

What Will Biden Do If China Makes a “Limited” Military Move Against Taiwan?

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One of the biggest early surprises about the Biden administration’s foreign policy is the extent and intensity of its diplomatic support for Taiwan. An especially stunning gesture took place even before Biden took office when he extended an invitation to Taiwan’s Economic and Cultural Representative in the United States to attend the presidential inauguration. It was the first time that Taipei’s diplomat had been given that opportunity since the United States switched official diplomatic relations to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1979. Even Donald Trump, who significantly increased Washington’s backing for Taiwan in multiple ways, did not display such ostentatious disdain for Beijing’s position.

Since the inauguration, administration officials have issued several statements emphasizing Washington’s “rock-solid” commitment to Taiwan. Those expressions of support also entail tangible military moves. When Chinese military aircraft again penetrated Taiwan’s self-proclaimed air defense identification zone over the Taiwan Strait, Washington not only expressed sharp criticism, it dispatched an aircraft carrier battle group to the South China Sea as a display of U.S. military power. That deployment occurred barely a week after Biden took office.

Given those actions, it seems clear that the Biden administration is at least as committed as its predecessors were to come to Taiwan’s defense if Beijing makes a direct military assault against the island. But what if the PRC tests U.S. resolve by making a hostile, but less flagrant, move against a peripheral target—specifically, tiny islands in the South China Sea over which Taipei claims sovereignty? Taiwan administers two sets of islands there, the largest of which is Taiping (Itu Alba) in the Spratly chain. Taipei also controls Pratas Island (along with some atolls) in another chain farther north. Both claims have served as a source of national pride.

Not only would PRC military pressure against any of those holdings create a horrid dilemma for Washington, it would put the Taiwanese government in a terrible bind as well. Could Taiwan mount a defense of such distant territorial holdings even if it wanted to? Would the United States be willing to assist Taipei in doing so, knowing that such aid might risk a dangerous military clash with the PRC? And what would be the domestic political consequences for Tsai Ing-wen’s government if she suffered a humiliating loss of territory and prestige on that scale?

Although there is no hard evidence that Beijing intends to take such a gamble, there have been worrisome signs for months that PRC officials may be flirting with that option. Two separate times during the last week of January, PRC fighters and bombers in sizable numbers (13 in one

case and 15 in another) penetrated Taiwan's declared air defense identification zone. Both times, the incursion took place in the extreme southwest portion of the zone. What is noteworthy about that development is that the planes flew between the main Taiwan and Pratas, 275 miles to the southwest. Pratas, which occupies a strategic location, is closer to Hong Kong than to Taiwan. It would be a daunting logistical undertaking for Taiwanese forces to defend that territory if it came under attack. Protecting Taiping, which is 730 miles farther away, would be even more challenging.

The flights in late January are not the first incidents in which China's military moves could be construed as testing Taiwan's ability to sustain its territorial claims in the South China Sea. Last summer, the PRC conducted a very large-scale naval and air power exercise near the Spratly chain. Speculation ensued that those forces could move to seize control of the Taiwanese-held islands. Most military observers dismissed that possibility, noting that the islands lost much of their strategic value for Beijing when the PRC built several artificial islands nearby. However, a takeover would not be primarily for military reasons; the overriding motive would be to emphasize to the government and people of Taiwan that any hope of having the status of an independent country in the international system is futile. A display of decisive military force against secondary, but symbolically important, targets would convey that message with great clarity.

Moreover, the Biden administration's brave words about "rock-solid" support for Taiwan notwithstanding, the U.S. reaction is not certain. Despite the virulently anti-PRC nature of public opinion in the United States currently, it is not apparent that there would be reliable congressional and public support for a U.S. military showdown with China merely to back Taiwan's claim to a few miniscule islets in the South China Sea.

Beijing's patience with Taiwan's continued refusal even to discuss political unification has been growing thin for several years—especially since the electoral victories of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party in 2016 and 2020. PRC leaders have made their mounting dissatisfaction apparent in multiple ways, with the intrusions into Taiwan's claimed airspace being just the most recent and emphatic. Beijing may conclude that it has no choice except to take even more decisive action to squelch Taiwan's hopes for full sovereignty. Seizing islands in the South China Sea would be a very risky gamble, and such a move would do serious damage to China's relations with the United States, even if Washington did not respond militarily. But frustrated PRC leaders may be getting ready to take the plunge.

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