

Biden administration meddles in the Taiwanese election

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With Taiwan's presidential and parliamentary polls just days away, US President Joe Biden has made a provocative, last-minute intervention leaking to the media that he plans to send a high-level delegation to Taipei in the aftermath of the election.

According to the *Financial Times*, "The White House has tapped James Steinberg, a former Democratic deputy secretary of state, and Stephen Hadley, a former Republican national security adviser, to lead the bipartisan delegation, according to five people familiar with the plans."

While the White House "declined to comment on the planned delegation," it undoubtedly authorised the "people familiar with the plans" to speak to the media, anonymously of course. Even the *Financial Times* felt compelled to note that the timing was "unusual" and "could complicate efforts by the US and China to stabilise their strained relationship."

In reality, Washington has no intention of stabilising relations with Beijing but has deliberately poisoned the atmosphere, in particular by heightening tensions over the status of Taiwan. While still paying lip service to the One China policy that de facto recognises Beijing as the legitimate government of all China including Taiwan, the Biden administration has undermined the status quo by boosting political and military ties with Taipei.

Biden has unambiguously declared on multiple occasions that the US will go to war with China in any conflict with Taiwan—an abandonment of Washington's previous policy of "strategic ambiguity" designed to ward off provocations by both Taipei and Beijing.

Current Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen, who is ineligible to stand again having served two four-year terms, has been Washington's willing accomplice

under both Trump and Biden. While Tsai has stopped short of calling for formal independence for Taiwan, knowing full well that would rapidly provoke war with China, she has encouraged high-level US delegations to Taipei in breach of longstanding diplomatic protocols and boosted Taiwan's military preparations for war with China.

Lai Ching-te, currently vice-president, is the candidate of Tsai's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) for the presidency. Lai is known as a more aggressive advocate of Taiwanese separatism, describing himself in 2017 while premier as a "pragmatic worker for Taiwanese independence." He is running against Hou Yu-ih, from the main opposition Kuomintang (KMT) party, and Ko Wen-je from the Taiwan People's party, both of whom favour efforts to improve relations with China and avoid war.

Lai downplays his attitude to Taiwanese independence so as not to alarm voters, but he does present himself as a strongman prepared to stand up to China and prepare for war if need be. He lashed out again at Beijing on Tuesday, telling the international media: "China meddles every time Taiwan holds elections, but this time it is the most serious we have ever seen. No matter if it is propaganda or military intimidation, cognitive warfare or fake news, they are employing it all."

Lai is echoing the constant drumbeat in the American and Western media against "Chinese aggression" and "Chinese interference." While formal campaigning ended on Sunday, his denunciation of Beijing is aimed at stoking fears of a Chinese menace and stampeding the electorate into voting for him and the DPP.

The announcement of Biden's high-level delegation to Taipei plays into the same strategy, by making clear that the US intends to continue to disregard the One

China policy and heighten tensions with China regardless of who is elected on Saturday. To leak the news just prior to polling day is calculated to influence the vote.

This last-minute provocation stems from concerns that Washington's preferred candidate, Lai, might not win. He has been ahead in the polls in the course of the campaign and is favoured to win given that the presidential election is based on a first-past-the post count. With no run-off, Lai could win with less than 50 percent of the vote.

His victory, however, is by no means certain. Hou, from the KMT, has promoted himself as the candidate of peace who can ease tensions with China, develop trade and investment, and facilitate the return of Chinese tourists to Taiwan. Overthrown in China in the 1949 revolution, the KMT fled to Taiwan, and claimed to be the legitimate government of all China. It ruled the island under a brutal military dictatorship for decades. With the embrace of capitalist restoration by Beijing, the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party found common cause in promoting heavy Taiwanese investment in China and closer trade relations.

The KMT ridiculed Lai's condemnation of Chinese election meddling after Taiwan's defence ministry issued an alert about a Chinese satellite rocket launch that was wrongly referred to in English as a missile flying over Taiwan's airspace. "Do they want to accuse China of election interference again? Or is the DPP just using the Chinese Communist Party to scare our people?" a Hou spokesperson asked.

Hou has also sought to capitalise on domestic issues. He has criticised DPP plans to wind back Taiwan's dependence on nuclear power and rely on renewable energy, warning that it will lead to electricity shortages and rising costs. A commentary published by the US-based Brookings Institution in December revealed that the chief concern of voters was economic development with cross-strait relations with China running a poor second.

The author—Ching-hsin Yu, director of the Election Study Centre at the National Chengchi University—pointed out: "People are frustrated with issues like low wages (particularly for young people and labourers), high living costs (particularly housing prices), insufficient public facilities (such as transportation and education), and an inadequate social

care system (such as a declining birth rate and insufficient care for preschool children and the elderly)."

The third presidential candidate, Ko Wen-je, is something of a political wild card, who is seeking to exploit the widespread disaffection among the population, particularly young people, with both of the established parties. Ko, who also advocates easing tensions with China, could draw votes away from the KMT and ensure a victory for the DPP. However, as voting day looms, the size of his vote and influence on the outcome is unknown, adding another uncertainty to the result.

Commenting on Biden's plan to send a delegation to Taipei, one former US official told the *Financial Times* that doing so soon after the election was a risky move that could backfire. "The paramount US goal at this sensitive time should be to encourage restraint by both Beijing and Taipei," he said. "Sending such a high-level delegation looks like a bear hug to Taipei, giving Beijing cover to overreact. We need more subtle actions to be effective."

The very fact that the Biden administration has proceeded, well aware of the inflammatory character of its planned visit, makes clear that it has no interest in encouraging restraint across the Taiwan Strait. Rather just as the US goaded Russia into a devastating war in Ukraine, it is following a similar strategy in recklessly provoking conflict with China over Taiwan. Its aim in both cases is to destabilise and subordinate what it regards as the chief threats to American global hegemony even at the price of a world war.



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