

US must commit to Taiwan's defense

Written by Joseph Bosco
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Should Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) be quaking in his boots at the prospect that US Senator Bernie Sanders might become president? Sanders has stated emphatically that he would “absolutely” use military force if China attacks Taiwan.

That is an (almost) unprecedented expression of strategic clarity on the US commitment to Taiwan's democratic security.

However, Beijing might be forgiven for dismissing it as so much political rhetoric in the midst of a presidential campaign. It has heard such tough talk before, and seen it dissipate once the candidate took office and actually had the power to follow through — but did not.

When Richard Nixon prepared his 1968 run for the presidency, he laid out his strategy to get “Red China” to moderate its harsh domestic policies and aggressive approach in international affairs. He argued against making premature concessions such as “to ply it with trade ... which would serve to confirm its rulers in their present course.”

In office, Nixon delegated to his junior partner, then-US national security adviser Henry Kissinger, the immediate task of starting negotiations, but told him to avoid giving away too much just to get a deal: “We cannot be too forthcoming in terms of what America will do. We'll withdraw from Taiwan, and we'll do this, and that, and the other thing.”

Yet, in the end, that is exactly what the two consummate realists did, thereby establishing a pattern in US-China relations: strong rhetoric and strategic retreat.

When Bill Clinton ran against then-US president George H.W. Bush in 1992, he justifiably criticized the incumbent for “coddling the butchers of Beijing” — implying that he would act differently.

Just after the Tiananmen Square Massacre, Bush had sent his national security adviser Brent Scowcroft and US deputy secretary of state Lawrence Eagleburger to Beijing to clink glasses

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with Deng Xiaoping (邓小平), who had ordered the slaughter, and assured him that Washington would conduct business as usual with China.

However, when Clinton became president, he followed the soft Bush approach and doubled down on the coddling.

He visited Beijing and declared “three noes” against Taiwan: “We don’t support independence for Taiwan, or ‘two Chinas,’ or ‘one Taiwan, one China,’ and we don’t believe that Taiwan should be a member in any organization for which statehood is a requirement.”

What were actually four restrictions on Taiwan further crushed its hopes for international dignity and respect, if not outright recognition.

However, it was not only political and diplomatic isolation that Clinton imposed on democratic Taiwan in deference to China’s communist leaders; it also was a diminution of Taiwan’s sense of security.

When Clinton’s assistant secretary of state Joseph Nye was bluntly asked by his Chinese counterparts what the US would do if China attacked Taiwan, he said, speaking for the administration: “We don’t know ... it would depend on the circumstances.”

Based on that response — which became the apotheosis of strategic ambiguity religiously followed by subsequent administrations — China set about creating “the circumstances” that would dissuade a future US president from even thinking about coming to Taiwan’s defense. It became known as the strategy of anti-access and area-denial, and consisted of a fleet of attack submarines and anti-ship ballistic missiles intended to deter the US Seventh Fleet from entering the Taiwan Strait or other close regional waters.

However, China knew that it would take a decade or more to build that capacity, so to keep the US at bay in the meantime, Chinese military officials periodically made apocalyptic threats against the US homeland itself, using the missiles and nuclear weapons it already had — first warning US officials “you care more about Los Angeles than Taiwan,” and then a years, it

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escalated the warning of nuclear annihilation to “hundreds of American cities.”

Now, 25 years after the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis that ended in US aircraft carriers standing down after Chinese threats of a “sea of fire,” China has the military capability to make more specific and credible threats.

Chinese Rear Admiral Luo Yuan (罗元) last year said: “What the United States fears the most is taking casualties,” and that sinking a couple of US carriers could kill as many as 10,000 sailors, adding: “We’ll see how frightened America is.”

Clinton’s successor, George W. Bush, when asked the same question early in his first term, stated emphatically that the US would do “whatever it took” to defend Taiwan against Chinese aggression.

However, this precursor to the Sanders’ warning, even by someone already in office, horrified the foreign policy establishment and was quickly walked back by his administration officials.

Such defiance was not heard again as the administration suddenly found itself waging a “global war on terror” after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and bought into Beijing’s line that China and the US were “strategic partners” in the anti-terrorism project.

Would a new terrorist attack during a Sanders administration similarly divert its attention from the omnipresent China threat, especially given his aversion to US defense spending? For that matter, would it divert US President Donald Trump, who, Xi might have noticed, has yet to declare a firm commitment to Taiwan’s defense?

For the eighth consecutive US administration, strategic ambiguity continues to wield its dangerous allure — even as Xi shows increasing impatience and Kissinger warns Taiwan that China “won’t wait forever.”

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