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BY ROBERT BUZZANCO
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“One China,” Taiwan, U.S. Power, and Biden Saber-Rattling into a Crisis



Photograph Source: The White House – Public Domain

While the Ukraine-Russia war rages on, President Joseph Biden has set his sights on preparing for a much bigger conflict—an economic and political, and potentially military, war against the Peoples Republic of China (PRC). Over the past several months tension between the U.S. and China has escalated rapidly to a host of issues as seemingly, some trivial and some deadly serious.

The U.S. has been on a collision course with China for some time, especially since the 2016 Trump campaign put a bullseye on the PRC because of its big balance-of-trade

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surplus due to cheap labor and the comparative price of its currency, and then Trump upped the ante when he placed tariffs on the PRC and began a virulent anti-China (and anti-Chinese) campaign when COVID broke out.

Biden hasn't diverted from Trump's script. Even though the PRC has not materially supported Russia's war against Ukraine, neither has Beijing condemned it and has continued its economic relations with Moscow. In August 2022, then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi ramped up tensions with a visit to Taiwan, which provoked Beijing to hold military exercises in the South China Sea and suspend and cancel military talks and cooperative agreements with the U.S.

More recently, a Chinese "spy balloon" drifted into U.S. air space—it went off course according to Beijing—and the U.S. finally shot it down following media hysterics about it, but more seriously Secretary of State Anthony Blinken canceled a planned visit to talk with President Xi Jinping in Beijing. At the same time, the COVID issue was reignited as various government agencies and congressional committees began to claim "proof" of Wuhan Lab Leak theories and hold hearings and ramp up anti-China sentiment. And, above it all, remained the issue of Taiwan.

Taiwan is an island off the coast of China that has been a global hotspot since the end of World War II, and American politicians and media are escalating their rhetoric about the threat the PRC poses to the "independent" country of Taiwan.

Taiwan was already deeply contested by the U.S. in the early Cold War years. After the communist victory in the Chinese Civil War and PRC intervention in Korea, the United States staked its prestige, and the 7th Fleet, on the defense of Taiwan, an offshore island to which Jiang Jieshi retreated with much of the Chinese treasury and kept his Guomintang regime. To the Americans, Taiwan's existence involved a commitment, real and symbolic, to prevent PRC control over all Chinese islands and to let the communists know that the United States would not be pushed out of the Pacific—a foundation of U.S. policy since the Open Door notes.

This commitment to Taiwan, however, brought great peril as in 1955 and again in 1958 the Americans and PRC verged on war. The Guomintang had kept control over the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu, both close to the communist mainland. To the PRC the islands constituted a threat because Jiang was staging commando raids against the PRC and could potentially use his sizable U.S.-supplied arsenal to harass the mainland. As a result, Mao Zedong, to preempt a Guomintang attack and stake his own claim to the islands, established a blockade and began shelling Quemoy and Matsu. The U.S. came to

Taiwan's defense. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles would not pledge action to restore Jiang's rule over all of China, but threatened strikes against the PRC if its forces threatened Taiwan.

To Dulles, the United States had "to be prepared to take a risk of war with China if we are going to stay in the Far East . . . If we are not willing to take that risk, all right, let's make that decision and we get out and we make our defense in California." Obviously, it was preposterous to claim that China would control the Pacific all the way to California, but the United States used such claims to take action. Congress enacted the "Formosa Straights Resolution" giving the president authority to use force to protect Taiwan.

Finally, the crisis passed. Though some military advisors urged the president to attack with "low yield" nuclear weapons that would have caused millions of casualties, Eisenhower took a less aggressive approach and had U.S. Navy ships run the blockade and the PRC—not unlike Joseph Stalin in Iran or Berlin—backed down. At the same time the United States did make it clear to Jiang that it would not get involved in another civil war in China should he decide to reunite the country by invading the PRC. Unlike in Korea, a war in Asia had been averted.

Now, we're seeing a replay of the Dulles years. Military officials like Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday say U.S. needs a "fight tonight" posture toward China; "In my mind, that has to be a 2022 or 2023 window... to field the most lethal force that we can." Congress has held multiple hearings sounding the alarms over Chinese "aggression" and demanded U.S. war preparations, and to that end in December 2022 passed the "Taiwan Fellowship Act" to send \$10 billion in "security assistance" and weapons to Taiwan, and later that month the White House authorized a \$180 million arms sale to Taipei. Just this past week the commander of Pacific Air Forces, General Kenneth Wilsbach said that "'sinking ships is a main objective of not only PACAF [Pacific Air Forces] but really anyone that's going to be involved in a conflict like this" and specifically noted Chinese actions after Pelosi's trip.

But the reality is much different than the rhetoric from Biden, congress, and journalists regarding a potential crisis in the Pacific.

To begin, Taiwan's status is not as simple as U.S. officials are presenting it, which is why the Pelosi visit and Blinken cancellation are a big deal. Since 1979, the U.S. has maintained a "One China" policy toward the PRC and Taiwan. Americans "acknowledged" (they did not use the word "recognize") that the government in Beijing is the government of China and that Taiwan is part of it. According to the U.S. Department

of State, America has a “longstanding one China policy” guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, three joint communiques between Washington and Beijing, and six assurances. In those documents the U.S. stated that “we oppose any unilateral changes to the status quo . . . we do not support Taiwan independence; and we expect cross-Strait differences to be resolved by peaceful means.”

So the history of American interests in Taiwan have been a point of contention for decades, but there are diplomatic agreements and international law spelling out the relationship in ways different than the U.S. now claims. And the recent aid packages, with significant levels of military aid and weapons, along with the constant saber-rattling and hysterics about the putative Chinese threat are violations of that U.S. policy and international law. Imagine if the Chinese government sent representatives to Puerto Rico to discuss its relationship with the U.S. and then began funneling arms to the government in San Juan . . . and that’s basically how the PRC views U.S. actions toward Taiwan.

More than that, however, is the reality that the U.S. has a significant preponderance of power compared to China, so claims of Chinese aggression and malicious intent are highly exaggerated (not unlike during the Quemoy/Matsu crises).

Indeed, there is a significant disparity in power and capability between the two nations, which has to be a principal factor in any considerations of the conflict between Washington and Beijing. Economically, China has clearly ascended over the past decade, yet still remains behind the U.S. in nominal GDP, \$26 trillion to \$18 trillion (China’s purchasing power parity is higher due to differences in standards of living between the two countries). China’s manufacturing output has surpassed America’s but much of that is in the field of consumer goods, and its market is principally in Asia, though it does run a trade balance with the U.S.

In military strength and capability, however, the gap is much higher and more important. The U.S. military budget is now close to \$900 billion a year, more than three times more than China’s. China clearly has a military personnel advantage, but the prospects of a big land war in Asia aren’t the issue at all. America also has 5400 nuclear weapons compared to 350; and about 750 overseas bases in 85 countries, including bases all over the Pacific, where China has one foreign base (in Djibouti) and 6-7 other man-made bases in the South China Sea.

In air power the U.S. dominates, with over 13,000 aircraft to China’s 3300, 650 aerial tankers to 4, 5600 helicopters to 900, and about 1000 attack helicopters to 281. China has a larger overall naval fleet, but the U.S. has about double the number of destroyers, with

close to 100 to the PRC's 50, and there is a huge carrier gap, with the U.S. holding a 20 to 5 advantage (11 aircraft carriers to 2, and 9 helicopter carriers to 3). The U.S. also has 123 military satellites to China's 68.

In oil production, a crucial element in any hostilities, Americans produce about 5-6 billion barrels of oil and about 2-2.5 billion barrels of natural gas yearly, both numbers about 4.5 times larger than Chinese production.

China is surely a large and powerful state, and its economic rivalry with the U.S. has intensified over the years. Yet the idea that the U.S. has to protect Taiwan from a Chinese takeover or that we should prepare for a war against the PRC is badly overstated and makes the world much less safe. China has engaged in military exercises nearby, which is nothing out of the ordinary, but otherwise has not taken moves toward incorporating or even threatening Taiwan.

According to both official U.S. state policy and international agreements, Beijing is the government in both China and Taiwan and the Chinese have not taken steps to alter that arrangement. If American policy toward Taiwan provokes hostilities against China, the U.S. would have an overwhelming military advantage. So the Chinese, no matter their power or what one thinks of the government in Beijing, would be ill-served to incite a violent conflict with the U.S., especially when they have had such economic success without any wars for decades now.

Now complicating the U.S. response have been China's recent offer to broker talks between Ukraine and Russia, which the Americans rejected, and the announcement a few days ago that the PRC was brokering a Détente between America's ally Saudi Arabia and its enemy Iran, which would be a blow to Biden's continued overtures to MBS and sanctions and war-mongering toward Tehran. Again, China's use of "soft power" is cornering the U.S.

Balloons, conspiracies over the origins of COVID, fear-mongering over a potential Chinese role in Ukraine (which the PRC denies, and is without evidence), and hysterical posturing over Taiwan are clearly creating a more intense and dangerous Cold War with China, but the threat of and capability to do harm from the PRC is much lower than the Biden administration and its supporters are claiming. America's national security is not threatened by a nation about 8000 miles away with regional interests, its own economic/pandemic problems, and a markedly smaller military establishment than our own.

There is much in the world to focus on, particularly the war in Ukraine, a global economic slump, and global environmental crises, while in the U.S. we have to confront inflation, the remnants of a pandemic, a broken healthcare system, crumbling infrastructure, massive student debts, growing homelessness, bank failures, and a host of other crises. Biden's attention would be better focused on the streets of American cities or the climate crisis (or the environmental crisis in East Palestine, Ohio) than in spending billions to intimidate rivals of the U.S. and trying to trigger a military conflict with a country on the other side of the Pacific.

Robert Buzzanco is co-host Green and Red Podcast, Professor of History University of Houston, and author of *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era*, *Vietnam and the Transformation of American Life*, and many other books and articles on American foreign policy and history. He blogs at <https://afflictthecomfortable.org>

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