

US provocatively lifts restrictions on contact with Taiwan

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The Biden administration announced last Friday that it was significantly easing restrictions on contact between US and Taiwanese officials, effectively tearing up protocols in place since the US and China established formal diplomatic relations in 1979. The move is a major step in undermining the “One China” policy—accepted at the time by the US—that effectively recognised Beijing as the legitimate government of all China including Taiwan.

The announcement makes clear that the Biden administration intends to intensify the aggressive US confrontation with China on all fronts—diplomatic, economic and military—that began with the Obama administration’s pivot to Asia, and was stepped up under Trump. The Trump administration took a series of provocative steps toward strengthening US ties with Taiwan, including increased arms sales. In its final days in office, it lifted all restrictions on contact with Taiwanese officials, civilian and military.

Last Friday’s announcement followed a review of the Trump administration’s policy. A short US State Department press release hailed Taiwan as “a force for good in the international community,” saying the new guidelines would encourage US engagement with Taiwan and reflected “our deepening unofficial relationship.” While it paid lip-service to the “One China” policy, the new protocols clearly open the floodgates for far closer ties.

Details of the new arrangements were not made public in the State Department release, but some at least, in all likelihood the least controversial, were leaked to the media. According to the *Financial Times*, US officials will be able to regularly host Taiwanese officials at federal government buildings and to meet their counterparts at Taiwan’s economic and cultural offices, which serve as de facto embassies and consulates. US officials also will be able to attend events at Twin Oaks, a 17-acre estate owned and used by Taiwan. Some

restrictions remain in place, including the flying of the Taiwanese flag during meetings with US officials.

The Biden administration is justifying its closer ties with Taiwan by ramping up allegations of “Chinese aggression” and unsubstantiated claims that Beijing is actively considering a military invasion of Taiwan. Beijing regards Taiwan as a “renegade province” that it is seeking to reunite with peacefully, but has repeatedly warned that it will respond militarily to any unilateral declaration of independence by Taipei.

In an interview with NBC’s “Meet the Press” yesterday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken declared that “what is of real concern to us, is increasingly aggressive actions by the government in Beijing directed at Taiwan, raising tensions in the Straits.” He warned it would be a “serious mistake” for anyone to try to change the status quo in the western Pacific by force.

In reality, the US is in the process of upending the status quo, by calling into question the basis of US-China relations that have maintained a fragile peace in the Taiwan Strait for the past 40 years. Washington is now strengthening relations with Taiwan—which it acknowledged is part of China—and ignoring Chinese objections. The allegations of “Chinese aggression” are being cynically used to justify greater US collaboration with Taiwan—moves that are designed to provoke a response from China.

Fears in Beijing that the US will transform Taiwan into a base of operations against China have been compounded by the Trump administration’s actions, including the first visit to Taiwan by a cabinet-level US official—Health Secretary Alex Azar—last year, and US pressure on the hi-tech giant Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company to stop selling computer chips to China’s Huawei. These concerns have been compounded by Taiwan’s ruling Democratic Progressive Party, which advocates greater independence for Taiwan.

The Biden administration has taken a series of steps that signal its intention to rapidly strengthen ties with Taiwan, including:

- * Biden became the first US president to invite the de-facto Taiwanese ambassador to Washington to attend his presidential inauguration. Hsiao Bi-khim attended the swearing-in ceremony in January.

- * In March, Joseph Young, the acting US ambassador to Japan, welcomed his Taiwanese counterpart to his Tokyo residence and publicised the visit on Twitter.

- * Also last month, the US ambassador to Palau, accompanied by the president of Palau, became the first serving US ambassador to visit Taiwan since 1979. Palau is one of just 15 nations around the world to maintain formal diplomatic ties with Taipei rather than Beijing.

- * On March 30, the American Institute in Taiwan, which functions as an unofficial US embassy in Taipei, along with the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office, convened a virtual forum of high-level US and Taiwanese officials to discuss expanding Taiwan's participation in UN and other international fora—moves that Beijing vigorously opposes.

- * As reported last week to the *New York Times* by Bonnie Glaser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Secretary of State Blinken recently urged Paraguay's president in a phone call to maintain his country's formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan. In other words, the Biden administration is acting in direct opposition to the One China policy by actively promoting ties with Taiwan.

- * Most provocatively, Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced last month that it is preparing to sign a memorandum of cooperation with the United States regarding the collaboration of their coast guards. While coast guard is distinct from the navy, the memorandum takes on a quasi-military character and is directed in particular against China.

These apparently small steps are in fact significant breaches of longstanding protocols put in place after 1979 to prevent confrontation and conflict in what is the most explosive flashpoint in Asia. Behind the scenes, moreover, there is a push in military and strategic circles in Washington for the consolidation of far stronger ties with Taiwan and an upending of relations with China.

In 1979, as the Carter administration recognised the One China policy and established diplomatic relations with China, Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act, which Carter signed into law. The Act provided for the sales of defensive weapons to Taiwan and offered a vague

guarantee to come to Taiwan's aid in the event of Chinese aggression.

Successive US administrations attempted to square the circle by maintaining what was declared to be “strategic ambiguity”—China could not know if the US would back Taiwan or not in the event of war, while at the same time Washington pressured Taipei not to declare independence and provoke war. Now there is a clamour for “strategic clarity”—that is, a formal guarantee by the US to support Taiwan in a conflict with China.

For instance, Richard Haass, president of the influential Council on Foreign Relations, wrote in an essay in *Foreign Affairs* last September that strategic ambiguity had “run its course.” He continued: “The time has come for the United States to introduce a policy of strategic clarity: one that makes explicit that the United States would respond to any Chinese use of force against Taiwan.”

The Biden administration has not formally adopted such a formula. When asked yesterday on NBC whether the US would respond militarily to Chinese action against Taiwan, Blinken avoided the question, simply saying: “All I can tell you is we have a serious commitment to Taiwan being able to defend itself.” In fact, the Biden administration is already moving in that direction, with a declaration shortly after Biden's inauguration that it has a “rock solid” commitment to Taiwan.

Far from lowering the dangers of a war with Taiwan over China, as Haass argued, closer military cooperation between the US and Taiwan only heightens tensions and the risks of conflict. That is exactly what the Pentagon is preparing for as it pushes for a huge increase in military spending in the Indo-Pacific in preparation for war against China, including the stationing of offensive intermediate range missiles on the “first island chain” around China, which includes Japan, the Philippines and notably, Taiwan.



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