

19 August 2021

America's Taiwan Dilemma



Jonathan Clarke read Classics and Chinese at Oxford, but the eccentricities of the Diplomatic Service took him to postings in Germany, Zimbabwe and Washington. After taking early retirement in 1992, he settled in Washington where he has written three books about US foreign policy. He is active as a commentator and consultant on US affairs.

At about this time in any new Administration, foreign policy opinion-mongers start trying to discern a “doctrine” about this or that aspect of the President’s policy. With China almost single-handedly dominating the agenda at gatherings like the recent G7 summit, it is not surprising there is open season on trying to boil down President Biden’s approach into a neat template. The temptation is all the more present in that the current US national security team, from President Biden downwards, is among the most experienced, knowledgeable and articulate in recent US diplomatic history. Many of the leading figures like National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, Asia Coordinator Kurt Campbell and NSC China Director Rush Doshi have published lengthy articles or substantial books foreshadowing their thinking. They are presumptively regarded as thinking in doctrines.

Expectations were therefore high that, after the chaotic years of the Trump Administration which radically upset the consensus on China that had endured since the Nixon/Kissinger era but completely failed to fashion a coherent alternative posture, the more process-oriented officials leading on China under Biden would deliver a more understandable template.

With the best will in the world and allowing for the fact policy toward China is a massively complex affair, these expectations remain largely unfulfilled. High-level meetings between US and Chinese officials have so far been confined to two occasions: Secretary of State Tony Blinken’s meeting within his counterparts in Alaska in March and Deputy Secretary Wendy Sherman’s session in Tianjin in July. Biden is not scheduled to meet his opposite number Xi Jinping until the G20 summit in Rome in October.

Neither of these meetings went well. By all accounts both sides came spoiling for a fight and duly lived up to the billing. Blinken and Sherman read from a long list of US grievances — human rights, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, a level playing field for trade, etc. The Chinese side reciprocated to Sherman with their own list of demands. Washington has come up with the catchy phrase that US relations with China will be “collaborative, competitive or confrontational” as the situation demands. However, what remains absent, at least so far, is much sense of a “roadmap”

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

or “endgame” under which the US side is making clear what changes in Chinese behavior will be sufficient to return relations to a more stable state of affairs. For example, the Biden Administration has continued the Trump trade tariffs but, as noted by its own Government Accountability Office, has offered little explanation, let alone precise protocols of how these might be modified. The result is confusion for American and business leaders alike. The latter are campaigning actively for the resumption of trade talks with China.

Nowhere is this more apparent than with regard to Taiwan. This now features regularly in media commentary as the “most dangerous place in the world” – or at least it was doing so until the extraordinary events of recent days in Afghanistan. Top American officers in the Indo-Pacific Command lose few opportunities to highlight the dangers in the Taiwan Strait and to call for additional resources. The US is breathing new life into regional arrangements like the “Quad” with Australia, India and Japan. A British aircraft carrier strike group led by *HMS Elizabeth* is currently on exercises in the region with substantial US naval support.

A key reason for this tension is deep uncertainty on both the US and Chinese sides about the other’s intentions. There are many in Washington who argue openly that the balance of power in the region is shifting in China’s favor — despite contrary assertions from US regional commanders, a number of war fighting scenarios have shown the US as failing to prevent a Chinese trans-Strait invasion. While there are no serious calls for pre-emptive US action, there are heavyweight voices who say that the US should abandon its “strategic ambiguity” over Taiwan — under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act the US is bound to provide Taiwan with the means of self-defense like the recently agreed howitzer package, but is not obligated itself to intervene to interdict a Chinese invasion. That is, there is no equivalent of the NATO Article 5 guarantee — and to declare that it will come to Taiwan’s defense in the event of Chinese aggression.

Given that a declaration of this kind would clearly be seen in Beijing as highly provocative, the Biden Administration has hesitated to take this step. For that matter, despite a consistently more belligerent rhetorical tone, so did Trump. The result is that US Taiwan policy continues to occupy an uneasy half-way house. On the one hand, Taiwan’s signal democratic and economic advances over the past thirty years coupled with the democratic regression in China itself have clearly lent legitimacy to the island’s claims to be recognized as an independent sovereignty. In an ideal world, there is little doubt that this is Washington’s preferred option. However, the constraints are powerful. The US remains committed under the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué to a “One China” policy. While the US may over the years have tiptoed away from the Communiqué’s full rigor, this remains the formal state of affairs for US-China relations over Taiwan.

With an unlikely but not impossible worst case scenario of a great power nuclear exchange if things go awry, no one should underestimate the extreme delicacy of the task involved. This is why, for all the political, military and moral arguments for removing the ambiguity about the US commitment to come to Taiwan’s aid and thereby disincentivizing a miscalculation by Beijing, there are persistent voices behind the scenes in Washington who argue that to spell things out would compound rather than alleviate tensions. Given that this seems to accord with the mood on Taiwan itself where public opinion is consistently more mellow that a peaceful settlement will be forthcoming, this may be what transpires. It won’t suit those who prefer strategic clarity or

taking a moral stand against a bully, but, the argument goes, it may buy the world a little more time in the hope that “something will turn up.” A thin reed? Post the Afghanistan debacle, Washington will need Beijing to keep the Taliban in check. Perhaps this may help smooth the relationship.

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

The Ambassador Partnership LLP is a **unique international** partnership of former Ambassadors with unrivalled networks of influence in almost 100 countries. We provide discreet services to resolve your international problems and to improve your capacity to operate effectively wherever you need to.

We are **dispute resolution** specialists and **political risk** experts.

To discuss how we can help you to manage your political risk please call:

Tracey Stewart, Partnership Secretary

+44 (0) 7950 944 010

tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com

www.ambassadorllp.com