

From “Strategic Ambiguity” Toward “Strategic Clarity”: U.S. Taiwan Policy under Biden Presidency

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Abstract: The U.S. Taiwan policy has undergone significant changes under Biden Presidency. Strategic ambiguity is commonly used by U.S. government to deliberately spread uncertainty in Beijing and Taipei about whether the United States would intervene in cross-strait war. In recent years, Biden administration shifted from longstanding “strategic ambiguity” toward “strategic clarity” by pledging to fight alongside Taiwan against China in the event of war. The crisis in the Taiwan Strait looks imminent and the probability of a conflict can no longer be ruled out. How to resolved it peacefully require more analysis and a bit of speculation

Keywords: Taiwan; The U.S.-China Relations; Cross-strait Relations; Biden Presidency; Strategic Ambiguity; Strategic Clarity; One-China Policy; New Cold War; Salami Slicing.

1. Introduction

Cross-strait tensions have escalated since Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen took office in 2016. Meanwhile, Taipei expects more security assistance from Washington. U.S.-China relations have deteriorated sharply in recent years. More than once, Joe Biden publicly guaranteed that U.S. forces would defend Taiwan from Chinese attack, running counter to America’s long-standing Taiwan policy. The danger of a catastrophic collapse in U.S.-China relations in the Taiwan Strait has increased.

This paper will provide an analysis of Washington’s longstanding position of “strategic ambiguity” and newly adjusted “strategic clarity” on Taiwan. In order to reveal the critical challenges and root causes of the transition, remarks from officials and strategists of both countries will be studied.

2. Taiwan is a Part of China

Taiwan belongs to China since ancient times. According to historical records, the Chinese people were the first to contact with Taiwan, and the ancestors of today’s Taiwanese indigenous peoples mainly came from Chinese mainland[1]. Although Dutch and Spanish colony were established in Taiwan in the 17th century, for most of the time, Taiwan has been under effective administration of the Chinese government.

Taiwan was under Japanese rule for fifty years after China was defeated in the First Sino-Japanese War. Under long-term suppression by Japanese government, quite a few Taiwanese people rebelled against Japanese rule and turned to social campaigns pursuing democratic local governance. In 1945, following an end to the World War II, Chinese government took over Taiwan on behalf of Allied and established Taiwan Provincial Governor’s Office [2]. From that moment on, China had recovered Taiwan.

Soon after the victory of the war against Japanese aggression, the civil war broke out in China. It was until 1949, when the Communist Party founded the People’s Republic of China, the government of Kuomintang retreated from China to Taiwan. Communication between Taiwan and Chinese mainland was disconnected since then.

Taiwan is still an ethnic Han dominant society although foreign cultures and thoughts swarmed into Taiwan. The links between Chinese and Taiwanese were rebuilt since 1987 when China lifted the curfew and opened up cross-strait family visits. Later, postal, transportation, and trade ties had been gradually built. Cross-strait relations became smoother.

With the rise of Xi Jinping at the helm of the Chinese Communist Party, the dynamics of China’s foreign policy and cross-strait relations took a shift. China’s emphasis on reserving the right to use force over Taiwan and making the Chinese military world class by 2027, were largely misinterpreted by Taiwan. The dynamics of cross-strait relations also took a bump with the coming of the DPP (Democratic Progressive Party), which has been raising the independence slogan, in power in Taiwan.

The one-China principle is a universal consensus of the international community and a basic norm in international relations. Any country that wants diplomatic relations with China must break official ties with Taiwan. That Taiwan is an inalienable part of China remains a sine qua non of Beijing’s diplomacy. However, over the years, the United States maintains a robust contact with Taipei and continues to sell defense equipment to its military.

Taiwan is not only a sentimental issue for China, it also has the potential to be a flash point in U.S.-China relations. The U.S.-China relations are based on three joint communiqués: the Shanghai Communiqué, the Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations, and the August 17 Communiqué, the core of which is “the United States of America acknowledges the government of the People’s Republic of China is the sole legal Government of China. Within this context, the people of the United States will maintain cultural, commercial, and other unofficial relations with Taiwan”.[3] Sole, meaning the PRC was and is the only China, with no consideration of Taiwan as a separate sovereign entity.

3. Imminent Threats from Washington

The U.S. is eroding one-China policy over Taiwan. U.S. official Senator Marsha Blackburn referred to Taiwan as a “country” during a meeting with Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen; and the U.S. government publicly support Taiwan’s

participation in the United Nations (UN) system, seriously violating the one-China principle. On May 5th, 2022, the United States Department has made a major change in its “fact sheet” on Taiwan, removing wording on not supporting Taiwan independence and acknowledging Beijing's position that Taiwan is part of China.[4] Although Washington claimed the update did not reflect a change in policy, this kind of political manipulation on the Taiwan question was a blatantly attempt to hollow out the one-China principle.

Welcomed by some, decried by others, U.S. President Joe Biden publicly guaranteed that U.S. military will fight alongside Taiwan against China. Although Biden's Asia policy coordinator Kurt Campbell insisted that “our policy is consistent and not unprecedented”, [5] no one would believe this was not a policy change. Whether intentionally or not, Biden's brief regurgitation departed from previous U.S. policy, which carefully avoided pre-committing the United States to intervention in a Taiwan Strait war.

Biden administration passed package of Taiwan-related bills to prevent China from “invading” Taiwan, such as Taiwan Policy Act of 2022, Taiwan Conflict Deterrence Act of 2023, Taiwan Non-Discrimination Act of 2023, Taiwan Assurance Act and Taiwan Assurance Implementation Act, etc. These bills involved militarily financing Taiwan, accelerating arms sales, and strengthening military ties with Taiwan.

1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) required the U.S. to “maintain the capacity” to defend Taiwan against Chinese Communist aggression — but it did not obligate America to implement that “capacity”. The Taiwan Policy Act of 2022, passed by the Senate on September 14th, [6] was more than just defense ties. The most profound impact of the bill is in the areas of diplomacy and arms sales, covering broad security and military assistance to support Taiwan to deter China from interfering with the status quo. Joseph Bosco, a national-security consultant contended that the bill ended Washington's policy of “Strategic Ambiguity” on defending Taiwan. [7]

Relations between Taiwan and China deteriorated sharply following a visit to the island by the then U.S. House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, in August 2022. During her stay in Taiwan, Pelosi claimed that “America stands with Taiwan”, breaking the Washington's own commitment that it will only remain unofficial relations with Taiwan. This trip, a blatant and futile provocation, seriously infringed on China's sovereignty and security. China immediately started military exercises in the region and interrupted any dialogue with the United States.

On April 5th, 2023, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, defied Chinese threats of retaliation by appearing with Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen in California. Tsai delivered a dire warning that “democracy is under threat” during their meeting, prompting an angry statement from Beijing, with a spokesperson for China's Foreign Ministry saying that “China firmly opposes and strongly condemns it”.[8] Washington intentionally distorts the nature of the Taiwan question, which is purely China's internal affair, brings greater turmoil and disaster to the international community.

4. Could War Erupt Over Taiwan?

The expansion of Russia's military operation from the Donbas region into the rest of Ukraine has alarmed all of Russia's neighboring countries. Far from Ukraine, leaders of Taiwan are also concerned that Chinese leader Xi Jinping may take advantage of a distracted West to invade. Many

American media draw parallels between Ukraine and Taiwan, touting “Today Ukraine, Tomorrow Taiwan”.[9] While there are no signs an attack on Taiwan is imminent, the war in Ukraine has generated a new sense of urgency in this island.

In 2021, Adm. Phil Davidson, then-commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, testified in front of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said that China may be prepared to act on its ambitions to control Taiwan by 2027. This so-called “Davidson Window” has now emerged as a central topic in U.S. defense strategy toward China. In China's 20th Party Congress, the new amendment states the CCP's commitment to “resolutely oppose and contain Taiwan independence” while strengthening the Chinese military to promote “unification of the motherland”.[10] U.S. officials suggested that China's plans to annex Taiwan were accelerating beyond expectation.

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director William J. Burns stated in February 2023 that Beijing has instructed the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to “be ready” to “conduct a successful invasion” of Taiwan by 2027.[11] Some lawmakers assessed that China could attack as soon as 2024 - presumably around Taiwan's January 2024 elections. These predictive timelines unintentionally project a sense that war is inevitable, which undermines the pursuit of peace talks.

Much of the existing speculation focuses on when a Chinese attack on Taiwan could occur, there is also discussion of the consequences of such a scenario for China and the world. According to commentators from Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), reunification with Taiwan through force would be a pyrrhic victory for China. U.S. allies—most notably Australia, Japan, and the United Kingdom—would coordinate planning for actions that could discourage China. Even if the PLA were successful in seizing and holding Taiwan, Beijing would still face plenty of economic, diplomatic, and political challenges. [12]

Some commentators believe that China would avoid its troops storming into Taiwan and adopt a strategy of diplomatic isolation, gray zone pressure, or economic coercion against Taiwan. Admiral Lee Hsi-ming, a former commander of the Taiwanese military, claimed that these encroachment tactics are “super effective”. “You say it's your garden, but it turns out that it is your neighbor who's hanging out in the garden all the time. With that action, they are making a statement that it's their garden - and that garden is one step away from your house.”[13]

In fact, China displays little evidence of urgency about realizing unification with Taiwan via military means and there is no sign of a massive Chinese military buildup in the vicinity of the Taiwan Strait. For China, unification with Taiwan is an indispensable goal, who has long sought “peaceful unification” on the basis of the “one country, two systems” model. Resolving the Taiwan issue is a matter for the Chinese people, and allows no interference by any forces in the Taiwan question.

5. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the U.S. government is “salami slicing” and “hollowing out” one-China policy, heightening the risk of war in the Taiwan Strait. China has long warned that, the Taiwan question is at the heart of China's core interests. Those who expect China to compromise and back down on the Taiwan question are delusional and will only shoot themselves in the foot. Chinese government calls for guardrails for China-U.S. relations and stressed that the three Sino-U.S. joint

communiqués are the most reliable guardrails for the two countries.

Reunification of China and Taiwan meets the interests of all. Unfortunately, the potential common ground between America and China on Taiwan is dwindling. But the countries do share a common interest in avoiding a third world war. Somehow, both sides must find a way to coexist less dangerously.

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