



Biden's Latest Verbal Gaffe Is Truly Dangerous

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Throughout his extraordinarily long political career, Joe Biden has had a well-deserved reputation for making verbal gaffes. In 2018, he even admitted that he was "a gaffe machine." That problem has worsened since he became president, especially with respect to foreign affairs. Biden has made several statements that suggested important shifts in U.S. policy – apparently without meaning to do so. His subordinates then scramble to assure other countries and the news media that Washington's policy on that particular issue remains unchanged.

Such incidents have created needless confusion and raised serious questions about the president's competence. His latest comments while visiting US troops stationed in Poland are the most inept to date. Biden told troops from the 82nd Airborne Division that regular citizens in Ukraine were "stepping up" in the face of the Russian assault. "And you're going to see when you're there. And you – some – some of you have been there. You're going to see – you're going to see women, young people standing – standing the middle of – in front of a damn tank, just saying, 'I'm not leaving. I'm holding my ground.'"

Those remarks seemed to contradict the president's previous, unequivocal statements that US forces would not be used to defend Ukraine. When reporters asked about Biden's latest comments, the White House assured them that Washington's stance remained the same. "The president has been clear we are not sending US troops to Ukraine and there is no change in that position," a White House spokesperson stated.

This episode continues a frequent pattern in which Biden makes a highly controversial statement that his aides then desperately try to walk back. For example, he seemed to commit major gaffes not once, but twice, with respect to US policy toward Taiwan.

During a CNN town hall session in October 2021, the president was asked whether the United States would defend Taiwan from an attack by the People's Republic of China (PRC). Biden responded unhesitatingly: "Yes, we have a commitment." He flatly misstated what US policy has been since Washington established formal diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1979 and adopted the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) to govern economic and cultural ties with Taiwan.

The TRA commits the United States only to sell Taiwan "defensive" weapons and to regard any PRC attack on the island as a serious "breach of the peace" in East Asia. It emphatically did not obligate the United States to defend Taiwan with its own military forces.

Members of the administration spent the next several days scrambling to "clarify" Biden's comment. "He wasn't announcing a change in policy nor have we changed our policy," White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters. "We are guided by the Taiwan Relations Act." Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin also insisted that the United States remained committed to a "one-China" policy and the provisions of the TRA.

However, it was not the first time that Biden made comments misstating long-standing, official US policy on the Taiwan issue. During an August 2021 interview with ABC News, host George Stephanopoulos asked the president if Washington's allies could still rely on US protection in light of the disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan. Biden responded: "We made a sacred commitment to Article Five that if in fact, anyone were to invade or take action against our NATO allies, we would respond." The same alliance obligation existed with respect to Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, he added.

Insisting that Washington's vague security relationship with Taiwan is the same as the explicit US defense obligations specified in the North Atlantic Treaty and the bilateral treaties with Japan and South Korea was wildly inaccurate. On that occasion, as with the October episode, Biden's advisers worked to repair the damage the president's indiscreet statement had caused. The next day, US officials rushed to assure Beijing that US policy regarding Taiwan had not changed, despite Biden's comment suggesting the contrary.

The gaffes about Taiwan policy were bad enough, but Biden's verbal incontinence in Poland could lead to a catastrophe. Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a response to the prospect that Ukraine might someday be invited to join NATO. Vladimir Putin had warned on several occasions that such a move by the United States and its allies would cross a red line threatening Russia's security. Moreover, the Kremlin had been increasingly concerned not only by the possibility of Kyiv's formal inclusion in NATO, but by evidence of a mounting military partnership between the United States and Ukraine.

Moscow already is fuming about the shipments of NATO weaponry flowing into Ukraine in the midst of the ongoing war. Russian officials have warned that convoys of such weapons are legitimate targets. The Kremlin also is watching nervously as hawks in the West lobby recklessly for NATO to impose a no-fly zone over Ukraine, and Putin already put Russia's nuclear forces on high alert. One hopes that Russian leaders understand that Biden is a gaffe-prone individual, and his casual comment about US troops going to Ukraine should not be taken seriously. If they did conclude that Washington's policy was about to become even more confrontational than it is now, the consequences could be horrific.

Under less grave circumstances, Biden's frequent verbal blunders might induce head shaking or even laughter. Given the alarming situation in Europe and the growing tensions between the United States and Russia, though, his loose tongue is no laughing matter.

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