

China and US lay down 'red lines'

Written by Joseph Bosco

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Communist China's Global Times warned US President Joe Biden in the first week of this month that he "should make a significant response to China's sincerity within his first 100 days, as the sincerity and patience will not last forever."

In fact, they lasted only days. By the end of the week, Beijing had laid down the law, so to speak, to the Biden administration. First was a speech billed as a "Dialogue with National Committee on US-China Relations," by Yang Jiechi (杨洁希), director of China's Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs.

Yang said he was pleased "to have this virtual conversation with ... leading figures with important influence representing different sectors of the American society," but there was no dialogue or conversation, and no questions.

Yang praised the pro-China committee and former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger "for your long-lasting efforts to promote the friendship, mutual trust, cooperation and broader bilateral relations between our two countries."

However, Yang complained that former US president Donald Trump's administration "adopted misguided policies against China, plunging the relationship into its most difficult period... Some in the United States, sticking to Cold War thinking, perceived China as a threat. The[y] ... have interfered in China's internal affairs, undermined China's interests, and disrupted exchanges and mutually beneficial cooperation between the two sides. There have also been attempts to seek 'decoupling' and a so-called 'new cold war,' [which] have seriously damaged China-US relations."

Yang urged the Biden team to depart from "the previous administration's ... strategic misjudgement ... [of] view[ing] China as a major strategic competitor, even an adversary."

He said that Washington must "respect China's position and concerns on the Taiwan question ... stop interference in the affairs of Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang, which all matter to China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and stop attempts to hold back China's development by meddling in China's internal affairs... These issues concern China's core interests, national

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dignity [and] constitute a red line that must not be crossed. Any trespassing would end up undermining China-US relations and the United States' own interests."

In the same lecturing tone that he used as ambassador in Washington, Yang clearly was setting the stage for the telephone conversation he had been demanding for weeks with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. It finally took place on Feb. 6, and Beijing's readout indicated that Yang followed his same admonitory script.

Yet this time, there was a response. The US Department of State's account said Blinken "stressed the United States will continue to stand up for human rights and democratic values, including in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong, and pressed China to join the international community in condemning the military coup in Burma."

On the most sensitive issue embroiling US-China relations, Blinken "reaffirmed that the United States will work together with its allies and partners in defense of our shared values and interests to hold the [People's Republic of China] accountable for its efforts to threaten stability in the Indo-Pacific, including across the Taiwan Strait, and its undermining of the rules-based international system."

Chinese Ambassador to the US Cui Tiankai (崔天凯) criticized Blinken's comments, saying that "this readout still shows the example of power rather than the power of example. You don't have an effective foreign policy just by talking tough or playing tough. This is not the right way of doing diplomacy."

Biden appeared on a talk show on Feb. 7 to reaffirm his own message to China: "I've said to [Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平)] all along, that we need not have a conflict... But there's gonna be extreme competition... I'm not going to do it the way Trump did. We're gonna focus on international rules of the road."

The remark recalled Biden's warning in December last year to Beijing: "There are international rules that if you want to play by, we'll play with you. If you don't, we're not going to play."

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Biden and his officials are eager to contrast their tough “rules-based” rhetoric with Trump’s erratic, love-hate approach to Xi.

Yet there are no substantive policy differences so far, as all the Trump administration challenges were responses to China’s contraventions of one set of international rules or another — which is why Yang, Cui and official Chinese media outlets are exercised at Biden’s reluctance to repudiate Trump’s policies outright and his people’s willingness to explicitly endorse them.

It remains to be seen how firmly Biden’s team will adhere to the Trump framework and their own rhetoric in standing up to China, especially on the critical flashpoint of Taiwan. Trump took little public interest after his historic telephone conversation with President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文), focusing instead on broader trade issues. He left the Taiwan-related diplomatic and security issues to his Cabinet and staff appointees, who were uniformly committed to Taiwan’s democratic security.

However, on the ultimate question of defending Taiwan, it was Trump who gave the most potentially consequential indication of commitment. In a little-noted interview in August last year, he was asked the perennial question of how Washington would respond if China attacked Taiwan.

Trump said ominously: “It’s an inappropriate place to talk about it, but China knows what I’m gonna do. China knows.”

His tone was reminiscent of his public “fire and fury” warning to North Korea in 2017.

It was the closest a US president has come to strategic clarity on Taiwan, with the exception of former US president George W. Bush’s transitory pledge to do “whatever it took” to defend Taiwan, quickly disavowed by staff and never repeated.

The Biden administration would have determined by now what private warning Trump conveyed to Beijing regarding the US’ intention to defend Taiwan, and whether this president is

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prepared to build on that commitment and make it public. Strictly private warnings are even less credible to adversaries than the evanescent "red lines" of former US president Barack Obama's statement on Syria.

If the new national security team opts instead to continue with strategic ambiguity on Taiwan, it can rely on Beijing proceeding with its military preparations to seize Taiwan when "the circumstances" hypothesized by former US president Bill Clinton's administration are propitious.

While ambiguity has arguably deterred an outright Chinese assault on Taiwan, it has failed to dissuade China from deploying the missile systems, submarines and surface fleet needed to attack the nation and preclude meaningful US intervention.

Worse, the armada and air squadrons China built over the decades, primarily for "the Taiwan contingency," have proved highly effective in pursuit of Beijing's other ambitions in the South and East China seas.

What former US president Richard Nixon once ruefully said in retrospect of his original opening to China can be applied as well to the feckless doctrine of strategic ambiguity: "We may have created a Frankenstein."

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