

End of strategic ambiguity policy

Written by Joseph Bosco
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The decades-long debate about committing the US to defend Taiwan against communist China's aggression is approaching a resolution.

US President Donald Trump and his administration apparently have decided to end the archaic and counterproductive policy of strategic ambiguity.

In a Fox News interview on Aug. 23, Trump was asked: "If China, and it looks like it's getting more belligerent, tries to either invade Taiwan or effectively take control of it and its important industries, would you let them get away with it?"

"China knows what I'm gonna do. China knows," he said.

"I don't want to say I am gonna do this or I am not gonna do this. It is a very big subject. It is a very powerful subject, but I think China understands what I am gonna be doing," he added.

Mindful of unvetted actions or statements by former US presidents, Trump declined to elaborate, cautioning the interviewer, and himself: "I think it's an inappropriate place to talk about it... This is just an inappropriate place to talk about it."

He was obviously aware of what happened when then-US president George W. Bush said in an unprepared remark in 2001 that he would do "whatever it took" to defend Taiwan.

The Chinese communist government and the US foreign policy establishment came down hard on him for upsetting the precarious "stability" preserved by ambiguity, and officials of his administration quickly walked the statement back.

As US president-elect, Trump had his own experience straying from the path of self-restraint that US officials have followed on the delicate subject of Taiwan.

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After he accepted a gracious congratulatory telephone call from President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) in December 2016, Beijing and the US foreign policy community erupted in their usual uproar.

At first, Trump pushed back and said that he could talk to anyone he wanted to — and even disparaged the “one China” policy he was accused of undermining.

However, he was persuaded to mollify Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) by promising to consult with him before again talking with Tsai.

No subsequent conversations between the two democratically elected presidents have been reported — not on the occasion of her re-election, her second inauguration or on the death of Lee Teng-hui (李登輝), Taiwan’s first democratically elected president.

It is not known whether Trump refrained for fear of upsetting trade talks with China, or whether he checked with Xi and was denied permission. It is also possible that US Vice President Mike Pence or US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have had discreet contact with Tsai.

As for his latest remarks on defending Taiwan, for now it was an understanding between Washington and Beijing, and possibly Taipei.

It was left to US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, days later, to edge closer to a clear public declaration.

At Pearl Harbor, observing the 75th anniversary of Japan’s surrender, without mentioning Taiwan by name, Esper said: “America will defend our friends.”

Friends, not just allies.

During his visit to Taiwan last month, US Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar said that he brought “greetings from a great friend of Taiwan: President Donald J. Trump.”

Azar thanked American Institute in Taiwan Director Brent Christensen “for what he has done with Taiwan’s leaders ... to deepen our friendship.”

He called Taiwan “a reliable partner ... and a treasured friend of the United States.”

Azar also said that the relationship works both ways, adding that “in these trying times, the United States knows that we will always have a friend in Taiwan.”

In a CNN interview, Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu (吳德斗) reaffirmed the solid bonds.

“The message to Beijing is that we have a partner in the US, and the US has friendship in Taiwan. From Taiwan’s perspective, the better the relations are between Taiwan and the US, the better protected Taiwan will be,” Wu said.

Still, Wu said that Taiwan wants to avoid antagonizing China.

“We have our own strategy in dealing with China, and our strategy is that we don’t want to get into a situation where Taiwan will be seen as a target. We don’t want to have a provocation against China,” he said.

However, as Wu and Tsai have observed, weakness and indecision can also be a provocation and must be avoided.

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Stating that Taiwan is “on the front lines of freedom and democracy,” Tsai said that “strength can be correlated with deterrence.”

Deterrent strength requires not only military capabilities, but also political and moral resolve, which is why the US’ Taiwan Relations Act mandates that Washington not only provide Taiwan with defensive arms, but that it “maintain the capacity ... to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.”

Recognizing the mounting danger of Chinese aggression against Taiwan, the US Congress has passed a series of measures deepening relations with Taiwan, including calling Taiwan the US’ “security partner” in the Indo-Pacific region.

Now, stating that “strategic ambiguity has clearly failed,” the US Congress is moving the “Taiwan Invasion Prevention Act.”

Introduced by US Representative Ted Yoho, the act would ensure that the US military is prepared to defeat a sudden Chinese attempt at a fait accompli against Taiwan.

Passage of the legislation would constitute a congressional authorization for Trump, or an administration of former US vice president Joe Biden, to use force to defend Taiwan.

Since the administration of former US president Bill Clinton, strategic ambiguity has told Beijing that the US might or might not defend Taiwan “depending on the circumstances.”

Trump and his national security team seem poised to define those triggering circumstances as: “You attack Taiwan, we defend it and defeat you.”

It would be appropriate for the US and Taiwanese presidents to discuss the new security relationship electronically or in person.

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