

Biden clarifies use of 'independent'

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US President Joe Biden crosses the White House's South Lawn before boarding Marine One in Washington on Tuesday.

Photo: Bloomberg

The US is not encouraging Taiwanese independence — it is up to Taiwan to decide, US President Joe Biden said late on Tuesday after generating confusion with a comment suggesting that Taiwan is “independent.”

Speaking with reporters in New Hampshire, where he was promoting his recently signed infrastructure law, Biden said he told Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) in their virtual meeting on Monday that the US would abide by its Taiwan Relations Act.

Referring to Taiwan, he then said: “It’s independent. It makes its own decisions.”

Biden later clarified as he was about to leave New Hampshire that “we [the US] are not encouraging independence.”

“We’re not going to change our policy at all,” he added.

Asked specifically about the “independent” comment, Biden said: “I said that they have to decide — they, Taiwan, not us.”

“We’re encouraging that they do exactly what the Taiwan act requires,” he said, likely referring to the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which has served as a cornerstone of the US’ Taiwan policy since official diplomatic ties were severed that year.

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"That's what we're doing. Let them make up their mind. Period," he said.

What part of the act Biden was referring to is unclear, as it does not mention Taiwanese independence or Taiwan deciding for itself on the issue of independence, something that Beijing has said it would not accept and would stop by force if necessary.

The comments came after Biden, in his meeting with Xi, reiterated his administration's commitment to the "one China" policy, under which the US "acknowledges" that there is only one "China" across the Taiwan Strait and that the People's Republic of China is the sole legitimate government representing "China."

Biden underscored that the US "strongly opposes unilateral efforts to change the status quo, or undermine peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait," a readout of the meeting said.

Speaking to reporters following the meeting between Biden and Xi, a senior official in the US administration reiterated that the US does not support Taiwanese independence.

It was just the latest comment by Biden to cause confusion regarding the US' China policy and whether Washington is changing long-standing positions.

Last month, Biden suggested that the US would defend Taiwan if it were attacked by China — something that Washington has always inferred, but had never said outright.

The White House later issued a statement saying that US policy on the issue had not changed.

Also on Tuesday, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said that US engagement with China would intensify to ensure that competition between them does not veer into conflict.

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Sullivan said in a Brookings Institution Webinar that the two leaders had agreed that “we would look to begin to carry forward discussion on strategic stability.”

“President Biden did raise with President Xi the need for a strategic stability set of conversations... That that needs to be guided by the leaders and led by senior empowered teams on both sides that cut across security, technology and diplomacy,” Sullivan added.

“You will see at multiple levels an intensification of the engagement to ensure there are guardrails around this competition, so that it doesn’t veer off into conflict,” he said.

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