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Ben McGrath, Peter Symonds
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Biden and Suga ramp up confrontation with China over Taiwan

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga met with United States President Joe Biden Friday in Washington for a summit aimed at strengthening the US-Japan military alliance amid Washington's escalating confrontation with China. The meeting was the first Biden has held in-person with a world leader since taking office, indicating the importance Washington places on Japan for its agenda.

In their joint statement, Biden and Suga accused China of destabilizing the Indo-Pacific region. The two leaders, the statement said, "exchanged views on the impact of China's actions on peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and the world, and shared their concerns over Chinese activities that are inconsistent with the international rules-based order, including the use of economic and other forms of coercion."



Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga delivers remarks in a meeting with Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III, Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs Toshimitsu Motegi and Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi, Tokyo, March 16, 2021. (DoD photo by Lisa Ferdinando)

Washington insists that China bow to the “international rules-based order”—that is, the post-World War II framework established by the US in which American imperialism was the dominant power and set the rules. Driven by the fear that China could undermine its global position, the US has for the past decade—first under Obama, then Trump and now Biden—

sought to undermine China economically and strategically, including through a massive military build-up in the Indo-Pacific.

The most significant aspect of the Biden-Suga statement was a reference to Taiwan, which has been thrust to the fore by Washington, particularly in the past year. The statement declared “the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait” and encouraged “the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues.” This is the first time that US and Japanese leaders have directly mentioned Taiwan since Richard Nixon and Eisaku Sato made such a declaration in 1969.

While the reference might appear innocuous, it further undermines the “One China” policy that both the US and Japan accepted as the basis for establishing diplomatic relations with China, following Nixon’s visit to Beijing in 1972. Under the “One China” policy, the two countries effectively recognized Beijing as the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan. Previously they had recognized the Kuomintang (KMT) dictatorship in Taipei, established after it fled the Chinese mainland following the 1949 Chinese Revolution, as the government-in-exile of all China.

In the protracted discussions before the establishment of US diplomatic relations with China in 1979, Taiwan had been the most difficult obstacle to overcome—a measure of how sensitive it is today. While President Jimmy Carter oversaw the process, he also signed into law the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act that ensured the sale of US military hardware to Taiwan and gave a vague guarantee of US support for Taiwan against alleged Chinese aggression.

The Trump administration significantly boosted arms sales to Taiwan and stepped up contacts between Taiwanese and US officials. In his final days in office, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo dispensed with longstanding diplomatic protocols limiting such contacts and thereby undermined the “One China policy”—a move that Biden has largely continued. At the same time, top-level US officials have been warning of a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan as a means for justifying even closer relations with Taiwan, including possible military ties.

The Biden administration had been pushing Japan to take a tougher stance against China over Taiwan. The fact that it was even mentioned in the joint statement indicates that behind closed doors Biden and Suga discussed closer collaboration over Taiwan in some detail. The issue is particularly delicate for Japan as it was the colonial ruler of Taiwan (Formosa) from 1895 to 1945 when it reverted to China after Japan’s defeat. Japan is also heavily dependent on its economic relations with China.

Beijing immediately criticized the joint Biden-Suga statement. The Chinese embassy in Washington accused the two countries of “stoking division and building blocs against other countries... under the banner of ‘free and open’.” The embassy’s statement reiterated that Taiwan, along with Hong Kong and Xinjiang, were internal Chinese affairs and warned that Beijing would “firmly safeguard its national sovereignty, security and development interests.”

Beijing has repeatedly warned that it would use force if the government in Taipei were to declare formal independence from China. In response to the Biden-Suga statement, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng said: “We are prepared to do everything we can for a peaceful reunification (with Taiwan). That said, we don’t pledge to give up other options. No option is excluded.”

The Biden administration is deliberately raising tensions with China over what is potentially the most dangerous flashpoint for war in Asia. The current Taiwanese administration is headed by President Tsai Ing-wen from the Democratic Progressive Party, which advocates a more independent stance for Taiwan. By forging closer ties with Taipei, the US, aided by Japan, is encouraging Tsai to push for independence and risk conflict.

Under Biden, the US navy has already sailed through the Taiwan Strait four times, on track to pass the annual record of 13 such voyages set under Trump last year.

At the same time, Biden and Suga restated their opposition to China in other flashpoints. “We reiterated our objections to China’s unlawful maritime claims and activities in the South China Sea and reaffirmed our strong shared interest in a free and open South China Sea governed by international law, in which freedom of navigation and overflight are guaranteed, consistent with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.”

Biden has continued “freedom of navigation” operations, provocatively sending US warships into Chinese-claimed waters in the South China Sea. The US has not signed the UN convention that it accuses China of breaching.

Biden also reaffirmed that the US-Japan Security Treaty applies to the uninhabited rocky outcrops in the East China Sea, known as the Senkaku or Diaoyu Islands, that are controlled by Japan but also claimed by China. In other words, the US would back Japan militarily in the event of war with China over these islets, “using its full range of capabilities, including nuclear.”

The Biden-Suga talks are part of a US diplomatic offensive to strengthen its strategic partnerships in preparation for conflict with China. Last month, Biden held the first-ever leaders’ summit of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue that included Suga along with prime ministers Scott Morrison and Narendra Modi of Australia and India respectively. The “Quad” is a quasi-military alliance aimed against China.

This was followed by the first overseas trip by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to Japan and South Korea. South Korean President Moon Jae-in is due to meet Biden in Washington early next month.

Biden and Suga also pledged to deepen their economic cooperation. At a joint press conference, Biden prefaced the announcement of the new US-Japan Competitiveness and Resilience Partnership (CoRe) by again declaring that the two countries would work “together to take on the challenges from China.”

In particular, the US and Japan plan to spend \$2.5 billion and \$2 billion respectively to develop 5G mobile networks, as well as future “6G” networks. A White House statement

said the two would also “cooperate on sensitive supply chains, including semiconductors, and on the promotion and protection of critical technologies.”

These communication networks and technologies are crucial for US war efforts. Semiconductors are essential for military equipment like warplanes and missile guidance systems. The fact that the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company dominates the global production of chips, particularly the most advanced, is a factor in the US focus on Taiwan.

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