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Strategic Ambiguity: Alive and Well

By Hannah Elyse Sworn

SYNOPSIS

President Joe Biden's recent comments regarding Taiwan do not depart from Washington's longstanding policy of strategic ambiguity, but rather reflect its adaptation to balance Chinese actions in the Taiwan Strait.

COMMENTARY

ALARM OVER President Joe Biden's recent remarks that the United States would defend Taiwan in case of an attack by China underlines the need to dispel some of the ambiguity surrounding strategic ambiguity.

Biden's comments were quickly labelled by the [media](#) as an apparent break from this decades-old policy, which keeps the US' involvement in a cross-strait conflict intentionally vague. Such judgements misunderstand the nature of strategic ambiguity and how it has been leveraged by US presidents in the past.

Strategic Ambiguity as Dual Deterrence

Strategic ambiguity can be traced back to 1950. Following the Chinese civil war, the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan and People's Republic of China (PRC) each sought to forcibly subsume the other, believing themselves to be the 'real' China. Harry Truman [urged](#) both parties to cease aggression while postponing a decision on Taiwan's status.

To manage an increasingly important relationship with the PRC and maintain its ties with Taiwan, Washington codified strategic ambiguity in a series of key documents. In 1972, the US [acknowledged](#) both the PRC and ROC's belief in one China and stated that the dispute must be resolved peacefully by the "Chinese themselves".

On this condition, Washington [recognised](#) the PRC as the “sole legal Government of China” in 1979 and ended its formal relationship with Taiwan. Concurrently, the US Congress passed the [Taiwan Relations Act](#) (TRA), which pledged a capacity to “resist” coercion of the island and provide it with defensive arms.

The key to strategic ambiguity — also known as ‘dual deterrence’— is two-fold. By insisting on peaceful settlement and maintaining a vaguely defined commitment to Taiwan, Washington tables the possibility that the US could defend it against the mainland. This deters the PRC from coercively ‘reunifying’ Taiwan with itself.

But by recognising the PRC as the only legal Chinese government and keeping its commitment to Taipei unclear, the US also creates uncertainty about whether it would come to Taiwan’s aid if the island unilaterally moved toward becoming an independent state.

This deters Taiwan from provocations that could drag Washington into a conflict with the PRC. Strategic ambiguity prevents actions that could ignite a conflict by maintaining the possibility of a worst-case scenario regarding the US’ involvement for both sides of the strait.

Key Features of Strategic Ambiguity

An assessment of which party is at fault for a potential conflict is key to Washington’s involvement. US presidents have used strategic ambiguity to warn the more antagonistic actor — sometimes Taiwan, sometimes the PRC — not to upset the cross-strait peace, lest they find themselves abandoned by or at war with the US.

In 1996, Bill Clinton [deployed](#) two aircraft carrier groups to the waters surrounding Taiwan where the PRC was conducting live-fire missile tests to influence Taiwan’s first elections. Seven years later, George W. Bush balanced against Taiwanese posturings when he [stated](#) in a joint press conference with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao that the US opposed pro-independence Taiwanese president Chen Shui-bian’s controversial actions and comments.

Even the erratic Donald Trump inadvertently [maintained](#) strategic ambiguity despite unprecedentedly taking a [call](#) from Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen, then [cosying up](#) to Xi Jinping even as he launched a trade war with China.

Strategic ambiguity is a balancing act tailored to the current strategic environment that manifests differently over time and between presidents. This does not necessarily mean that strategic ambiguity itself has been abandoned. Biden’s remarks are no different from the manoeuvring of previous presidents, in this case discouraging escalating PRC aggression while keeping the conditions under which the US would defend Taiwan unclear.

Biden’s China-Balancing Strategic Ambiguity

When asked at a recent CNN Presidential Town Hall whether the US could “vow to protect” and “come to Taiwan’s defence if China attacked,” Biden tersely [responded](#) “yes”, stating his desire “to make China understand that we are not going to step back”.

Consciously or not, these responses are calibrated to the current cross-strait climate, characterised by record Chinese military [incursions](#) into Taiwanese airspace and China's [growth](#) in military power. Given the extreme yet vague wording of the questions, Biden is unambiguous about the US' response to a worst-case scenario, conveying an appropriately tough stance on China given its recent actions.

But this vow to defend Taiwan actually preserves strategic ambiguity, which — as a form of deterrence — depends on Washington's credibility to step in if Beijing invades the island unprovoked. At a time when Beijing is testing the boundaries with Taiwan, Biden's statement buttresses deterrence of China by communicating the strength of Washington's resolve to respond to an extreme scenario.

At the same time, the numerous lesser acts of Chinese responses to these are left unsaid, maintaining ambiguity and deterring Beijing from potentially escalatory behaviour. Even for the extreme case in question, the specific conditions under which the US would act and what "defence" would entail are kept sufficiently unclear to keep both China and Taiwan on their toes.

Biden has continued to remind China of Washington's commitment to Taiwan, [describing](#) Beijing's recent behaviour as "coercive" and a threat to "regional peace and stability" at the East Asia Summit last week (27 Oct 2021). While not as direct as his previous remarks, his comments invoke the TRA's language that the US maintains a capacity to resist all "forms of coercion" against Taiwan and maintain "peace and stability" in the Pacific that is in its interest.

Preserving Cross-Strait Peace

At a time of heightened cross-strait tensions, strategic ambiguity has never been so important to averting a costly conflict. Biden must avoid swinging too hard in favour of Taiwan and accidentally encouraging reckless actions.

However, Taiwanese leader Tsai has [avoided](#) risky pro-independence moves and the recent airspace incursions are a stern reminder of what's at stake in avoiding a conflict with Beijing.

Despite intense posturing, Beijing prefers to play the long game with Taiwan to secure peaceful reunification and [regulates](#) nationalistic sentiment that could reduce its room for manoeuvring. Washington is similarly keen not to become embroiled in another faraway conflict after extricating itself from its last 'forever war' in the Middle East.

Jumping to conclusions about the significance of Biden's comments vis-à-vis strategic ambiguity risks inflaming already heightened tensions in the strait. On one hand, it makes it harder for the Chinese government to provide a measured response without being branded as unpatriotic by the public; on the other, it could embolden fringe pro-independence groups in Taiwan.

Amidst China's increasingly assertive behaviour, Biden's remarks are an attempt to adapt strategic ambiguity to meet the immense challenge of maintaining the cross-strait status quo.

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