

Taiwan policy: Biden versus Trump

Written by John Copper
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Next month, on Nov. 3, US voters will go to the polls to pick their next president, a choice between former vice president Joe Biden and President Donald Trump, who is seeking a second term.

Residents of Taiwan have to wonder how the two will differ in terms of the US' future Taiwan policy and which will be better for Taiwan.

What stands out about the former vice president is how little he has said about Taiwan, and that information about his views or his policies about US-Taiwan relations should be so scarce.

That is unusual given that Biden has served in government for 47 years, was a long-time member of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee — even its chairman — was chosen by then-US president Barack Obama for his foreign policy experience and has foreign affairs experience that exceeded all of the Democratic candidates for president this year combined.

During the campaign this year, Biden has been on the side of the resistance to China in his foreign policy thinking, but this is the view of most Democrats and Republicans and a policy that a candidate might have chosen simply by looking at opinion polls. He did not, unlike a number of Democrats and Republicans, extend this to mean closer ties and commitments to Taiwan.

In his acceptance speech to be the Democratic Party's candidate for president he focused on other issues. He did not mention Taiwan.

Also, Biden has interpreted the Taiwan Relations Act's provision that the president is to "inform Congress promptly of any threat to the security or the social or economic system of the people of Taiwan and any danger to the interests of the United States arising therefrom" as meaning that he should act after the fact.

However, others interpret this provision as meaning that the president should act before or at

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the same time as advising Congress, otherwise it would be too late to rescue Taiwan.

In 2001, when then-US president George W. Bush said that he would do “whatever it took” to assist Taiwan if China were to attack, Biden criticized him for that comment — although he took it back later. He then said that he preferred “strategic ambiguity.”

During the Obama-Biden years, the vice president did not object or even express concern when Obama and his aides and supporters contemplated — and talked about openly — a policy of abandoning Taiwan. Their reasoning was that the US should finally end its involvement in China’s civil war and that the US could no longer defend Taiwan.

More recently, Biden said in response to Trump’s Taiwan policy: “The president should not cede to Taiwan ... the ability to automatically draw us into a war across the Taiwan Strait.”

If elected president, Biden has spoken of a China policy that would be more inclusive and would rely more on institutions in its formulation. Presumably this would include the UN and other international agencies, which espouse a hostile attitude toward Taiwan and seek to isolate it from involvement in global affairs.

Trump’s Taiwan policy is very different from Biden’s.

After a year of “good feelings” toward China in 2018, which ended in disappointment over trade and dealing with North Korea, Trump adopted what many have called the “Taiwan card,” or favorable policies toward Taiwan.

There has been clear evidence of this:

In March 2018, the US Congress passed the Taiwan Travel Act, which Trump immediately signed. The act sought to correct “insufficient high-level communications and self-imposed restrictions” on US-Taiwan contact.

Shortly after this, the American Institute in Taiwan — Washington's *de facto* embassy in Taiwan — opened a new building. The building is beautiful and expensive, and the opening attracted considerable media attention. President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) attended the ceremony and spoke of a “brighter future” with the US.

Two months later, Congress passed the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act, which affirmed that the US is still Taiwan's guardian. The US Department of State then authorized Tsai's stop in the US during a diplomatic trip. She visited the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in California and the Johnson Space Museum in Houston, Texas — a first for a Taiwanese president.

In November last year, the Trump administration lauded Taiwan's democratic election. The next month, Trump signed the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, which cited support for broad contacts with Taiwan. Tsai applauded the act in her New Year's address. A few months later, in July last year, the Trump administration approved the sale of US\$2.2 billion in arms to Taiwan. Tsai expressed her “sincere gratitude.”

On the heels of the arms sale, with Trump's approval, Tsai made another diplomatic trip with two stops in the US, in New York and Colorado. The US stays were longer than had been typical and gave Tsai an opportunity to meet with high-level US officials.

In August last year, Trump approved the sale of a whopping US\$8 billion in weapons to Taiwan. Tsai commented that this would give Taiwan a “new air force.” Lockheed Martin, the maker of the fighter aircraft included in the sale, said that the planes would “fly and fight to 2070 and beyond.”

Two months later, a Tsai administration official stated on the record that Trump was the “best US president ever in terms of relations with Taiwan.”

Prior to Taiwan's presidential and legislative elections on Jan. 11, observers could clearly see that the Trump administration favored Tsai to win re-election and for her party, the Democratic Progressive Party, to prevail. They were victorious over the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT)

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presidential candidate and legislative contenders, who were supported by China.

In recent months, the Trump administration has challenged China's military intimidation of Taiwan by mobilizing and showing US forces, has sent high-level US officials to Taiwan and has broached a new arms sale agreement worth several billion dollars, which is said to include "seven new weapons systems."

Biden's foreign policy might be described as "cautious cum timid" — and this characterizes his Taiwan policy. For him, the Taiwan Strait is a flashpoint zone to be avoided, as a broader conflict might ensue there. Some even cite Biden's opposition to or skepticism over Obama's order to kill former al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden as emblematic of his character.

By contrast, Trump has engaged with Taiwan in line with his policy of undertaking a US military buildup and his special concern with the US' role in Asia — plus, this comes from his more determined nature. Also, for him, Taiwan is important to the US.

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