of 15 percent - a plan aimed at leveling the playing field for governments competing to attract international corporations. "After a lot of commentary in recent weeks about the state of the transatlantic relationship, the United States and Europe head into these two summits aligned in, united on the major



ARLINGTON: US President Joe Biden takes selfies with the crowd after a campaign event for Virginia Democratic gubernatorial candidate Terry McAuliffe at Virginia Highlands Park in Arlington, Virginia. — AFP

elements of the global agenda," Sullivan said.

Trouble at home

But Biden will not be able to dodge the specter of domestic woes threatening to undermine his credibility abroad. When Air Force One lifts off on Thursday, Biden likely still won't know whether his Democrats are going to give him a win on trillions of dollars in infrastructure and social spending. If the party comes through, maybe even in the next few days, Biden will be bolstered. Failure, however, would be catastrophic for a president only nine months into his first term, knocking a hole in his

argument that democracies need to show they can compete with single-minded autocracies like China.

Also hanging over Biden's head as he crosses the Atlantic is the tense Virginia governor's election next Tuesday - the day he flies home. A Republican is running neck and neck with the Democratic candidate in a state where Biden won by 10 percentage points against Trump last year. It's just one state. But losing there would trigger humiliating reviews for Biden, who took time out before his Europe trip to campaign for the Democrat on Tuesday, and signal broader party losses in the 2022 midterms, leaving Biden weaker still. — AFP

TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat defend impact on kids

WASHINGTON: Three social media networks massively popular with the youngest users - TikTok, Snapchat and YouTube - tried to convince skeptical US lawmakers Tuesday they are safe as worry about Facebook's potential harms spills over to other platforms. Video-sharing app TikTok and photo network Snapchat, in their first testimony to US senators, argued they are built to protect against the mental health and safety risks present on social media.

"Your defense is, 'We're not Facebook,'" Senator Richard Blumenthal told the networks' representatives. "Being different from Facebook is not a defense, that bar is in the gutter." "Everything you do is to add users, especially kids, and keep them on your apps," he continued. While a recent whistleblower-fueled controversy has focused on Facebook's knowledge that its sites could cause harm, other social media giants also grapple with safety issues.

"Snapchat was built as an antidote to social media," said Jennifer Stout, Snap VP of global public policy, noting images on the platform delete by default. Under questioning later in the hearing, she said the company is making efforts to crack down on the drug dealing that has proliferated on the platform, with sometimes deadly consequences.

TikTok, which said in September that it has one billion active users, has fast become a phenomenon among youths and argued it is a different kind of platform.

"TikTok is not a social network based on follow-



WASHINGTON: Ranking Member Sen Marsha Blackburn (R-TN) speaks during a Senate Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security hearing on Protecting Kids Online: Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube in Washington, DC. — AFP

ers.... You watch TikToks, you create on TikTok," said Michael Beckerman, TikTok's head of public policy in the Americas. Yet the app has been attacked on charges its algorithm can serve content to kids, for example, that encourages dangerous weight loss or introduces them to viral challenges that promote the destruction of school property.

'How long will this continue?'

The site also became a political battleground after then-president Donald Trump targeted the app in 2020 for a subsequently abandoned shutdown effort on the argument the platform represented a national security risk because of its links to China. The ByteDance subsidiary, whose equivalent in China is called Douyin, nevertheless remains well behind YouTube, which claimed 2.3 billion monthly active users in 2020. Though 13 is the official minimum age limit to join most social media platforms, both TikTok and YouTube have versions that are aimed at younger children. — AFP

The status is reminiscent of the Soviet-era term "enemy of the people" and is meant to apply to people or groups that receive funding from abroad and are involved in any kind of "political activity". "Foreign agent" organizations must disclose sources of funding and label publications with the tag or face fines. A journalist can face a fine of up to 2,500 rubles (\$36) for failing to properly mark a story or a social media post. The same offence could cost a company up to 50,000 rubles. The branding has put off advertisers, editors at news organizations say, piling financial pressure on the few independent outlets left in Russia.

Mayetnaya, who works for US-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFERL) and other reporters on the pariah list say it also seriously hinders their work. "People have refused to speak to me saying: 'It'll end badly for us,'" Mayetnaya said. The Kremlin says the measures are necessary because of increased "interference" from abroad with non-governmental groups and journalists exploited by outside actors to meddle in Russian affairs. The result is that all eyes in Russia's media landscape are glued to the justice ministry's website most Friday evenings, where, almost weekly, new names appear.

Aside for the 24-word social media disclaimer, people branded "foreign agents" say they are subjected to "absurd" bureaucracy, such as meticulously reporting income and expenses. Every three months, they have to complete a financial audit. "The ministry not only wants to know where I send my money, but also where the money people transfer me comes from," said Maria Zheleznova, a former reporter at the Proekt investigative media banned as "undesirable" in July. — AFP

Human faces behind Germany's surge in migrants via Belarus

EISENHUTTENSTADT: At the Eisenhuettenstadt reception centre for refugees on Germany's border with Poland, 19-year-old Iraqi asylum seeker Sibian dreams of making a new life for himself after an exhausting journey from Belarus. "I want to live here," he says in broken German, learned through a few months of online courses. Sibian spent eight days trekking across Poland by foot to get to Germany after flying to Minsk from Turkey. "I had no water, no food, it was cold. It was very tiring," he tells AFP. Sibian is one of more than 6,100 illegal migrants who have entered Germany via Poland from Belarus since the beginning of this year, most of them from the Middle East, according to German authorities.

The EU accuses Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko of flying migrants from the Middle East and Africa to Minsk and then sending them into the bloc on foot in retaliation for sanctions imposed over a crackdown on the opposition. German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer has branded the alleged scheme "a hybrid threat, in which migrants are used as political weapons". The migrants are initially crossing from Belarus into Poland and the Baltic States, but many are then travelling on to Germany - seen as welcoming to migrants after Angela Merkel's decision to leave the borders open to hundreds of thousands in 2015-16.

Tenfold increase

On arriving in Germany, the migrants are not being immediately sent back to Poland as EU rules would normally dictate, but taken to reception centres for

registration. The centre in Eisenhuettenstadt has seen 10 times more arrivals this year than in 2020, Olaf Jansen, head of the city's migration authority, tells AFP. It feels like 2015 all over again, "even if we don't have the same numbers" at the national level, he says. A dozen new tents have been set up to accommodate the new arrivals and create space for Covid-19 testing centers. Around half of the 1,300 asylum seekers at the centre are from Iraq. The others are mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, Iran and Yemen.

Most of them want to remain in Germany. "Very few want to continue the journey to France or north-



EISENHUTTENSTADT: Refugees check their mobile phones at the arrival centre of the initial reception facility of the eastern German state of Brandenburg in Eisenhuettenstadt. — AFP

ern Europe," Jansen says. "I want to stay in Germany and continue my studies. It's good here," says Rohullah, 23, who arrived four days ago from Afghanistan. To pass the time, some play football between the tents, while others call their relatives while sitting in the courtyard. All have stories of exhausting journeys on foot. Zeidun, 22, from Fallujah in Iraq, walked non-stop for 10 days across Poland before taking a taxi across the border. — AFP

Russia 'foreign agent' reporters navigate 'absurd' rules

MOSCOW: In her Moscow apartment, reporter Yelizaveta Mayetnaya motions to her laptop displaying a message now infamous among independent Russian journalists. "This news media/material was created and/or disseminated by a foreign mass media performing the functions of a foreign agent and/or a Russian legal entity performing the functions of a foreign agent."

Since being branded a "foreign agent" by authorities this year, the 47-year-old is obliged to add the disclaimer to each and every one of her social media posts, whether they're part of her reporting or a picture of her dog digging through autumn leaves. It's one of the tedious regulations that she and dozens of other reporters recently slapped with the label are learning to navigate in a year that has seen the walls close in on independent media.

The authorities want "everyone to exhaust themselves doing this, so there isn't any time for anything else," Mayetnaya said. The label is a "form of repression", she added, predicting it would be used more and more to silence Kremlin critics. Russia first introduced the term in legislation passed in 2012, but it applied to non-governmental groups before being expanded to media organizations in 2017 and individual journalists last year.

In bellwether Virginia vote, it all hangs on COVID-19

RICHMOND: It is mid-afternoon on a Saturday in downtown Richmond's Penny Lane Pub and the post-pandemic crowd, like the head of a well-poured pale ale, is bubbly but thin. Owner Terry O'Neill has plenty of time between serving drinks and swapping banter with regulars to reflect on the damage COVID-19 has done to business.

"It's never going to come back to what it was. We were doing 150 lunches. We're down to 40," says the grandfather-of-five who is a former bouncer at The Cavern Club, the Liverpool nightclub frequented by The Beatles. Washington politics can seem far away from the daily struggles of people in Richmond, but Virginia is seen as a reliable indicator of where the parties are headed in national elections.

All eyes have been on the state for weeks because it holds its election for the governor's mansion on November 2, a too-close-to-call race between Democratic establishment candidate Terry McAuliffe and brash Trumpist Glenn Youngkin. Now in his 80s, O'Neill bought the Penny Lane with his wife Rose in 1979 after 10 years in New York. Signed photographs and record covers adorn the walls, alongside memorabilia from his beloved Liverpool Football Club.

During the darkest days of the pandemic, the native Briton was only able to keep the business afloat thanks to government COVID relief. "We would not be here now if it wasn't for the loans they sent us. It was my nightmare," he tells AFP. While next week's vote is in large part about how well Virginians think

their state is run, the old capital of the Confederacy is also a crucial national battleground for President Joe Biden and Donald Trump, the man he evicted from the White House and the most likely Republican challenger next time around.

'Topsy-turvy'

Traditionally conservative Virginia has swung left since the turn of the century. Four of the last five governors have been Democrats and Biden won the state by 10 points in 2020. The gubernatorial race has been tightening for weeks, with McAuliffe's lead evaporating in the final stretch. The Democrat has tried to make the race a referendum on Trump, while Youngkin has focused on Republican red meat such as mask mandates and the school curriculum.

Richmond's Democratic mayor Levar Stoney describes central Virginia - with its rural counties, suburbs and diverse urban areas - as "a microcosm of America." "We are preoccupied by some of what's driving some of the American conversation right now. That's COVID-19 and the impacts that this virus and the pandemic have had on our economy, jobs, public education and our way of life," he tells AFP. "It's been a little topsy-turvy since last March so there's a lot of folks who are still suffering."

Stoney sees the election as a precursor for the November 2022 midterms, with the parties getting an early shot at testing messages to deliver on the national stage. But he adds: "Virginia voters are going to be voting on Virginia issues, on Virginia candidates." And the issue that comes up time and again when locals voice their concerns is the faltering US recovery from COVID-19. Like every other state, Virginia saw its economy obliterated by the pandemic but business has been perking up, with tax revenue soaring by 18 percent year-on-year last month. — AFP