

Prospects & Perspectives



Ten months into the Biden administration, it is abundantly clear that the United States will continue to strengthen ties with Taiwan and defend the island if ever attacked by China. Picture source: President Joe Biden, September 23, 2021, *Facebook*, <<https://www.facebook.com/POTUS/photos/368161905260344>>.

Biden Administration Shows Unwavering Support for Taiwan

By Derek Grossman

Ten months into the Biden administration, it is abundantly clear that the United States will continue to strengthen ties with Taiwan and defend the island if ever attacked by China. As I have previously [argued](#), the Biden administration has routinely signaled its willingness to do both of these things,

in effect [doubling-down](#) on Trump administration-era policy. Since I last wrote about this topic in February, the Biden administration, through both word and deed, has continued to demonstrate that Taipei should have no worries about Washington's commitment to the island.

Indeed, from its very first day in office, the Biden administration set the tone for a strong U.S.-Taiwan partnership. Biden's new Indo-Pacific Coordinator, Kurt Campbell, [invited](#) Taiwan's de facto ambassador to the United States, Hsiao Bi-khim, to the presidential inauguration ceremony. This was the first time a Taiwanese envoy had been invited since Washington switched diplomatic recognition away from Taiwan (Republic of China) for the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1979. During his Senate confirmation hearing in January to become Secretary of State, Antony Blinken [argued](#) in favor of keeping Trump-era guidance intact to end self-imposed contact limits with Taiwan. When Beijing later in the month [flew](#) up to then an historic number of warplanes into Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ), the Biden-run State Department [issued](#) a lengthy statement of staunch support for Taiwan, in part reading: "We urge Beijing to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan and instead engage in meaningful dialogue with Taiwan's democratically elected representatives.....the United States maintains its longstanding commitments as outlined in the Three Communiqués, the *Taiwan Relations Act* [TRA], and the Six Assurances our commitment to Taiwan is rock-solid."

In early March, the Biden administration [released](#) its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, which noted that "We will support Taiwan, a leading democracy and a critical economic and security partner, in line with longstanding American commitments." By mentioning Taiwan, the Biden team became only the second administration ever, after the Trump administration, to highlight Taiwan in a national security strategy, indicating the U.S. intent to ensure Taiwan's *de facto* sovereignty in the face of growing Chinese aggression.

During an extensive interview in April with Chuck Todd on "Meet the Press," Secretary Blinken [responded](#) to Todd's question about whether the U.S. was prepared to defend Taiwan from Chinese attack. In a clear moment of reassurance to Taipei, Blinken stated: "All I can tell you is we have a serious



commitment to Taiwan being able to defend itself and in that context, it would be a serious mistake for anyone to try to change that status quo by force.” On April 16, President Biden welcomed then-Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide to the White House, and in their joint statement they [underscored](#) “the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait”—a rare statement of support showing Taiwan that the U.S.-Japan alliance could be brought to bear in cross-Strait conflict, if the proper conditions were met. At the end of April, while at the Aspen Security Forum, Biden’s National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, [noted](#) that the Biden administration would “approach the Taiwan issue with steadiness, clarity and resolve with respect to our view that there should be no unilateral changes to the *status quo*.”

Then, in May, Blinken [called](#) for Taiwan to join the World Health Assembly in the face of Chinese opposition. In June, he [announced](#) the start of U.S.-Taiwan trade and investment talks, in effect reciprocating Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen’s decision to allow U.S. pork imports, which had long been a fraught issue in Taiwan. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in late July visited Singapore as part of a three-country Southeast Asia trip. While there, he [highlighted](#) U.S. commitments to Taiwan in his prepared remarks, and when specifically asked whether he was concerned about the potential for a Chinese attack on Taiwan, he responded: “Nobody—no one wants to see a unilateral change to the status quo with respect to Taiwan. And again, we are committed to supporting Taiwan and its capability to—to defend itself...”

In early August, the Biden administration [approved](#) its first Taiwan arms sale. Shortly thereafter, the Taliban reclaimed Afghanistan, and Chinese propaganda went into [overdrive](#) to convince Taiwan that the United States was an untrustworthy security partner. Beijing sought to convince Taipei (and the world) that Washington’s abandonment of Kabul was indicative of a particularly American approach to international affairs. During an interview with George Stephanopoulos of *ABC News*, Biden [argued](#) “We have made—kept every commitment. We made a sacred commitment to Article 5 that if in fact anyone were to invade or take action against our NATO allies, we would respond. Same with Japan, same with South Korea, same with—Taiwan. It’s not even comparable to talk about that.” Although a senior Biden administration official later [walked back](#) the president’s statement, noting that the U.S. “One China” policy—*i.e.*, only recognizing the PRC as “China” and



acknowledging its position on Taiwan—had not changed, it does offer a glimpse into Biden’s thinking on the matter. In essence, Biden considers Taiwan, as a like-minded democratic partner under threat from authoritarian China, to be on par with official U.S. allies Japan and South Korea. That should not be lost on Taiwanese leaders. A few days later, National Security Adviser Sullivan [stressed](#) that Taiwan has nothing to worry about in the context of Afghanistan. He said: “We believe our commitments to our allies and partners are sacrosanct and always have been. We believe our commitment to Taiwan and to Israel remains as strong as it’s ever been.”

Secretary Blinken [reinforced](#) Sullivan’s point in mid-September during testimony before the House, stating in response to a question about whether the U.S. is still committed to Ukraine and Taiwan post-Afghanistan: “Absolutely, we stand by our commitments to both countries.” As a side note, this was the second time Blinken had referred to Taiwan as a “country” since the beginning of his tenure. The Biden administration has further [supported](#) Taiwan’s application to become a member of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTTP), a multilateral trade framework. China has predictably opposed Taiwan’s inclusion and has applied for membership itself.

When China deployed an unprecedented number of nearly 150 warplanes into Taiwan’s ADIZ starting on the PRC’s National Day, on October 1, and stretching through October 4, the Biden administration [released](#) a similar statement from late January, reaffirming its “rock solid” commitment to Taiwan. On October 5, President Biden [stated](#) that he had an “agreement” with Xi on Taiwan, which the White House later [clarified](#) to mean the TRA. Sullivan also [met](#) with Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi in Switzerland on October 6, in part to bring down the temperature in cross-Strait relations.

Finally, it is important to highlight that throughout its time in office, the Biden administration has demonstrated U.S. military resolve to defend Taiwan if needed by routinely dispatching warships to transit the Strait. To date, the U.S. has sent ten warships, one for every month thus far including most a joint U.S.-Canadian transit late last week. Biden is persisting in a Trump administration trend which saw 13 such transits in 2020.



All of these positive words and deeds from the Biden administration should assuage any remaining concerns Taiwan might have about American security commitments, particularly since the fall of Afghanistan and Beijing's stepped up military aggression toward the island. That said, there is ample reason for Taipei to continue to be vigilant of trends in U.S.-China relations and the potential implications for Taiwan. As I have [discussed](#) previously, the Biden administration has gone from a seeming no holds barred "extreme competition" against China, to more recently an approach that seeks "guardrails" in the relationship. It remains to be seen whether the Biden administration might seek cooperation with Beijing in exchange for a softer approach on Taiwan, most notably for example on climate change. This is highly unlikely, however, given the robust track record the Biden administration has in supporting Taiwan and the continued deterioration of U.S.-China ties.

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