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POLITICS NATIONAL SECURITY

Biden Undercuts U.S. 'Strategic Ambiguity' Over Defending Taiwan

While White House says policy hasn't changed toward Beijing, president's remarks come during Asia trip meant to show resolve toward allies



By *William Mauldin* [Follow](#)

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President Biden's commitment that the U.S. will defend Taiwan further erodes a decades-old policy of ambiguity on how Washington would respond to a Chinese attack on the island, despite his aides saying that nothing has changed.

Asked at a news conference in Tokyo on Monday whether the U.S. would respond militarily to defend Taiwan, after declining to send American troops to Ukraine to fight Russia's invasion, Mr. Biden said, "Yes." He added, "That's the commitment we made."

The remarks mark the third time in the past year that Mr. Biden has appeared to jettison the policy known as "strategic ambiguity" under which the U.S. kept vague whether it would intervene in a China-Taiwan conflict. As with the previous two times, the White House said there has been no shift in U.S. policy. An official later said that Mr. Biden was referring to the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act that commits the U.S. to providing Taiwan with

the means to defend itself.

On Tuesday, Mr. Biden said he would maintain longstanding U.S. policy toward Taiwan, telling reporters in Tokyo: “My policy has not changed at all. I stated that when I made my statement yesterday.”

Mr. Biden’s repeated comments about a U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan and the timing of Monday’s remarks are leading former officials and foreign-policy experts to conclude that the policy is being changed—with the potential for exacerbating already tense relations with China.

“It increases the perception that we would come to Taiwan’s defense directly, but it doesn’t resolve the uncertainty totally,” said Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations who sees strategic ambiguity as outmoded and urges a clear policy to deter China.

Mr. Biden’s latest Taiwan statement comes during his first presidential visit to the Asia-Pacific region, a trip U.S. officials have said is aimed at signaling U.S. resolve to support allies and counter China. Mr. Biden likened a possible Chinese attack to Russia’s assault on Ukraine, saying, “It would dislocate the entire region.”

Mr. Biden called Taiwan a “burden that is even stronger” as he stood alongside Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who said his government “is against any unilateral attempt to change [the] status quo by force in Asia.”

Beijing regards Taiwan as among the most sensitive issues in relations with the U.S. and it reacted angrily to Mr. Biden’s latest remarks. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin urged the U.S. “to speak and act with prudence on the Taiwan question, and avoid sending any wrong signal to the ‘Taiwan independence’ separatist forces.” Otherwise, he said, it could “seriously undermine peace across the Taiwan Strait and China-U.S. relations.”

The China-Taiwan split dates from the Chinese civil war, when Mao Zedong’s Communist forces pushed Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government from the Chinese mainland. Ever since, Taiwan has been either a formal ally of the U.S. or, after Washington switched official relations to Beijing in 1979, a close security partner.

“Strategic ambiguity” about whether the U.S. would intervene in a China-Taiwan conflict

was meant to restrain both sides—discouraging Beijing from launching an attack and keeping Taiwan from declaring full-fledged independence or engaging in other acts that would provoke a Chinese assault.

Over the past two decades, China has embarked on a full-scale military buildup to develop the capabilities to take Taiwan and deter the U.S. from intervening.



As those capabilities have improved over the past decade and Chinese leader Xi Jinping turned to a more assertive foreign policy to match China's emergence as an economic competitor, Washington has taken a harder line toward Beijing.

“Strategic ambiguity” has come under debate, with some in the security establishment and in Congress saying it is no longer serving to deter Beijing.

“It is essential that President Biden declare the United States will come to Taiwan's defense in the event of a Chinese attack,” Sen. Tom Cotton (R., Ark.) tweeted Monday. “Continued ambiguity will provoke the Chinese communists without deterring them—the worst of both worlds.”

A month before his inauguration as president, Donald Trump took a call from Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen. That broke with precedent on high-level contacts, rattled Beijing and presaged a policy of stepped-up U.S. engagement with Taipei.

The Biden administration adopted much of that approach, though overall it has remained cautious about public changes in U.S. policy toward Taiwan. Mr. Biden on Monday said the U.S. abides by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act and by agreements with Beijing in which the

U.S. acknowledges China's claim to Taiwan. The Biden administration didn't include China or Taiwan in talks launched Monday to form a new trade framework in the Indian and Pacific Ocean region.

Mr. Biden's more forward-leaning statements on a U.S. commitment to Taipei—combined with a White House denying a policy change—puts the U.S. on risky middle ground, according to some foreign-policy experts.

“President Biden seems to have staked out a new position somewhere between ‘strategic clarity’ and ‘strategic ambiguity,’ ” said Daniel Russel, a top Asia diplomat in the Obama administration and current vice president of the Asia Society Policy Institute.

“He's clear about his belief that the U.S. should respond in the event of Chinese military aggression against Taiwan, but he's ambiguous about what exactly that means and what it is based on.”

Backers of “strategic clarity” like Mr. Haass say such transparency could deter China, with its growing nuclear arsenal, from risking an invasion that could draw Beijing into direct conflict with Washington

Defenders of ambiguity warn that a military commitment to Taiwan could encourage its political leaders to take risks that would draw the U.S. into a conflict against American interests.

“Giving Taipei a blank check to provoke Beijing as much as it likes on the assumption that the U.S. will come to the rescue is a vector for volatility in the region,” said Michael Swaine, East Asia director at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, a think tank that urges military restraint.

Write to William Mauldin at william.mauldin@wsj.com

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