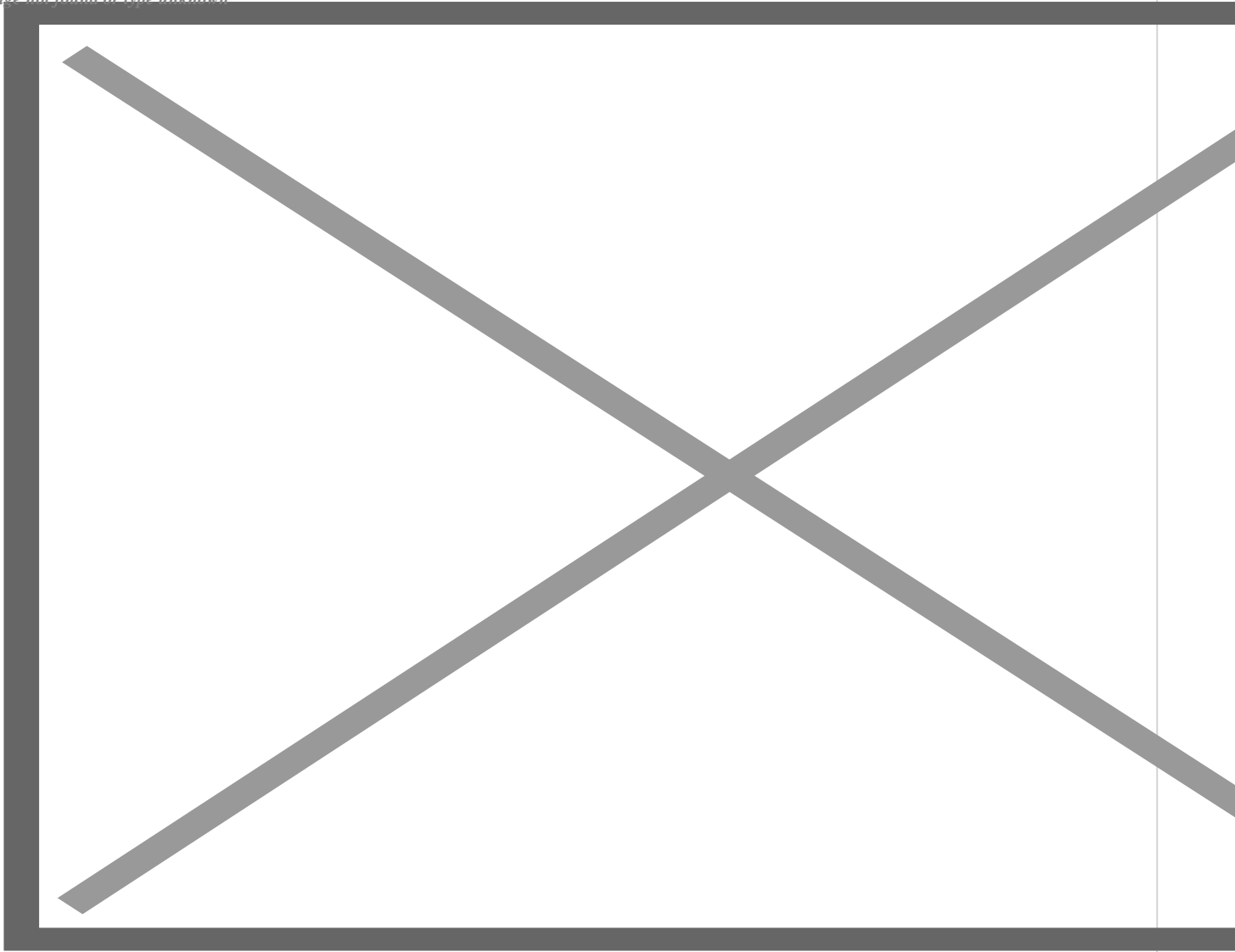


World leaders pledge to focus on global vaccination efforts

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Russian President Vladimir Putin attends a virtual meeting, part of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, at the Novo-Ogaryovo state residence outside Moscow, Russia, July 16, 2021 [Aleksey Nikolskyi/Sputnik/Kremlin via Reuters]

Moscow, July 17 (RHC)-- Leaders of the Asia-Pacific trade group APEC, including US President Joe Biden, Russia's Vladimir Putin, and China's Xi Jinping, pledged on Friday to work to expand sharing and manufacturing of COVID-19 vaccines to fight the global pandemic.

The leaders, struggling to tame outbreaks exacerbated by the Delta variant, said they would encourage the voluntary transfer of vaccine production technologies "on mutually agreed terms" as the region prepared for future health shocks.

"The pandemic continues to have a devastating impact on our region's people and economies," the leaders said in a joint statement issued after a virtual meeting chaired by New Zealand. "We will only overcome this health emergency by accelerating equitable access to safe, effective, quality-assured, and affordable COVID-19 vaccines," they added.

The APEC leaders met virtually to discuss collective actions to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic effects.

New Zealand, the revolving Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation host, said this week it would chair the extraordinary meeting ahead of a formal gathering in November, the first time such an additional meeting has been held.

"Our discussions moved us beyond vaccine nationalism. Now we are focusing on all aspects of contributing to the global vaccination effort — making vaccines, sharing vaccines and using vaccines," New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said after the meeting. She said the leaders agreed this will not be the world's last pandemic and that preparedness was critical.

The meeting highlights growing concerns around COVID-19, which is raging in the region as countries including Indonesia, Thailand and Australia face new waves of infections.

Putin told the group that global barriers to vaccine production and deliveries needed to be removed, and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga expressed his determination to fellow leaders to hold a safe and secure Olympics.

Despite their show of resolve, there are tensions among APEC members, most notably between the West and China – over issues ranging from the origins of the coronavirus to trade, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and the South China Sea.

Just as the meeting concluded, Washington announced sanctions on seven Chinese individuals over Beijing's crackdown on democracy in Hong Kong, its latest effort to hold Beijing accountable for what it calls an erosion of rule of law in the former British colony.

The United States and China have a troubled relationship and they have had little high-level, face-to-face contact under the Biden administration since a March meeting between senior officials in Alaska, where the Chinese side expressed anger at US sanctions announced just ahead of the talks.

At the APEC meeting, Biden discussed investing in better global health security and preparedness to deal with potential future pandemics, the White House said on Friday. Biden also emphasized the importance of multilateral cooperation and reiterated his commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific, it said in a statement. He underscored the importance the United States places on the region and pledged that "the United States will remain deeply engaged" there "for generations to come", the White House said.

The group includes the world's three largest economies and impoverished nations such as Papua New Guinea, as well as members at vastly different points in the COVID-19 cycle, providing further challenges for building consensus.

That consensus model of APEC has been tested in recent years, with the group unable to agree on a communique at their 2018 meeting in Papua New Guinea, driven by differences between China and the then-US president, Donald Trump.

The 2019 APEC meeting in Chile was cancelled due to protests while the one in Malaysia last year was side-tracked when officials hastily organised a virtual meeting as the pandemic locked down the world.

In June, APEC trade ministers agreed to review trade barriers and expedite the cross-border transit of COVID-19 vaccines and related goods, but stopped short of a broad commitment to remove tariffs that New Zealand was pushing for.

There have been more than 50 million cases of COVID-19 within APEC's borders, with more than 1 million deaths. APEC-wide gross domestic product contracted by 1.9 percent in 2020.

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