Bush hints at war with China over Taiwan

Patrick Martin
27 April 2001

In a statement which amounted to an open threat of war against China, President George W. Bush told a television interviewer Wednesday morning that he was prepared to order full-scale US military action in the event of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

Speaking on the ABC television program "Good Morning, America," Bush was discussing US policy towards China in the aftermath of the conflict over the US spy plane, which collided with a Chinese air defense jet. He was explaining his decision the previous day to authorize the biggest US arms sales to Taiwan in history, when this interchange took place with interviewer Charles Gibson:

GIBSON **:** I'm curious, if you, in your own mind, feel that if Taiwan were attacked by China, do we have an obligation to defend the Taiwanese?

BUSH **:** Yes, we do, and the Chinese must understand that. Yes, I would.

GIBSON **:** With the full force of American military?

BUSH **:** Whatever it took to help Taiwan defend herself.

This extraordinary language suggests that there would be no limitation on a Bush administration response to the outbreak of war in the strait of Taiwan, including the commitment of ground troops, air and missile strikes against the Chinese mainland, even the use of nuclear weapons.

Bush repeated these comments in a somewhat toned-down presentation in other interviews given in the course of the day, as part of a media blitz by the White House to mark his first 100 days in office. On CNN Bush declared, "the Chinese need to hear the message" about US defense of Taiwan. "I have said that I will do what it takes to help Taiwan defend herself, and the Chinese must understand that." Later he told the Associated Press that military force "is certainly an option" in the event of a Chinese attack on Taiwan.

Officials in Beijing reacted with outrage to the declaration that the United States would intervene militarily within the national territory of China. A spokesman for the Foreign Ministry said, "Taiwan is a part of China, not a protectorate of any foreign nation." Bush's comments were "dangerous" and "undermine peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and will create further damage to Sino-US relations."

Bush's comments mark a clear reversal of 30 years of American policy in relation to China and Taiwan. He actually went beyond the language of the US-Taiwan defense pact established during the Cold War, which was abrogated after the US-China rapprochement undertaken by Nixon and Kissinger in 1971.

Since that time US policy towards Taiwan was based on a doctrine known as "strategic ambiguity." Six successive presidents made it clear that they would oppose any military action by Beijing against the island of Taiwan, while stopping short of a commitment to a specific level of military response, let alone a pledge to use American troops in combat against the Peoples Republic.

This approach had a twofold purpose: to threaten China against any attempt to recapture the breakaway province by force, and to deter the corrupt right-wing Kuomintang regime on Taiwan from any unilateral action which might, for its own purposes, provoke a military clash with Beijing. This policy has been continued after the disintegration of the Kuomintang dictatorship and its replacement by a bourgeois regime with rival political parties, some of which espouse independence for the island.

The State Department and White House issued "clarifications" of Bush's war threat presenting it as a mere reiteration of the traditional US stance, and much of the American press portrayed the declaration as a Bush misstatement. But the *Washington Post* quoted an unidentified high US official denying that any verbal slip was involved. "Obviously, the president chose his words carefully," the official said.

In fact, there is ample reason to view these comments as a signal of a fundamental shift in the foreign policy of American imperialism in the Far East. It follows the spy plane incident, which revealed the increasingly belligerent posture towards China on the part of the Pentagon, the

© World Socialist Web Site

Bush White House and much of the congressional leadership, Democratic and Republican. And it flows from the logic of the Taiwan policy which Bush advocated during the presidential campaign, when he criticized Clinton—who dispatched aircraft carriers to the strait of Taiwan in 1996—as too soft on Beijing. Speaking at a campaign stop at a Boeing plant in Seattle, Washington last May, Bush said, “They have been inconsistent on Taiwan. I will be clear.”

Several top Bush foreign policy advisers, including Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, and Lewis Libby, chief of staff to Vice President Cheney, signed a statement in 1999 denouncing Clinton's China policy and calling for the kind of open threat of military force which Bush made in his ABC interview.

On Tuesday Bush notified Taiwan that the US government would agree to sell it a long list of military equipment, including four Kidd-class naval destroyers, eight diesel-powered submarines and 12 Orion P-3C aircraft used to detect submarines. The White House did not authorize sale of the most advanced US destroyer, the Aegis-class ships, which specialize in anti-aircraft and anti-missile combat. While this was presented as a concession to Beijing, Bush merely postponed deciding on an action that could not be carried out for nearly a decade in any case, since the US Navy will not have enough Aegis-class ships for its own use, making them unavailable for export, until 2010.

There was mixed reaction in Congress to the Bush statement and the decision on arms sales to Taiwan, with support and criticism cutting across party lines. Some of the most belligerent anti-Chinese statements came from Democrats. House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, reacting to the arms sale decision, said, “With the sizable buildup of military forces on the mainland side of the Taiwan Strait, I have serious questions regarding the Bush administration's decision not to provide destroyers equipped with advanced command and control systems to Taiwan.”

Another House Democrat, Tom Lantos of California, hailed Bush's ABC interview, declaring, “I think the president's straightforward, courageous and unambiguous statement will guarantee that hostility in the Taiwan Strait will not take place.”

Several Democrats criticized the Bush remarks, not so much for the substance as for their offhand manner. Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts said Bush had apparently “made a major policy change with absolutely no consultation with members of Congress or with our allies in the region.” Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware said, “The president made, I hope, an unintentional substantive mistake this morning.”

The Taiwan arms sale decision also underscores the increasingly unilateral character of American foreign policy. Bush announced that the US would sell diesel-powered submarines even though no American shipyard has built one in 40 years, and all up-to-date models are based on German and Dutch designs. (US shipyards build only nuclear-powered submarines).

Neither Germany nor the Netherlands was consulted about the decision, and both governments said that their relations with Beijing preclude selling weapons to Taiwan. A spokesman for German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder said the German government would maintain this policy despite the US action. “It would never be approved,” he said.

As the British Broadcasting Corporation noted in an acid-toned commentary, “That leaves Mr Bush in the unusual position of having promised to sell technology his country does not control, and may have difficulty supplying.” The BBC quoted a German official saying that US shipbuilders could try building a diesel-powered submarine from scratch with a new design, but it would be prohibitively expensive. “I wish them luck,” he said sarcastically.

Previous US presidents—even Ronald Reagan and Bush's father—refused to sell diesel-powered submarines to Taiwan, despite providing $21.7 billion in weapons to the island in the past two decades. Sale of submarines would violate a US understanding with Beijing that Washington would not sell offensive weapons.

In a further sign of mounting tensions in the Far East, the *Washington Post* reported April 20 that the Pentagon has prepared detailed plans for US fighter jets to escort military reconnaissance planes off the Chinese coast once the White House orders the resumption of the spy flights that led to the April 1 collision with a Chinese jet and the death of the Chinese pilot. The spy flights remain grounded while US and Chinese officials discuss the fate of the E3P turboprop plane, which remains on Hainan Island.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site