

Biden faces reckoning on China

Written by Joseph Bosco
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US President Joe Biden's administration continues to impress advocates of a strong, clear-eyed US policy on China and Taiwan — and to anger Chinese communist officials who had planned for a return to the accommodationist policies of the administrations of former US presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

Biden has put Beijing on its back foot by adhering rigorously to the historic shift by the administration of US President Donald Trump to a policy of defiance against China's onslaught on Western interests and values. Since Biden's inauguration, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan have embraced, and greatly expanded, their predecessors' sporadic efforts at multilateral cooperation and emphasis on human rights in meeting the China threat.

In the space of a week from April 4 to April 9: The US ambassador to Palau visited Taiwan; the US Department of State called Taiwan "a critical security partner"; the USS *John S. McCain* transited the Taiwan Strait on its way to yet another freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea; the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*

made its third visit to the region under Biden; and the state department released new, relaxed guidelines for official US-Taiwan interactions, replacing the restrictive ones that former US secretary of state Mike Pompeo had canceled, while Washington issued a statement of "rock-solid" support for Taiwan and a condemnation of China's threatening behavior.

In the same week, the US Department of Commerce banned the sale of US-made chips to Chinese technology giant Huawei Technologies Co (华为) and blacklisted seven Chinese supercomputing companies for assisting Chinese People's Liberation Army activities, including China's weapons of mass destruction program, while the state department affirmed that the US stands with its ally the Philippines "in the face of the [People's Republic of China's] maritime militia amassing in the South China Sea."

Meanwhile, the US Congress, on a broad, bipartisan basis, continues to express its strong opposition to Beijing's hostile policies and deplorable human rights record against Tibetans, Uighurs and political dissidents, and its destruction of Hong Kong's limited democratic system. Congress is considering several pieces of legislation that would apply further economic and diplomatic pressure on China to leave Taiwan alone — and increase political pressure on the executive branch to sustain a strong, consistent policy.

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The proposed Taiwan invasion prevention act would call on the Biden administration — as it was to do under the Trump administration — to take more meaningful action to deter Beijing. Neither administration has worked to advance the act, which is consistent with the historic reluctance of the executive branch to surrender foreign policy prerogatives to lawmakers. At least the Trump and Biden teams have not openly opposed pro-Taiwan initiatives the way the administration of former US president Jimmy Carter did with the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979.

When asked in the waning months of his term what he would do if China were to attack Taiwan, Trump said that “China knows what I’m gonna do” in a menacing tone that suggested a robust US military response. He declined to share with the US public what only his administration and the Chinese communists supposedly understand about the prospects for war over Taiwan.

Similarly, Biden, in his long-delayed and only news conference so far, gave a rambling account of his two-hour telephone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平), saying he told him that “we are going to hold China accountable to follow the rules [on] their agreement made on Taiwan.”

Like Trump, he did not disclose the actual verbal exchange so that the policy implications could be understood by the US, Taiwanese and Chinese publics.

Did they discuss the commitments Trump said he made on Taiwan? Did Biden tell Xi that the US would defend Taiwan? If so, what was Xi’s response? Did the leaders of the world’s two most powerful militaries discuss the likelihood of escalation over the Taiwan Strait and how it could be controlled?

Xi and his communist colleagues have been preparing Chinese for the growing possibility — even the necessity — of war to “return Taiwan to the motherland.” No US president has seriously informed the US public of the moral and geostrategic implications of allowing Taiwan to fall under communist rule. Neither the Trump nor Biden presidential campaigns addressed the issue of war with China over Taiwan, which was actually a prominent issue in the 1960 debates between then-US presidential candidates Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy.

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It is entirely possible that Biden's conversation with Xi accomplished one thing: dissuading Beijing from exploiting "legal warfare" to mandate an attack on Taiwan as threatened during the proceedings of the "Two Sessions" last month. So far, there has been no further action in Beijing to enshrine in Chinese "law" the communist state's "obligation" to subjugate and absorb Taiwan.

Yet, actual military preparations for that contingency are ongoing and increasing — which could mean that Beijing has decided it needs no further "legal" pretext beyond the 2005 "Anti-Secession" Law, which threatened the use of "non-peaceful means" to "reunify" China and Taiwan if "peaceful" means failed to persuade Taiwanese to see the light — of the onrushing train.

Blinken capped the week with a television appearance in which he again criticized China for its deceitful performance on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Asked the inevitable question on the US' intention to defend Taiwan, he said: "We have a commitment to Taiwan under the Taiwan Relations Act, a bipartisan commitment that's existed for many, many years, to make sure that Taiwan has the ability to defend itself and to make sure that we're sustaining peace and security in the Western Pacific. We stand behind those commitments."

When pressed to clarify whether Washington "will militarily respond," he said: "I'm not going to get into hypotheticals. ... [I]t would be a serious mistake for anyone to try to change the existing status quo by force."

Like officials from all administrations, Blinken was simply reciting the act's core mandates to enable Taiwan to defend itself and to maintain "the US capacity" to intervene directly. He did not dispel the ambiguity as to whether the US would actually do so — the crucial element in China's strategic planning. Beijing will force a decision at some point, probably when Washington is preoccupied with a crisis precipitated by Russia, Iran or North Korea, the quadrilateral axis of evil.

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Taiwan Institute's advisory committee.

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