

Biden in Tokyo: Killing Strategic Ambiguity: The Taiwan Relations Act of 1979

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Could it have been just another case of bumbling poor judgment, the mind softened as the mouth opened? A [question was put](#) to US President Joe Biden, visiting Tokyo and standing beside Japan’s Prime Minister Fumio Kishida: “You didn’t want to get involved in the Ukraine conflict militarily for obvious reasons. Are you willing to get involved militarily to defend Taiwan if it comes to that?” The answer: “Yes. That’s a commitment we made.”

Biden was again flatly committing the US to a conflict over Taiwan should China deploy its forces. He has done so [on two previous occasions](#), showing either a degree of ignorance, or a willingness to throw caution to the wind. The first took place during an interview with ABC News in August, when he equated Taiwan’s status to those of other allies such as South Korea. The second, in a CNN town hall, took place in October, when he stated that the US had “a commitment to do that”.

In doing so a third time, he was helping no one in particular, and taking the hammer to the strategic ambiguity that has marked US-Taiwan policy for decades. The only thing that could have been taken away from it is a reminder to Beijing that they are not facing a cautious superpower steered by a sage, but a government not unwilling to shed blood over Taiwan.

Biden has expressed this view before, and grates against a policy Washington has had for 43 years. It is a policy characterised by two key understandings. The first is the One China policy, which the Biden administration affirmed in Tokyo. Beijing, accordingly, remains the sole legitimate authority representing China.

The Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 is the other pillar that guides US policy towards Taiwan. The Act [declares it the policy](#) of the United States “to preserve and promote extensive, close, and friendly commercial, cultural, and other relations between the people of the United States and the people of Taiwan, as well as the people of the China mainland and all other people in the Western Pacific area.”

The Act facilitates the provision of arms to Taiwan “of a defensive character” and maintains “the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or social or economic system, of the people of Taiwan.” It does not impose an obligation on the US to intervene militarily in the event of an attack, or to compel the use of forces in defence of the island.

The first pertinent question was whether an *actual* change had been heralded in Tokyo. The *National Review* [certainly](#) thought so. “Biden’s remarks signal a big shift in US foreign policy regarding Taiwan.” The *New York Times* [also suggested](#) that, unlike his previous, seemingly incautious remarks on the subject, this could not be treated as a simple gaffe. Sebastian Smith, White House correspondent for Agence France-Presse, [thought](#) that Biden’s response “really raised the adrenaline levels in that palace briefing room”.

Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs was overjoyed, [expressing](#) “sincere welcome and gratitude to President Biden of the United States for reiterating its rock solid commitment to Taiwan.”

For his part, Biden [was having a bit each way](#), suggesting that strategic ambiguity was still being retained in some modest form. “We agree with the One China policy and all the attendant agreements we made. But the idea that it can be taken by force, would just not be appropriate.” His Defense Secretary, Lloyd Austin was even more adamant that there had been no change to speak of on the part of the president. “As the president said, our One China policy has not changed,” [he stated](#) at the Pentagon. “He reiterated that policy and our commitment to peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. He also highlighted our commitment under the Taiwan Relations Act to help provide Taiwan the means to defend itself. So, again, our policy has not changed.”

On being asked by a journalist what potential risks would rise as part of a US military defence of Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion, General Mark A. Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, [was unwilling](#) to elucidate. A “variety of contingency plans” were held by the military applicable to the Pacific, Europe “and elsewhere”, all classified. “And it would be very inappropriate for me on a microphone to discuss the risk associated with those plans relative to anything with respect to Taiwan or anywhere else in the Pacific.” Reassuring.

As often tends to come to pass, when the potential for war lurks in cupboards and around corners, there are those less than unwilling to repel it. The chance to exercise muscle, especially indulged vicariously, brings out the inner war monger. Bret Stephens uses the *New York Times* [to promote](#) the popular view held by many in the US and amongst its allies that Biden was quite right not to stick to “diplomatic formulas of a now-dead status quo”. President Xi Jinping, that sly devil, had “changed the rules of the game” by crushing protests in Hong Kong, repudiating the “one country, two systems” formula and blithely ignored the ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration on Chinese claims on the South China Sea.

Stephens sees opportunity in this statement from Biden, a thankful slaying of ambiguity. For one, the US can sell more arms to Taiwan while incorporating Taipei into its broader strategic approach. The administration should also convince Taipei to increase its “scandalously low” military budget. Washington, for its part, can increase the small component of US Special Operations and Marine personnel already deployed to train local forces. Biden’s stumble, in short, was a shift; and the shift moves one step closer to inciting war.

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