



***THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION'S
PURSUIT OF "COLLECTIVE
STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY" TOWARD
TAIWAN***

BY RUPERT SCHULENBURG

Rupert Schulenburg (rupert@schulenburg.co.uk) is an analyst focusing on Indo-Pacific security, US alliances and force posture, as well as US-China competition. He holds an MPhil in International Security Studies from the University of St Andrews and a BA (Hons) in International Relations from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. He can be found on Twitter at [@R_Schulenburg](https://twitter.com/R_Schulenburg).

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Since the United States terminated its formal alliance with Taiwan in 1979, Washington has adhered to a strategy known as “strategic ambiguity.” The Taiwan Relations Act, which Congress passed in that same year, declares that the United States will “consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means...is considered a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States.” It additionally specifies that “the President and the Congress shall determine the appropriate action in response to any such danger.” This language resembles the United States’ formal alliance treaties with its Indo-Pacific allies, but falls short of an explicit defense commitment. In order to communicate to Beijing that Washington might defend the self-governing island, US presidents and officials have routinely referred to the US policy towards Taiwan as being rooted in the Taiwan Relations Act and made general references to its interest in peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. In the last few years, however, President Biden has explicitly declared on four occasions that the United States would defend Taiwan. That said, the White

House walked back Biden’s remarks each time saying that there had been no change in US policy, adding more ambiguity to “strategic ambiguity.”

On top of this shift, the Biden administration has pursued a new strategy that could be termed “collective strategic ambiguity.” Part of Washington’s effort to bolster deterrence across the Taiwan Strait has involved signaling to China that there could be a combined allied effort to defend the status quo. Since Biden entered office, Washington has released joint statements with 9 of its formal treaty allies—Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and the United Kingdom—that include a line in the vein of “we emphasize/underscore/reaffirm the importance of preserving peace and stability in/across the Taiwan Strait.” In June 2021, Kurt Campbell, the White House Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, indicated the Biden administration’s intent with these statements. Discussing the references to Taiwan in the US-Japan and the US-South Korea joint statements issued earlier that year, he declared that “we are seeking to take these concerted actions to send a clear message of resolve that we are determined to maintain that peace and stability” across the Taiwan Strait.

These joint statements have resulted from various types of diplomatic engagements at different levels of seniority, including bilateral leadership-level summits, bilateral 2+2 ministerial dialogues, trilateral ministerial meetings, and a G7 summit. Notably, some of these joint statements mentioned Taiwan for the first time ever or in decades. For instance, in April 2021, when Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide made an official visit to Washington, the leaders released a joint statement that referenced their shared interest in the “importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait,” marking the first time since 1969 that Taiwan was mentioned in a joint statement by the two countries. Next month in June, the G7 (made up of 6 NATO members and Japan) published a joint statement in which they referenced Taiwan for the very first time, declaring that they “underscore the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.” More recently, when Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. made an official visit to Washington in May, a US-Philippines joint statement

declared that “they affirm the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.”

Even outside of joint statements with the United States, leaders and senior officials of US allies have made comments suggesting that their countries would get involved in a Taiwan contingency. For instance, in July 2021, Japanese Deputy Prime Minister Aso Taro declared that “if a major incident occurs in Taiwan, it's not at all unusual to consider it an existential threat...In such a case, Japan and the United States will have to work together to defend Taiwan.” In November 2021, Australian Defense Minister Peter Dutton stated that it would be “inconceivable” for Australia not to join a US defense of Taiwan. In February this year, President Marcos Jr. stated that given “our geographical location,” it is “very hard to imagine a scenario where the Philippines will not somehow get involved” in a Taiwan conflict.

In addition to these messages, US allies in the Indo-Pacific are seeking to bolster their military capabilities in ways that could be used to help protect Taiwan. US defense cooperation is key to these efforts. For instance, through the AUKUS partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States that was formed in 2021, the United States will sell Australia three to five nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs), as well as share its nuclear propulsion technology to help Australia develop its own SSN. This will enable Australia to reach the waters around Taiwan to conduct operations such as anti-submarine warfare against China's subsurface fleet, which poses a threat to US carrier groups that would be key to defending Taiwan. Similarly, Japan announced plans this year to acquire counter-strike capabilities, which will include purchasing 400 intermediate-range Tomahawk cruise missiles from the United States. These would allow Japan to target China's missile launchers and command-and-control sites which would be key to an invasion of Taiwan. Moreover, the United States has engaged in planning with its allies over potential joint responses to a Taiwan contingency. For instance, the interim US Ambassador to Australia Michael Goldman claimed in April 2021 that the United States and Australia are engaged in “strategic planning” for a “range of

contingencies” of which Taiwan is an “important component.” Similarly, it was reported in December 2021 that the United States and Japan have drawn up a plan for a joint operation in response to a Taiwan contingency.

Speaking at the G7 summit in May this year, President Biden communicated a message of confidence that the United States and its allies are united in their willingness to defend the status quo. He declared that “there is clear understanding among most of our allies that, in fact, if China were to act unilaterally, there would be a response.” At the time of this remark, the United States had 34 formal treaty allies; 29 in NATO and five in the Indo-Pacific.

Despite this signaling, uncertainty remains over not just the type of support allies would provide, but over whether they would even provide support. Regarding potential contributions from NATO allies, for example, some analysts are deeply skeptical as to whether they could and would make consequential military contributions. There is even uncertainty among analysts as to whether US allies in the Indo-Pacific would provide any substantial military support. A recent report by the RAND Corporation assessed that just two US allies in the Indo-Pacific, Australia and Japan, could be expected to help the United States. Moreover, the authors conclude that this support would likely just lie in the realm of “limited support,” rather than “operations support,” which would entail providing the “full range of its capabilities.” As such, it is perhaps more realistic to assume that allied assistance would largely consist of a sanctions regime similar to that which Washington and its allies imposed on Russia in response to its invasion of Ukraine. However, the threat of sanctions may do little to deter China given that it likely expects sanctions and would have incorporated these expected costs into its calculus. Moreover, the costly worldwide economic fallout that would result from a conflict could render sanctions moot, meaning that US allies may see little point in sanctioning China.

To strengthen this collective signaling to China that there could be a combined effort to defend Taiwan, the United States should take the following actions. First, the United States should formulate

comprehensive plans with its allies that outline specific roles, whether that be logistical, reconnaissance, or combat, for how they might aid US forces in a contingency. Second, Washington and its allies should inform Beijing privately about the existence of some type of contingency planning, so as to mitigate China's propensity to retaliate against "provocations" to satisfy public nationalist sensitivities. Third, depending on the willingness of certain US allies to endure potential pushback from China, the United States and its allies could eventually begin to conduct joint exercises drilling these plans. Together, these actions could help convince China's leadership that US allies are serious about participating in a US defense of Taiwan, which could bolster deterrence against potential aggression. Moreover, in the event of a deterrence failure, coordinated planning could result in a more effective response that has a greater prospect of denying China its objective. That way, the United States and its allies can better ensure the continuation of peace across the Taiwan Strait.

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