US Senator's tweet over Taiwan provokes Chinese threats of war

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Just days after the fall of Kabul, the danger of an even more disastrous conflict between the US and China over Taiwan has erupted into the media.

In the fractious debate over the Afghan debacle, US Republican Senator John Cornyn in a tweet yesterday argued that the retention of a relatively small US force of 2,500 troops could have prevented the ignominious collapse of the Kabul regime. By way of comparison, he highlighted far larger American troop numbers in Germany, Japan, South Korea… and 30,000 in Taiwan.

The tweet prompted an immediate response in the Chinese state-run *Global Times* warning that, if true, China would never accept it. "It is believed that China will immediately put the Anti-Secession Law into use, destroy and expel US troops in Taiwan by military means, and at the same time realize reunification by force," it stated.

"The US stationing troops in the Taiwan island severely violates the agreements signed when China and the US established their diplomatic ties as well as all political documents between the two countries. It also critically runs counter to international law and even US domestic law. It is equivalent to a military invasion and occupation of the Taiwan Province of China. It is an act of declaring war on the People's Republic of China."

It is unlikely that the US has secretly deployed 30,000 troops on Taiwan, and Cornyn deleted his comments without further explanation. However, Cornyn's tweet underscores the extraordinary tensions between Washington and Beijing that have been ramped up under the Obama, Trump and now Biden administrations, and the explosive character of Taiwan as a trigger for war.

Biden following Trump has called into question the One China policy that treats Beijing as the legitimate government of all China including Taiwan and has been the bedrock of US-China relations for more than 40 years. While not explicitly adopting the policy, the US nevertheless de facto recognised One China when it established diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1979 and broke off all formal ties with Taipei.

US relations with Taiwan remained at a limited, informal level for decades. While Washington supplied arms to Taipei under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act and opposed any attempt by China to forcibly reunify Taiwan, it ended its military alliance with Taipei and removed US troops from the island.

Under Trump, however, Washington resumed high level contact with Taipei and in the final days of the administration ended all restrictions on meetings between US and Taiwanese military and civilian officials. Biden signalled that he would do the same when, for the first time, the de facto Taiwanese ambassador in Washington was invited to attend his inauguration.

In the context of US naval provocations in the South China and East China Seas, an accelerating US economic warfare and military build-up against China, Beijing has angrily reacted to US threats to overturn the status quo on Taiwan. It has repeatedly warned that any declaration of formal independence by Taipei would result in forcible reunification of the island with China. The island is important to China both strategically as it lies just 150 kilometres across the Taiwan Strait, and economically, including as the world's top manufacturer of semi-conductor chips.

The reaction in China to Cornyn's tweet makes clear that any stationing of US military forces on Taiwan or forging of closer military ties with Taipei would in effect be an act of war. Yet that is exactly what is under discussion in US strategic and foreign policy circles in

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Washington as Cornyn who sits on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence is well aware. He is an outspoken advocate of boosting US ties with Taiwan and has introduced legislation to establish a partnership between the US National Guard and Taiwan's military.

This is part of the debate underway in Washington over replacing the current policy of "strategic ambiguity" with "strategic clarity"—in other words, making a firm commitment to back Taiwan militarily against China in the event of conflict. Such as shift would only encourage the current administration in Taipei to take the provocative step of declaring formal independence.

At the same time, the US Navy under both the Trump and Biden administration has stepped up the number of warships passing through the narrow Taiwan Strait between the island and the Chinese mainland and the sale of arms to Taipei. Moreover, Japan's Nikkei news service published excerpts from the Pentagon's Pacific Deterrence Initiative that called for the stationing of offensive ballistic missiles, previously banned by the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, on Taiwan as well as in Japan and the Philippines.

The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan was always part of the broader US strategic shift enunciated by the Pentagon away from the "war on terror" to "great power conflict"—with China being the central target. However, the rapidity of the collapse of the puppet US regime in Kabul has brought forth panicked calls in Washington for the US to shore up its prestige internationally by aggressively backing its allies and confronting its rivals.

In an opinion piece in Monday's *Washington Post* , the right-wing pundit Henry Olsen declared that Biden must not follow the policies of the Carter administration in the wake of the US defeat in Vietnam, which he argued, weakened its position internationally. He called for Biden to "show our adversaries and our allies that he intends to maintain and restore US global leadership with deeds as well as words." He bluntly targeted China as "our most dangerous global foe," saying that "combating its pernicious rise must be Biden's primary global task."

Significantly, Olsen then focussed on Taiwan: "Following the weekend's catastrophe, Biden should make clear that the United States considers Taiwan's autonomy from China to be of the utmost importance. That statement should be followed by selling advanced weaponry to the Taipei government and by negotiating troop deployments in neighbouring countries that are closer to Taiwan than our bases in Japan, which are more than a thousand miles away. He must also maintain U.S. tariffs on Chinese goods and push harder to decouple the United States' economy from its dangerous dependence on business controlled by the Communist Party."

Even a cursory examination of the map of East Asia makes clear that other than Japan, and possibly the Philippines, there is nowhere to place US troops closer to Taiwan—other than Taiwan itself.

The response of the *Global Times* to Cornyn's tweet demonstrates that Beijing is following the discussion in Washington closely and is making plans to defend what it regards as its "core interests." The editorial demanded an immediate explanation from the US government on the tweet and stressed that "Taiwan is a red-line that cannot be crossed."

Yesterday, Chinese warships and fighter jets carried out military drills in areas to the south of Taiwan in response to what Beijing described as "external interference" and "provocations."

In March, the outgoing head of the US Indo-Pacific Command Philip Davidson, called for a doubling of the command's military budget and warned of a war with China over Taiwan in the next six years. Far from being an exaggeration, that warning takes on a chilling new meaning as US imperialism recklessly inflames the region's most dangerous flashpoint.

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