

Biden in Asia: Further Steps Toward War with China

By [Dr. Brian Victoria](#)

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For observers of President Biden’s recent visit to Asia it will come as no surprise that, as in the past, the US sought to encourage Asian allies to join in further strengthening its political, economic and especially military containment of China. Like the US role in prolonging the war in Ukraine in order to weaken Russia, the US hopes to weaken China so that it will be unable to challenge American hegemony.

On Monday, May 23rd, when Biden was asked by a reporter if the United States would respond militarily if China attempted to invade Taiwan, the president responded, “Yes” and added, “That’s the commitment we made.” In reality the US has never made such an explicit security guarantee to Taiwan, with which it no longer has a mutual defense treaty. Instead, it has long maintained a policy of “strategic ambiguity” about how far it would be willing to go if China invaded. The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which has governed US relations with the island, does not require the U.S. to step in militarily to defend Taiwan if China invades, but makes it American policy to ensure Taiwan has the resources to defend itself in order to prevent any unilateral change in the status of Taiwan by Beijing.

Nevertheless, as the *Washington Post* noted, Biden has, over the course of the past nine months, stated on two previous occasions that the United States would defend Taiwan if invaded. Thus, there was really nothing new in his latest statement, especially as it has long been believed, strategic ambiguity or not, that the US will continue to defend Taiwan militarily as in the past, beginning with the Korean War when the Truman administration employed the US Seventh Fleet to prevent victorious Communist forces from crossing the Taiwan Strait in pursuit of the defeated Nationalist forces under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek.

Does this mean there were no new developments connected to Biden’s trip? Most definitely not! On the contrary, a new and important development occurred. However, it occurred not in Asia but in Washington, specifically on the webpages of the US State Department. Around May 5th an unannounced change was made to the State Department’s webpage entitled, “U.S. Relations with Taiwan (see [this](#)). Eliminated were such phrases as “we [the US] do not

support Taiwan's independence" and "Taiwan is part of China." Now the webpage opens with the words: "Taiwan is a key U.S. partner in the Indo-Pacific."

As innocuous as these deletions may appear, they represent a momentous change in policy, for it means that the US is no longer opposed to Taiwan's independence. True, Taiwan would have to give up its claim that, as the "Republic of China," the country is the true government of all of China, but that claim has been dismissed by the world as the myth it has long been since losing the Chinese civil war in 1949. On the other hand, it represents the long sought opportunity by elements in the current government in Taipei to declare independence, i.e. to become the Republic of *Taiwan*. From the US viewpoint, the attractiveness of this development is that the US will still be able to proclaim its adherence to the professed policy of recognizing only "one China" even while supporting the birth of a new island nation.

Needless to say, the US is not the only country welcoming this possibility. I recently had the opportunity to discuss this development with one of the leaders of Japan's largest opposition political party. When I queried him on the current Japanese government's likely reaction to a Taiwanese declaration of independence, he immediately responded, "The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs would undoubtedly recognize Taiwan's independence." Further, both the US and Japan could claim that Taiwan's change in status was in accord with the will of the democratically elected representatives of the Taiwanese people and was not the result of military force or coercion on the part of the US, China or any nation.

There is, of course, one not so small problem to this 'peaceful' scenario – the People's Republic of China (PRC). For the PRC, Taiwan is the single remaining part of the country separated from mainland control since the Communist defeat of Nationalist forces in 1949. The PRC has made it abundantly clear that a Taiwanese declaration of independence is a redline which, if crossed, will result in war. Expressed in the negative, Zhou Bo, a retired officer of the People's Liberation Army, now a senior fellow at Tsinghua University's Center for International Strategy and Security Studies, explained: "China will not use force unless and until Taiwan declares independence, unless and until an external force separates Taiwan from China, or unless and until the possibility of peaceful reunification is totally exhausted."

Nevertheless, as my recent article in *Countercurrents* makes clear, at least one influential conservative think tank in the US is currently planning, if not advocating, for a US *military* response to a Chinese invasion they believe is coming soon (see: "[Pearl Harbor Comes to Taiwan](#)"). In fact, if this think tank's plans come to pass, Japan will also be embroiled in the US military's response, thereby committing Japan to its first overseas combat role since WW II.

Conservative voices in Japan would welcome Japan's military involvement, not least because of its ties to Taiwan as a former Japanese colony while, at the same time, China's communists have been regarded as a major enemy from as far back as 1937 if not before. Many of Japan's contemporary conservative political leaders, including former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and current Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo, are descendants of Japan's wartime leaders and have inherited many of their predecessors' views. Japan's arms manufacturers, like Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, also trace their origins to the same time period, with roots reaching back to the nineteenth century. They welcome Japan's stated intention to substantially increase its military budget, including, for the first time, building offensive

missiles that can strike enemy military bases.

However, from the Chinese viewpoint, it must be remembered that as the result of Japan's full-scale invasion during WW II, China lost a total number of military and non-military casualties of around 35 million, including 20 million dead and 15 million wounded. Thus, Japan is the worst possible ally the US could have in any future war with China. The hatred toward Japan a conventional war would rekindle among the Chinese people is beyond belief. Ultimately, nothing short of a full-fledged nuclear exchange with the US would end the carnage. Yet were that to occur, what would remain of either side, or any side?

In light of the ongoing bloodbath now taking place in Ukraine, and its repercussions throughout the world, it is nearly inconceivable to imagine another major war breaking out.

Yet, as early as June 2020 Michèle Flournoy, formerly an undersecretary of defence in the Obama administration, called for the US Navy in the South China Sea to have the ability to destroy the entire Chinese navy within 72 hours. Her proposal, one of many, demonstrates there are powerful elements in the US who are seriously preparing for a conventional war with China, sooner rather than later. This is because they are aware China is growing militarily stronger year by year. Thus, striking China now, in tandem with Japan's growing military might, is an attractive opportunity. Observing how Russia has been bloodied in the Ukraine, they dream of achieving the same result regarding China.

It is not yet too late to prevent this madness from occurring, but it will take the collective voices and efforts of citizens in many nations, beginning with the US and Japan, but also including citizens from all nations who recognize the utter folly of yet more warfare, especially in the face of ever worsening climate change, growing world hunger, the refugee crisis, etc. At least for a short period, we still have the opportunity to make our opposition known to a new war, this time over Taiwan. Will we seize it?

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Brian Victoria, Ph.D., Senior Research Fellow, Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies

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