

Top Pentagon official declares Taiwan critical to “vital US interests”

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3 January 2022

In a little reported meeting of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations last month, top officials of the Biden administration made clear that it will make Taiwan—potentially the most explosive flash point in Asia—central to its aggressive stance towards China.

The status of Taiwan was fundamental to the establishment of US-China diplomatic relations in 1979. In recognising the One China policy, Washington de facto acknowledged that Beijing was the legitimate government of all China including Taiwan and ended its formal diplomatic ties with Taipei. Now Biden, following Trump, is upending the diplomatic status quo.

In his opening remarks, chair Senator Bob Menendez declared that the hearing on future US policy on Taiwan could prove to be “one of the more consequential” held by the committee in 2021. While blaming China, he warned that “the Taiwan Strait remains one of the most dangerous divides in the world today and one of the handful of places in the world where miscalculation could lead to a war with potentially catastrophic global consequences.”

These remarks underscore the degree to which Washington is actively focused on preparing for war with China over Taiwan. The opening testimony of Ely Ratner, assistant defence secretary for the Indo-Pacific, pointed to the underlying reasons—strategic and economic—for Washington’s determination to bring Taiwan firmly into the US camp.

Ratner described Taiwan as “a critical node within the first island chain, anchoring a network of US allies and partners—stretching from the Japanese archipelago down to the Philippines and into the South China Sea.” The first island chain runs parallel to the Chinese mainland and is regarded as central to the Pentagon’s

war strategy of hemming in Chinese naval and air forces and potentially mounting a blockade in the event of war.

The US has long maintained a hypocritical doublespeak when it comes to the status of Taiwan. While formally recognising it as part of China, Washington has opposed any prospect of Beijing forcing Taiwan’s reunification with the mainland and has sold increasing volumes of “defensive” weapons to Taipei. Over the past year, the Biden administration acknowledged for the first time that US special forces troops are on Taiwan as “trainers.” All US forces were previously withdrawn in 1979.

The Chinese government legitimately regards strengthening US relations with Taiwan, particularly military ties, as a direct threat under conditions of mounting tensions. The main island of Taiwan is just 160 kilometres from the Chinese mainland across the Taiwan Strait, while small heavily fortified islets lie only kilometres from several major Chinese cities.

In one of the few articles on the committee’s hearings, the *Financial Times* (FT) recalled the top-secret memo sent by General Douglas MacArthur to President Harry Truman on the eve of the Korean War in which he insisted China should not gain control of Taiwan. Describing it as an “unsinkable aircraft carrier,” MacArthur warned that “the strategic interests of the United States will be in serious jeopardy if Formosa [European name for Taiwan] is allowed to be dominated by a [hostile] power.”

The FT article noted the similarities with Ratner’s testimony in which he declared that Taiwan was “critical to the region’s security and critical to the defence of vital US interests in the Indo-Pacific.” It suggested that the hearing might well “be remembered as the moment Washington came clean on its intentions

regarding Taiwan” and was regarded in Beijing as another sign that the US was dropping all pretense that it would allow a unification of Taiwan with China.

Ratner also highlighted another critical factor in the US determination to effectively control Taiwan. The island is not only a “valuable economic and trade partner” but specifically “our economy—like many others around the world—has come to count on Taiwan as a critical supplier of high-technology, including semiconductors.”

Indeed, the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) has a virtual monopoly on the production of high-end semiconductors that are essential not only to a wide variety of commercial applications but to the military and its weapons systems. The Trump administration pressured the TSMC to cut off supplies to key Chinese corporations.

The political framework for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing was what has now become standard US propaganda—Chinese aggression and threats towards “democratic” Taiwan. In fact, Beijing’s “threats” towards an island that the US has acknowledged is part of China have been in large measure a response to flagrant US breaches of diplomatic One China protocols established over three decades, as well as provocative US military activity in the East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

The US and international media frequently highlight the presence of Chinese military aircraft in Taiwan’s self-declared Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), without explaining that the ADIZ has no standing in international law or that it includes significant areas of airspace above the Chinese mainland. At the same time, the presence of US warships and warplanes close to the Chinese mainland—that is thousands of kilometres from the nearest American territory—is presented as legitimate.

In his testimony at the hearing, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Daniel Kritenbrink regaled the committee with a list of the Biden administration’s actions in seeking to elevate Taiwan’s status internationally and strengthen US-Taiwanese economic ties. He noted that the US has encouraged allies such as Japan and Australia to also deepen relations with Taiwan. Even though the US recognises Beijing not Taipei diplomatically, it has also opposed any switch from Taipei to Beijing by the handful of countries that

maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

As the Biden administration is well aware, its growing ties with Taiwan constitute a direct threat to China and also encourage the Taiwanese administration of President Tsai Ing-wen to formally declare independence from China—a move that Beijing has warned it will oppose by force. Tsai is a member of the separatist Democratic Progressive Party.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi last week condemned Washington’s actions, stating that: “The US [had] violated the promises made when China and the US established diplomatic relations, condoned and encouraged ‘Taiwan independence’ forces, and tried to distort and hollow out the one-China principle.”

In a stark warning, Wang declared: “This will not only bring Taiwan into an extremely dangerous situation, but also cause the US to face an unbearable price.” The US, however, has no intention of pulling back from a line of action that is aimed not at defending Taiwanese “democracy” but at preventing China from threatening American hegemony in Asia and internationally—ultimately through military means.

As Ratner told the Senate committee: “Let me be clear that this is an absolute priority: The PRC is the Department’s pacing challenge and a Taiwan contingency is the pacing scenario. We are modernizing our capabilities, updating US force posture, and developing new operational concepts accordingly.”

In plain language: the US is preparing for a catastrophic war with China over Taiwan.



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