

US-China tensions flare over Taiwan Strait

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In the wake of the inflammatory anti-China speech delivered a fortnight ago by US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin to the Shangri-la Dialogue security forum in Singapore, Washington has continued to escalate its confrontation with China over Taiwan.

Yesterday, the US Navy provocatively flew a US Navy P-8A Poseidon reconnaissance plane over the Taiwan Strait to underscore its rejection of Chinese claims, reiterated in the wake of the security forum, that the Taiwan Strait falls within its jurisdiction.

At the Singapore event, Austin explicitly accused China of “intimidation,” “coercion” and “aggression” toward Taiwan in particular. He singled out the Taiwan Strait as an area where “the stakes are especially stark,” declaring that the US would continue to fly and sail in what it regards as international waters.

Chinese Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe responded by denouncing the “hegemony and power politics” of the US and declared that China was ready for war, if necessary, to defend its sovereignty, including over Taiwan. Beijing regards Taiwan as a renegade province of China and has repeatedly declared that it would reintegrate the island by force if Taipei ever declared formal independence.

Last week China’s foreign ministry reiterated that it “has sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the Taiwan Strait” and rejected the “false claim when certain countries call the Taiwan Strait ‘international waters.’” This week the Chinese air force reportedly flew 29 military aircraft, including fighter jets together with various surveillance, early warning and refuelling aircraft, into Taiwan’s self-declared air defense identification zone (ADIZ).

The US and international media seized on the operation as further evidence of China’s aggressive intentions toward Taiwan. In fact, Beijing is responding to ongoing US provocations, both diplomatic and military, over Taiwan. The extensive Taiwanese ADIZ,

which covers parts of mainland China, has no standing in international law and no Chinese aircraft flew into Taiwanese airspace.

The reaction to the Chinese operation is part of the broader US propaganda campaign accusing China of preparing to invade Taiwan, likening it to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Washington’s claims not only lack any evidence, but stand reality on its head. Just as the US goaded Russia into intervening in Ukraine, so it is seeking to drag China into a war over Taiwan and transform the island into a quagmire for the Chinese military.

It is not China, but US imperialism, under the Trump and Biden administrations, that has deliberately upset the delicate diplomatic protocols surrounding the status of Taiwan adopted when Washington established diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1979 and ended its ties with Taipei. The US sought to transform China into an ally against the Soviet Union by de facto recognising Beijing as the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan, in what is commonly referred to as the One China policy.

Washington has deliberately undermined the One China policy by authorising top-level contacts between the US and Taiwan, boosting its arms sales to Taiwan, including of offensive weaponry, sending US special forces to Taiwan to train its military, and increasing the number and size of US and allied naval exercises near Taiwan.

The number of supposed “freedom of navigation” operations by US warships through the Taiwan Strait has increased under Biden to roughly one a month—the most recent being on May 10 by the guided missile cruiser USS Port Royal.

Last week, the US State Department flatly rejected Chinese claims of sovereignty over the Taiwan Strait, declaring it to be “an international waterway” where “freedom of navigation and overflight are guaranteed

under international law.”

The US assertion of its “right” to sail through and fly over the Taiwan Strait is shot through with hypocrisy and contradictions. According to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), a country has exclusive rights within its territorial waters—12 nautical miles from its coastline—and more limited rights within its 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

The Taiwan Strait is about 70 nautical miles at its narrowest point and 220 nautical miles at its widest. Moreover, if one accepts that Taiwan is part of China, as the US nominally still does under the One China policy, then the entirety of the strait falls under Chinese jurisdiction of one form or another. What can or cannot be done within an EEZ is in dispute between China and the US and its allies. Washington’s attempt to claim the higher ground based on “international law” is particularly two-faced given that it is one of the few countries not to ratify UNCLOS.

Quite apart from the finer points of UNCLOS, the US is claiming the “right” to fly warplanes and sail its warships close to strategic military bases on the Chinese mainland and thousands of kilometres from the nearest American territory. At the same time, it denounces China for conducting similar operations in what the US insists are international waters and international airspace.

The aggressive character of the US confrontation with China over Taiwan is underscored by President Biden’s declaration on three separate occasions, most recently last month, that the US is fully committed to backing Taiwan in a conflict with China.

Despite attempts by US officials to “clarify” the comments, Biden has effectively overturned the longstanding US policy of “strategic ambiguity.” By previously refusing to give a firm security guarantee to Taiwan, the US aimed at preventing conflict across the Taiwan Strait—by, on the one hand, warding off a Chinese assault, while, on the other, constraining any move by Taiwan to declare independence and precipitate a war.

The ambiguous status of Taiwan suited both Washington and Beijing while the two were de facto allies against the Soviet Union and subsequently close economic partners. US imperialism, however, is determined to prevent China’s economic rise from threatening its global hegemony and Taiwan is vital to

those plans. It is not only strategically located in the so-called first island chain, running from Japan through to the Philippines, that Pentagon strategists see as essential to blockading China. It is also home to the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company that produces over 90 percent of the world’s most advanced computing chips, essential to both the US military and industry.

While the Biden administration still maintains that it adheres to the One China policy, despite all its actions to the contrary, the most hawkish sections of the American political establishment are moving to decisively overturn it.

Earlier this month, two senators—Democrat Bob Menendez and Republican Lindsey Graham—announced the introduction of a bipartisan Taiwan Policy Act into Congress that would drop any pretence of “strategic ambiguity” and commit the US to a war with China over Taiwan. As well as providing almost \$4.5 billion in military assistance to Taiwan, the bill would designate Taiwan as a Major Non-NATO Ally. By effectively treating the island as a sovereign nation, it would essentially overturn the One China policy and call US diplomatic relations with China into question.

Even as it recklessly pursues its proxy war with Russia in Ukraine, the US is setting course for a confrontation and conflict with China that would transform the European war into a global conflict between nuclear-armed powers.



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