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Biden's Pledge to Defend Taiwan Chips Away at Longstanding U.S. Policy

Taiwan, China and some American officials see the U.S. edging away from 'strategic ambiguity' despite White House saying it isn't

By [Charles Hutzler](#) [Follow](#), [Joyu Wang](#) [Follow](#) and [James T. Areddy](#) [Follow](#)

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President Biden's repeated statements that the U.S. would defend Taiwan from a Chinese attack is chipping away at longstanding American policy meant to keep the hostile sides at bay.

Mr. Biden's recent remarks that the U.S. military would intervene if Beijing attacked Taiwan were the fourth time in just over a year he made such a pledge and appeared to retreat from the policy that leaves U.S. involvement ambiguous. In an interview with CBS's "60 Minutes" aired Sunday, Mr. Biden also said Taiwan would decide itself about declaring independence—a red line Beijing has said would trigger a military assault.

The White House says U.S. policy hasn't changed. But the message, especially its repetition, has cheered Taiwan, angered Beijing and encouraged U.S. politicians and security hawks who want more forward-leaning American support for the Taiwanese government.

"Look, the president has said this, not once, not twice, but four times now. So I guess that's his feeling," Sen. Bob Menendez (D., NJ), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, told reporters. "I think it's certainly got to give pause to [Chinese leader] Xi Jinping about taking on Taiwan, because it just won't be Taiwan. It'll also be the U.S., if the president is true to his word."

What Mr. Biden said stands to affect already high tensions over Taiwan. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi aired differences over Taiwan in a meeting in New York on Friday, with Mr. Blinken emphasizing the critical importance of preserving peace and stability in the region, according to the State Department.



“The Taiwan question is growing into the biggest risk in China-U.S. relations,” Mr. Wang said earlier in the week in New York. He described relations as at “a low ebb” and among the challenges he cited were “remarks related to ‘defending Taiwan’ ” without naming Mr. Biden.

Beijing is increasingly suspicious that the U.S. is drawing closer to Taiwan, backtracking on past commitments to limit contacts and arms sales. Meanwhile, the U.S. is wary of China’s decadeslong military buildup and its rising willingness to apply coercive tactics against Taiwan.

After House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.) traveled to Taiwan last month—the highest-level visit by a U.S. official in a quarter-century—Beijing conducted large-scale military exercises, demonstrating capabilities to blockade Taiwan and launching missiles over the island. This week, the U.S. and Canada sailed warships through the Taiwan Strait, and China stepped up naval and air force sorties in the region.



The enmity between Taiwan and China is a legacy of the Chinese civil war in the middle of the last century, with Beijing vowing to absorb the island by force if necessary. For decades, U.S. policy has been to maintain what officials call “strategic ambiguity.” The idea was to leave China guessing whether the U.S. would directly intervene in a clash, and at the same time restrain Taiwan from declaring outright independence and triggering a Chinese attack.

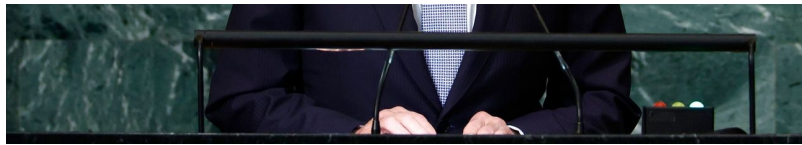
“People don’t realize how dangerous the president’s statements sound, that it’s up to Taiwan to declare independence. The Chinese are losing confidence that the U.S. would stop Taiwan from declaring independence,” said Bonnie Glaser, director of the Asia Program at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. She said she attended a meeting this week with Chinese scholars who criticized the U.S. for hollowing out and “salami-slicing” its commitments to China on Taiwan.

A result of Mr. Biden’s statements, Ms. Glaser said, has been “strategic confusion” rather than “strategic ambiguity.” She expects that China’s Mr. Xi will emerge from next month’s Communist Party congress with a third term as leader and a more coercive strategy on Taiwan.

In Taiwan, political commentators said Mr. Biden’s remarks gave the island a morale boost, especially given China’s recent military muscle-flexing. While Mr. Biden’s previous remarks were seen as possible misstatements, the fourth time around led some people to sense a shift in the U.S. position, if not an outright policy change.

“If you recall, back in August last year, a vast majority of media, or even many Taiwanese, would think he was a dotard who had misspoken, calling it a slip of the tongue,” Ming Chu-cheng, a retired Taiwanese political science professor, said on a television talk show this week. “After that, he repeated it three more times—it’s simply not a gaffe,” Mr. Ming said.





Officials with both the ruling and opposition parties said that while the Biden administration hasn't abandoned "strategic ambiguity," it is edging away from it.

"This time, his comments are indeed a step further," said Lin Fei-fan, deputy secretary-general of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party. "The U.S. executive branch's policy on Taiwan is moving toward a stage of greater clarity.... Its reassurance toward Taiwan has become more clear."

In his "60 Minutes" interview, Mr. Biden was asked, "Would U.S. forces defend the island?"

"Yes, if in fact there was an unprecedented attack," Mr. Biden responded.

The White House has said Mr. Biden meant what he said and didn't signal any change in policy.

"The president is a direct and straightforward person," national security adviser Jake Sullivan told reporters earlier this week when asked about Mr. Biden's response. "He answered a hypothetical. He's answered it before in a similar way, and he has also been clear that he does not, has not changed U.S. policy toward Taiwan."

The administration, however, is also trying to balance the need to support Taiwan, while managing the U.S.'s increasingly adversarial relationship with Beijing over global influence and control of leading-edge technologies.

Some of those tensions came to a head over the Taiwan Policy Act, legislation that China has objected to, saying it aggravates tensions. The bill, when introduced this summer, contained a range of measures—from financing of military sales to Taiwan to requiring Senate confirmation for the U.S. representative to Taipei and renaming Taiwan's unofficial embassy in the U.S.

Those latter measures struck a nerve with Beijing. The Chinese government saw the measures eroding the U.S. commitment to a "one-China policy," under which the U.S. has agreed to maintain informal diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

Mr. Sullivan urged senators on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to focus on the

substantive, rather than the symbolic measures of support for Taiwan, congressional aides said. When the bill emerged from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week, the renaming of Taiwan's representative office had been watered down, becoming a suggestion rather than a requirement, while the confirmation of the U.S. representative was dropped.

Still included in the measure were \$6.5 billion in financing for sales of weaponry and military equipment to Taiwan, plus a package of economic sanctions to be imposed on China in the event of an attack. With time running out on the current legislative session, the bill in whole or in parts is likely to be attached to a must-pass defense authorization act, the congressional aides said.

—Lindsay Wise contributed to this article.

Write to Charles Hutzler at charles.hutzler@wsj.com, Joyu Wang at joyu.wang@wsj.com and James T. Areddy at james.aredy@wsj.com

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