



Washington Keeps Poking the Panda Regarding Taiwan

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Expectations that Joe Biden's administration would pursue a more conciliatory policy toward the People's Republic of China (PRC) than its predecessor did have not been borne out. The surprising continuity with the Trump administration's approach is most evident regarding policy toward Taiwan. Indeed, Biden has broken new ground with respect to U.S. support for the island's de facto independence. In doing so, he is intensifying Beijing's ire and exacerbating already dangerous bilateral tensions.

During the Trump years, US diplomatic and military support for Taiwan expanded dramatically. For the first time since the United States officially recognized the PRC in 1979 and severed formal relations with Taipei, there were meetings between high-level US and Taiwanese security officials. In the waning days of the administration, the State Department waived virtually all remaining restrictions on diplomatic contacts.

The Trump administration concluded multiple arms sales to Taiwan, including some systems that had offensive as well as defensive capabilities. Washington increased its lobbying efforts to have international organizations grant membership to Taiwan and to help Taipei gain a larger international diplomatic presence generally. All of those measures had broad, bipartisan support in Congress.

Nevertheless, the extent of the Biden administration's solicitous attitude toward Taiwan has surprised even experienced foreign policy observers. The first eyebrow-raising episode occurred even before Biden took the oath of office, when he invited Taiwan's de facto ambassador to the United States to attend his inauguration. It was the first time that honor had been given since the United States switched diplomatic relations to the PRC. Not even Trump or George W. Bush, both staunch supporters of Taiwan, did something so bold that it bordered on outright disdain for Beijing's insistence that there is only one China and that Taiwan is part of that country. The Biden administration's provocative gesture got its relations with the PRC off to a chilly start.

A more recent comment by Biden has heightened Beijing's suspicions. When ABC News reporter George Stephanopoulos asked him about possible damage to US credibility after the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, Biden dismissed that danger, stating that Washington's reliability with respect to the security of allies should not be doubted. "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," he emphasized. Biden then added: "Same with Japan, same with South Korea, *same with Taiwan.*" (Emphasis added)

His last comment immediately angered Beijing, since it seemed to signal a major shift in US policy. The United States has explicit treaty obligations for the defense of fellow NATO members, Japan, and South Korea. It has no such obligation to Taiwan. Washington has only a vague commitment under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act to regard a PRC act of aggression against the island as a serious "breach of the peace" in East Asia. There is no firm commitment to defend Taiwan from attack, and Washington actually has maintained a policy of "strategic ambiguity" about its likely response.

The next day, US officials rushed to assure Beijing that, despite Biden's comment, US policy on the Taiwan issue had not changed. It's likely that the notoriously gaffe-prone Biden simply misspoke. However, in light of the inauguration invitation, another arms sale to Taipei, and the increased pace of US warships transiting the Taiwan Strait, PRC officials now had a new reason for concern.

In addition, President Biden has pressed Japan to become more supportive of Washington's position on the Taiwan issue – a move that automatically antagonizes China. In a joint statement following the April 2021 summit meeting between Biden and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, the two leaders stated: "We emphasize the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and encourage the peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues." Notably, it was the first time in 52 years that a U.S.-Japan summit communiqué explicitly mentioned the Taiwan issue. Moreover, immediately after the meeting Suga told reporters that the two leaders had agreed "to oppose any attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion in the East and South China Seas."

A new development threatens to bring Beijing's dissatisfaction with Washington's Taiwan policy to a boil. According to news reports, the Biden administration is considering a request from Taiwan's government to change the name of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO) in Washington to the Taiwan Representative Office (TRO). It might seem like a minor revision, but it has powerful symbolic significance.

Beijing goes to extreme lengths to prevent the use of the name "Taiwan" in any international setting. For example, Taiwanese athletes must compete in the Olympics and other sporting events under the awkward "Chinese Taipei" banner to avoid a PRC veto. Although sometimes steaming with resentment, a succession of Taiwanese governments swallowed the humiliation of a "compromise" that denies their country's statehood. As the campaign to change TECRO's name confirms, however, current Taiwanese leaders are now working hard to defy and undermine that arrangement.

The Biden administration has not yet responded officially to Taipei's request. But a hint of which way Washington may be leaning can be gleaned from its response to the establishment of an office with the TRO label in Lithuania. When Beijing pressured Vilnius to rescind its acceptance of that name, Washington weighed in to support Lithuania. "We stand with our ally Lithuania and condemn the People's Republic of China's recent retaliatory actions," said US State Department spokesman Ned Price. "The US supports our European partners as they develop ties with Taiwan." National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan later reiterated that vow of support.

Washington is playing with fire if it ventures down that path, however. PRC officials repeatedly have made it clear that they will never tolerate Taiwan separatism. Yet US relations with the island increasingly resemble those that Washington would maintain with an independent country that is an important economic and military ally. It is not clear, though, that the Biden administration has truly thought through the implications of the policy changes it is putting into place. Instead, the United States appears to be drifting into a crisis with the PRC over an issue that Chinese leaders consider a red line that Washington must not cross.

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