

War means instant independence

Written by Joseph Bosco

Tuesday, 07 September 2021 03:52

The people of Afghanistan are bearing the escalating brunt of inhuman Taliban rule after US President Biden's abandonment of the country. However exasperated many Americans felt about the prolonged US stay in Afghanistan, they do not like what Biden has done and said about it, and his approval ratings have justifiably fallen.

For its part, China mocks Biden personally and the US generally as weak and untrustworthy. Driving its disdain home, it has issued a brazen new challenge, threatening military action against Taiwan if Washington merely allows President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) to participate in a virtual democracy conference planned for December.

Biden announced in February that he would convene a Summit for Democracy to "bring together heads of state, civil society, philanthropy and the private sector, serving as an opportunity for world leaders to listen to one another and to their citizens."

Taiwan's unofficial ambassador in Washington, Hsiao Bi-khim (蕭淑慎), told administration officials that Taiwan would like to participate. She said she received "very positive feedback."

At a US House Foreign Affairs Committee meeting in March, US Representative Young Kim asked US Secretary of State Antony Blinken if he was committed to inviting Taiwan, and he responded: "I'm absolutely committed to working on it. I share your view that Taiwan is a strong democracy, a very strong technological power, and a country that can contribute to the world and not just its own people."

That glowing commitment has been put in doubt by: a) the disastrous retreat from Afghanistan and b) China's dire warnings against Taiwanese involvement.

Hu Xijin (胡锡珩), editor of Beijing's propaganda outlet Global Times, last month said that Tsai's participation would "gravely violate" China's red lines on Taiwan and would present "a historic opportunity for Chinese fighter jets to fly over the island." That would be a blatant breach of Taiwan's sovereign airspace, and Taiwan's military would be justified in firing warning shots.

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Hu, known for fiery rhetoric unrestrained by Beijing, anticipated that possibility: “If the Taiwan military dares to open fire on the PLA [People’s Liberation Army] fighters, the large number of missiles aimed at Taiwan’s military targets from the mainland and our bomber fleets will make a decisive answer and write history.”

The cross-strait war would then be on, and the US would have to discover, in extremis, whether it has the capacity mandated by its Taiwan Relations Act “to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security ... of the people on Taiwan.” More critically, Washington would need to decide under desperate circumstances whether it has the will to do so.

The crisis scenario can be avoided if Biden makes clear now that the US would defend Taiwan — for all the long-standing moral and geostrategic reasons, but also to restore the US’ international credibility after the horror and shame of Afghanistan. That US red line more than matches communist China’s sensibilities over whether Tsai appears on a virtual conference with scores of other democracy advocates, many of whom would not be national leaders or even government officials.

Beijing could save face by choosing to treat Tsai as representing just another non-governmental organization, called Taiwan. Washington, of course, would simply ignore that pseudo-designation and treat Taiwan as “Taiwan,” not “Chinese Taipei” or by any other demeaning alias.

While the US administration said last month that invitations to the summit had yet to be extended, at least some embassies had received theirs. Biden or Blinken must soon announce that Taiwan has been invited and is to participate on an equal basis with all of the other democratic invitees.

As for China’s “unofficial” threats to breach Taiwan’s airspace and potentially provoke a military conflict, Washington should definitively declare that the US would help defend Taiwan. In an ABC TV interview last month, Biden seemed prepared to take such a stand. George Stephanopoulos challenged him with this: “You already see China telling Taiwan: ‘See? You can’t count on the Americans.’”

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Biden responded emphatically: “We made a sacred commitment to Article 5 that if, in fact, anyone were to invade or take action against our NATO allies, we would respond — same with Japan, same with South Korea, same with Taiwan.”

Biden’s declaration of a solid security commitment to Taiwan was quickly diluted by the US administration’s explanation that “US policy has not changed.”

That recalled the immediate staff walk-back of then-US president George W. Bush’s pledge to do “whatever it takes” to defend Taiwan, or the hasty reassurance of “no policy change” when then-US president-elect Donald Trump graciously accepted Tsai’s congratulatory call in 2016.

However, there was also Trump’s enigmatic comment last year that “China knows what I’m gonna do” if it attacks Taiwan, obliquely suggesting that Beijing was warned of military conflict with the US. Biden’s far more specific security statement expands on Trump’s remark and seems to suggest that both administrations have conveyed firm US intentions to Chinese leader Xi Jinping (习近平).

If so, those secret warnings manifestly have not had the intended deterrent effect; China persists in its escalating rhetoric and provocative actions. A greater public demonstration of US will is needed. Biden should repeat his statement of commitment to Taiwan — and this time, Blinken and the rest of the national security team should endorse and affirm it as a serious new policy declaration, rather than dismissing it as a typical Biden gaffe.

To further demonstrate the US’ resolve, Biden should tell Beijing that any more threats of force against Taiwan’s participation in the democracy summit would trigger immediate diplomatic recognition of Taiwan and an official statement of Washington’s new “one China, one Taiwan” policy. Beijing must understand that war would mean instant Taiwanese independence.

Finally, the US administration should tell Beijing that any use of force against Taiwan would undermine the very premise of the US-China relationship itself.

The Taiwan Relations Act clearly stated in 1979: “[T]he United States decision to establish

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diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China rests upon the expectation that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means.”

Beijing has long gotten away with threats of force against Taiwan through its moves short of kinetic action in the “gray zone.” Flying military aircraft over Taiwan as a direct provocation would make it a very dark gray zone and would virtually constitute an act of war. Biden needs to tell Xi that brinkmanship over Taiwan is no longer acceptable in a peaceful relationship with the US.

Perversely, Biden's disastrous performance on Afghanistan and the terrible price the Afghan people are paying have created the imperative and motivation for Washington to act responsibly on Taiwan.

Joseph Bosco served as China country director in the office of the US secretary of defense, and is a fellow of the Institute for Taiwan-American Studies and a member of the Global Taiwan Institute's advisory committee.

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