

Biden must follow up on Taiwan

Written by Joseph Bosco
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Until the administration of US President Donald Trump, Washington had always been of two minds regarding Taiwan's importance to US national interest.

In the post-World War II period, when Taiwan was controlled by Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石), a US ally, but a harsh dictator, then-US president Harry Truman's administration saw no need to get in a war with China over the nation.

In 1949 and 1950, speeches by US General Douglas MacArthur and then-US secretary of state Dean Acheson excluded Taiwan (and South Korea) from the US Pacific defense perimeter, and the US Navy was removed from the Taiwan Strait and nearby waters.

North Korea's invasion of South Korea, fully supported by communist China and the Soviet Union, awakened Truman to the Cold War reality that Asian communism was on the move.

He quickly sent the US Seventh Fleet back into the Taiwan Strait to block Mao Zedong (毛澤東) from unifying China and Taiwan under communist rule — and Chiang from unifying them as an anti-communist entity.

The separation by US deterrence was maintained until 1972 when then-US president Richard Nixon, until then the leading anti-communist in Washington, embarked on his opening to China and began the 40-year experiment in engagement.

With the enthusiastic encouragement of then-US national security adviser Henry Kissinger, a proud practitioner of European-style realpolitik, Taiwan was viewed as a convenient bargaining chip for larger geopolitical stakes such as leverage over the Soviet Union.

If done cleverly, as Kissinger envisioned it, Taiwan could be abandoned to the Chinese Communist Party, while Beijing would theoretically enable the US to withdraw gracefully from Vietnam and abandon the South to the North Vietnamese communists. Two troublesome US allies could be dispatched with one brilliant geopolitical stroke.

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To preserve at least the appearance of US honor, it all had to be done with what came to be known as strategic ambiguity. That was accomplished through the 1972 Shanghai Communique, which has been called “the original sin” of modern US-China relations.

Then-Chinese premier Zhou Enlai (周 恩来) stated in unequivocal terms that Taiwan belonged to China.

However, as Chiang also claimed the territories on both sides of the Strait, the US “acknowledges” and “does not challenge that position,” Kissinger wrote.

With that opening, wide enough to drive an aircraft carrier through, Beijing has for the past five decades falsely asserted to the world that the US has acceded to its “one China” principle, as other countries have followed Washington’s lead. Ever since, US leaders have struggled to distinguish the US’ “one China” policy by insisting that it is agnostic on Taiwan’s fate, as long as it is achieved peacefully and consensually.

When then-US president Jimmy Carter followed the Nixon-Kissinger lead and in 1979 broke relations with Taiwan, the US Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act, which went as far as it could in making a binding defense commitment to Taiwan without a formal treaty.

It stated that the US would consider any threat to Taiwan as “a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States.”

The act further committed the US “to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character [and] to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion” against Taiwan.

However, the act would be only as good as its implementation by the US government, and during the 1995-1996 Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, even though Taiwan was becoming a full-fledged democracy, then-US president Bill Clinton’s administration dialed US policy back

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toward ambiguity.

When Chinese officials explicitly asked their US counterparts how Washington would react if China attacked Taiwan, they were told: “We don’t know and you don’t know. It would depend on the circumstances.”

China tested the US’ resolve in 1996 by firing missiles toward Taiwan to protest its first direct presidential election. Clinton sent aircraft carriers into the Strait, but turned them away when Beijing threatened a “sea of fire.”

A traumatized US official later called the incident “our own Cuban missile crisis... We had stared into the abyss.”

That was decades before China built its arsenal of anti-ship ballistic missiles and its flotilla of attack submarines, creating new “circumstances” to deter US intervention.

Avoiding a recurrence of such a military confrontation with China became the guiding imperative of US Taiwan policy through the administrations of Clinton and his successors, George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

Constant admonitions to Taiwanese officials not to “provoke” China, and protracted delays in mandated arms sales became the norm, with administrations often letting the clock and the calendar run out to the ends of their terms without approving Taiwan’s requests.

However, the Trump administration has been less concerned with upsetting communist China’s sensibilities and more committed to sending stronger signals of US commitment to Taiwan.

Trump has signed every piece of pro-Taiwan legislation sent to him by the US Congress, and from the 2017 *US National Defense Strategy* going forward, his administration has made a series of diplomatic and policy statements conveying a deepening of the US-Taiwan security

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and values relationship.

On the bottom-line question about how the US would react to a Chinese attack on Taiwan, Trump conveyed no self-doubt or ambiguity when he was last month asked by an interviewer. There was no cleverly opaque “we don’t know and you don’t know.”

Instead, Trump said emphatically: “China knows what I’m gonna do. China knows... It is a very big subject. It is a very powerful subject, but I think China understands what I am gonna be doing.”

Although Trump said it would be inappropriate to divulge more in that setting, the meaning was clear: Beijing knows that there will be a significant response, and now the US and the world know.

If the administration of US president-elect Joe Biden proves to be as committed to human rights as it claims, it should have no hesitation about affirming unflinching US support for Taiwan’s continued democratic flourishing.

For geopolitical “realists” who say that they require more than idealism and shared values to justify risking US blood and treasure, there is the lesson of the Korean War when the Truman administration declined to state a US security commitment to South Korea and Taiwan.

Taiwan’s geostrategic position, connecting the South and East China seas, speaks for itself.

On Dec. 7, 1941, when planes from Japan’s aircraft carriers bombed Pearl Harbor, the simultaneous attack on the Philippines was carried out by aircraft stationed in Japanese-ruled Taiwan — what MacArthur called “the unsinkable aircraft carrier.”

Communist China’s plans for the territories and resources of the South China Sea area and beyond are every bit as ambitious as imperial Japan’s Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

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Beijing must be made to understand that launching aggression against Taiwan — or today's democratic Japan — will bring it the same fate.

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