



Biden keeps saying US will defend Taiwan — and White House keeps walking it back

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May 24, 2022

President Joe Biden appearing at odds with his administration for the third time regarding China and Taiwan reverberated around Washington and Beijing.

Despite the White House trying to downplay the differences, Biden intentionally or unintentionally renewed the foreign policy debate over "strategic ambiguity" in the Taiwan Strait at a time when U.S.-China relations are at a nadir and Russia wages war in Ukraine.

The "dissonance" between Biden's spoken words concerning China and Taiwan and his administration's stated policy is "irresponsible," according to American Enterprise Institute nonresident fellow Michael Mazza. It muddles his message to Beijing as well as to his White House aides, the State Department, and the Pentagon, Mazza said.

"It's fair to assume that he is personally committed to come to Taiwan's defense in the event that China opts to attack," he told the *Washington Examiner*. "I tend to agree that the policy that the president is suggesting is right. I just think the way that we're going about it is all wrong and very confusing."

Mazza decoupled Biden's China-Taiwan comments in Japan from a State Department website update removing language stipulating that the United States does not support Taipei's independence. For Mazza, the update was a clarification rather than a change. But he recommended that Foggy Bottom conduct a comprehensive Taiwan policy review so there is better synergy between the president's position and global conditions.

Strategic ambiguity is premised on the idea that China should not know whether the U.S. would intercede if it uses force against Taiwan, and Taipei should not be sure of the same if it becomes provocative — for example, if it pushes for independence.

"The Taiwan Relations Act commits the United States to provide Taiwan with the arms that it needs to defend itself and to ensure that the United States can defend Taiwan in the event it chooses to do so," Mazza said. "It does not commit the United States to intervene directly in a conflict to defend Taiwan."

Mazza is not alone in endorsing strategic clarity with China and Taiwan, finding an unlikely ally in Rep. Elaine Luria (D-VA).

"The legal limitations on a president's ability to respond quickly could all but ensure a Chinese *fait accompli*," the House Foreign Affairs Committee vice chairwoman first wrote last fall in a *Washington Post* op-ed. "My Republican colleagues introduced the Taiwan Invasion Prevention Act in February to grant the president the authority to act against an invasion of Taiwan and prevent a *fait accompli*. This act is a good starting point to address a legal dilemma."

House Foreign Affairs Committee ranking member Michael McCaul (R-TX) echoed Luria, though he conceded that the intelligence community would not appreciate it.

"Having said that, I personally kind of like it because it does provide a deterrent message that we will defend Taiwan," he said. "Coming from the president, it's very strong."

The Cato Institute's defense policy studies director, Eric Gomez, disagreed, contending that strategic ambiguity endows the U.S. with "freedom of action" as it attempts to maintain peace and stability between China and Taiwan, particularly because Beijing already operates under an assumption that escalation is possible.

"The risk of these repeated things that Biden is saying is that I think it emboldens the crowd in Washington who want to do away with strategic ambiguity entirely," he said. "Do you open Pandora's box?"

China condemned Biden telling reporters beside new Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida that "yes," the U.S. has made "a commitment" to defend Taiwan militarily.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin reminded the U.S. that Taiwan is "a purely internal affair for China."

"No one should underestimate the firm resolve, staunch will, and strong ability of the Chinese people in defending national sovereignty and territorial integrity," Wang said.

This is the third time the White House has had to distill Biden's China-Taiwan policy. This time, senior administration officials told reporters the U.S. position "has not changed."

"He reiterated our One China Policy," the source said. "He also reiterated our commitment under the Taiwan Relations Act to provide Taiwan with the military means to defend itself."

Biden had previously indicated that the U.S. would come to Taiwan's aid if attacked during a town hall in October of last year, and he earlier gave a similar answer about South Korea and Japan.

The White House has issued similar statements related to Russia and Ukraine, including on Biden's recent trip to Belgium and Poland. There, staff sought to downplay his "Putin cannot remain in power" remark.

Biden's China-Taiwan comment is not the only surprising remark Biden has made during his inaugural Asia trip.

In addition to stoking monkeypox outbreak panic, confusing South Korean President Yoon Seok-yeol with his predecessor, and abbreviating the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue to the "Quartet," Biden was asked about his message to North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un alongside Hyundai Chairman Chung Eui-sun in South Korea.

"Hello. Period," he replied.