

Biden's Taiwan Gaffe Meant No Harm

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The probability is that the US President Joe Biden committed yet another diplomatic gaffe at a CNN town hall last Thursday that Washington had a commitment to come to Taiwan's defence if it were attacked by China.

Yet, like Biden's gaffes usually, this one too was not without an element of deliberateness. Biden was even insistent. Indeed, there is an ongoing debate in the US on this topic and Biden tapped into it.

Nonetheless, the very next day, the White House sought to walk back Biden's comments, explaining he “wasn't announcing a change in policy nor have we changed our policy. We are guided by the Taiwan Relations Act.” The Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 commits the US to providing Taiwan with arms for its self-defence but does not commit sending American troops to defend Taiwan.

Again, on Friday, Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and State Department Spokesman Ned Price signalled to Beijing that the status quo hasn't changed — and to Taipei cautioning against declaration of independence.

Interestingly, on Friday itself, Senator Edward J. Markey, Chair of the East Asia Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Senator Dan Sullivan introduced a bipartisan legislation titled the *Taiwan Actions Supporting Security by Undertaking Regular Engagements (Taiwan ASSURE) Act* that “invests in stability measures to lower the risk of conflict in the Taiwan Strait by supporting dialogues to mitigate misunderstandings and promote transparency.”

Senator Markey, the veteran lawmaker from Massachusetts, has been closely associated with Biden and former secretary of state John Kerry and stepped in for damage control in consultation with the White House. He said,

“We must find ways to lower tensions and avoid miscalculation in the Taiwan Strait. This legislation will invest in crisis stability measures as an essential part of the United States' regional security strategy with the goal of avoiding armed conflict. Consistent

with our commitments under the *Taiwan Relations Act*, the United States must continue to support Taiwan's meaningful participation in the international community and help the country withstand cross-Strait coercion, while taking clear action to avoid conflict in the region." [read more](#)

Clearly, at the responsible level of US leadership, there are no takers for the steady drumbeat among the hawks and neocons to play chicken with the US-China relations. Both within the Biden Administration and the Congress, there is level-headed understanding that the US national security is not at stake here and to gamble the fate of humanity is sheer madness. Biden has more foreign policy experience than any US president in modern history since Eisenhower.

Beijing reacted forcefully to Biden's remark but to set the record straight. Meanwhile, could Biden have been in the dark about the 20-year energy deal last week between the US exporter Venture Global LNG and the Chinese state oil giant Sinopec on supplying a combined 4 million tons of liquefied natural gas annually and a second deal with the trading arm of Sinopec to supply another 1 million tons of LNG for three years?

Reports also appeared last week that the Chinese natural gas distributor ENN Natural Gas Co signed a 13-year deal to buy LNG from US supplier Cheniere Energy Inc starting July 2022. This is the first time in 3 years that major LNG deals were inked between Chinese and US companies.

Global Times wrote that the deals could "make China and the US to strike for a return to normal bilateral relations." Due to logistics snags and other factors, the US currently has little ability to meet China's cascading demand for natural gas. China is forecast to overtake Japan as the world's biggest buyer of LNG this year. To be sure, energy cooperation with China is crucial for the US export of natural gas in the long run. In the Asian market, energy prices are skyrocketing.

As it is, China-US trade volume grew 35.4% from January to September in dollar terms from last year (US exports to China jumped 43.5% in this period), and is expected to surpass the \$630 billion pre-trade war level in 2018 to touch \$700 billion.

Such growth testifies to the intertwining character of the world's two largest economies and underscores that China and the US are deepening economic and trade ties and getting back to a normal track since Biden took office. Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng told CGTN in an interview on Tuesday that China and the US are "an inseparable community of shared interests."

That said, the big question still hangs in the air: Why did Biden sound belligerent? Three — possibly, four — reasons can be attributed. First, post-Afghanistan, be it on Ukraine and the Black Sea or NATO expansion, the Biden Administration is flexing muscles. Second, the US feels exasperated that like at no time, its pathway is getting blocked as others keep testing its resolve. Look at North Korea's chutzpah.

For instance, things look as if the JCPOA is about to collapse and all that remains is "a perception of movement in the negotiations," as Trita Paris, the well-known American expert on Iran, has written, while a "shift to more coercion under an undefined Plan B" is fraught with grave dangers. [read more](#)

Ironically, even as Biden spoke, news appeared that a Chinese-Russian joint naval flotilla is displaying “freedom of navigation” by making a circle around Japan and sailing toward the US Navy base in Yokosuka, headquarters of the US Seventh Fleet, from which the US has been making provocative moves in the Taiwan Straits and South China Sea.

There is a taunting message here to the US and Japan, as many key military installations are located on the east side of Japan. A [Russian Defence Ministry](#) statement said, “The tasks of the joint patrolling were to demonstrate the state flags of Russia and China, maintain peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and also protect facilities of both countries’ maritime economic activity. During the patrol, the group of warships passed through the Tsugaru Strait (to western Pacific) for the first time.” [read more](#)

Third, Biden is fully well aware that China has no intentions to annex Taiwan through military means and his grandstanding wouldn’t change Beijing’s grand strategy. On the other hand, at a juncture when his political capital is depleting and public rating plummeting, it looks good to sound resolute and strong.

The reality is that Biden began his presidency with an ambitious agenda to remake the US economy that drew comparison with FDR’s New Deal. But, bogged down in negotiations and Senate rules, and coping with a schism within his own party, Biden has been forced to trim sails and his most ambitious proposals have been dropped, some of them indefinitely.

Meanwhile, as [Axios puts it](#), “Former President Trump is telling most anyone who’ll listen he will run again in 2024... Trump is the heart, soul and undisputed leader of the Republican Party and will easily win the nomination if he wants it, the polls make unmistakably clear.”

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Featured image: China-Russia naval exercise Joint Sea-2021 kicked off in Russia’s Peter the Great Bay on October 14 focusing on mine countermeasures, air defence, live-fire shooting, maneuvering & anti-submarine mission (Source: China Military)

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