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China, Russia furious over democracy summit snubs

Biden invites 110 countries to virtual summit on democracy

BEIJING: China and Russia reacted furiously yesterday to US President Joe Biden's planned democracy summit, which will exclude them, with Beijing angered over an invitation for Taiwan and the Kremlin branding it divisive. The global conference was a campaign pledge by the US president, who has placed the struggle between democracies and "autocratic governments" at the heart of his foreign policy.

The inclusion of Taiwan, and not China, led to an angry rebuke from Beijing, which said it "firmly opposes" the invitation to "the so-called Summit for Democracy." Beijing claims self-ruled Taiwan as part of its territory to be retaken one day, by force if necessary. Around 110 countries have been invited to the virtual summit, including the United States' major Western allies but also Iraq, India and Pakistan.

But Russia said the guest list, released Tuesday on the State Department website, showed that the United States "prefers to create new dividing lines, to divide countries into those that — in their opinion — are good, and those that are bad." "More and more countries prefer to decide themselves how to live," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters, adding that Washington is "trying to privatize the term 'democracy'." "That can't do so and should not do so," he said.

Diplomatic coup

The invitation is a major coup for Taipei at a time when China is ramping up its campaign to keep Taiwan locked out of international bodies. Taiwan said the gathering would be a rare opportunity to burnish its credentials on the world stage. "Through this summit, Taiwan can share its democratic success story," presidential office spokesman Xavier Chang told reporters.

Only 15 countries officially recognize Taipei over Beijing, although many nations maintain de facto diplomatic relations with the island. The US does not recognize Taiwan as an independent country but maintains it

as a crucial regional ally and opposes any change to its status by force. China balks at any use of the word "Taiwan" or diplomatic gestures that might lend a sense of international legitimacy to the island.

"I agree Taiwan more than qualifies — but it does seem to be (the) only democratic govt invited that the US govt does not officially recognize. So its inclusion is a big deal," tweeted Julian Ku, a Hofstra University law professor whose specialties include China. Taiwan's foreign ministry said it would be represented at the summit by its de facto US ambassador Bi-khim Hsiao and digital minister Audrey Tang, who is one of the world's few openly transgender national politicians.

Scrutinized guest list

The long-advertised meeting will take place online on December 9 and 10 ahead of an in-person meeting at its second edition next year. India, often called "the world's biggest democracy", will be present, despite increasing criticism from human rights defenders over democratic backsliding under Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

So too will Pakistan, despite its chequered relationship with Washington. Turkey, a NATO ally of the United States whose President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was dubbed an "autocrat" by Biden, did not make the list. Neither did the city-state of Singapore, or Bangladesh, one of the world's most populous democracies.

In the Middle East, only Israel and Iraq were invited. The traditional Arab allies of the US — Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates — are all absent. Biden also invited Brazil, which is led by controversial far-right President Jair Bolsonaro. In Europe, Poland is represented, despite recurring tensions with Brussels over respect for the rule of law, but Hungary's far-right Prime Minister Viktor Orban is not. On the African side, the



CHIAYI CITY, Taiwan: File photo shows Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen (C) inspects air force troops during a ceremony at the Chiayi Air Force in southern Taiwan. — AFP

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria and Niger are invited.

'Decline of democracy'

"For this kick-off Summit... there's a case for getting a broad set of actors into the room: it provides for a better exchange of ideas than setting a perfect bar for qualification," Laleh Ispahani of the Open Society Foundations told AFP. Rather than using the summit as an anti-China meeting, Ispahani urged Biden to

address "the serious decline of democracy around the world — including relatively robust models like the US."

This summit is being organized as democracy has suffered setbacks in countries where the US had placed great hopes. Sudan and Myanmar have experienced military coups, Ethiopia is in the midst of a conflict that could lead to its "implosion," according to US diplomats, and the Taliban took power in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of US troops after two decades. — AFP

German parties to unveil deal for post-Merkel govt

BERLIN: A centre-left-led alliance of parties is poised yesterday to announce a deal to form Germany's new government, putting the Social Democrats (SPD) in charge for the first time in 16 years. Two months after the SPD beat Angela Merkel's conservative CDU-CSU coalition in a general election, its negotiators put the finishing touches on the deal with the Greens and liberal Free Democrats that will install Finance Minister Olaf Scholz, 63, as chancellor.

The relatively rapid accord is likely to be greeted by a heave of relief by international partners wary of a hamstrung Germany while crises from the coronavirus pandemic to Belarus and a weak economic recovery rage. Critical voices within Germany have grown

louder for greater urgency from the new coalition to curb a surging fourth wave of the pandemic as hospital beds fill up and new infections soar to records highs day after day.

In a sign of the emergency, Merkel, who is retiring from politics after four terms, summoned the leaders of the new coalition parties for talks over the rapidly deteriorating COVID situation midway during their last spurt of negotiations Tuesday. Yesterday, the parties said they will meet for a "final session" of talks.

"Afterwards, the leaders of the three parties and the candidate for chancellor, Olaf Scholz, will present the coalition agreement negotiated in recent weeks," they added. With the so-called coalition

contract, the parties have essentially set their policy roadmap for the next four years.

Expected to feature in the agreement along with their stance vis-a-vis foreign policy will be a plan to bring Germany's exit out of coal forward to 2030 from 2038 and a proposal to legalise recreational use of cannabis.

Negotiators are also likely to have resolved a thorny part of the talks — which party takes which ministry. Latest lists leaked on the ministry distribution show Christian Lindner, leader of the business-friendly FDP, running the powerful finance ministry of Europe's biggest economy.

Robert Habeck, co-leader of the ecologist Greens, is touted to lead a new 'super-ministry' grouping the portfolios of economy, climate protection and energy. Annalena Baerbock, the Greens' other leader, will likely become Germany's next foreign minister — the first woman in the job.

The health ministry, which has become highly crucial but also a hot potato during the pandemic, is expected to go to the SPD, according to German media. The lineup, if confirmed, hints at a Germany that could take a more assertive tone vis-a-vis China and Russia, while economically, it would likely stick to budgetary rigour and aggressively push green investments.

The swift pace at which the three parties-known in Germany as the Ampel or "traffic-light" after their colours — came together is a surprise given that the FDP is not a natural partner with the centre-left SPD or Greens. But the parties are anxious to avoid a repeat of the messy negotiations last time round, when Lindner was vilified for pulling the plug on talks with Merkel's CDU-CSU and the Greens. — AFP

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