

US President Biden's latest Taiwan gaffe stokes tensions with Beijing

PRESIDENT Joseph R. Biden is seeking to show US resolve against China, yet an ill-timed gaffe on Taiwan risks undermining his bid to curb Beijing's growing influence over the region.

Whether intentional or not, Mr. Biden provoked China with a vow to defend Taiwan militarily. After saying that US policy on Taiwan "had not changed at all" during a news conference in Tokyo, he then answered "yes" when asked if the US would act "militarily" to defend the island in the event of a Chinese attack.

"It's a commitment we made," Mr. Biden added.

White House officials later walked back the remark, saying the president was only promising US aid to help Taiwan defend itself in the event of hostilities. That would be akin to what the US is doing in Ukraine, where Mr. Biden has vowed not to send troops.

"The policy has not changed at all, and I stated that when I made my statement," Mr. Biden said Tuesday when pressed by reporters to clarify the US position.

The president's remark nonetheless roiled Mr. Biden's first trip to Asia since taking office and upstaged his roll-out of a new strategic framework for the region. It also cast new light on Washington's decades-old approach of "strategic ambiguity" about whether US forces would defend Taiwan against China, while also adopting a "One China" policy under which Taiwan isn't recognized as an independent country.

It's a complicated policy, criticized both by Beijing and some US lawmakers, that has tripped up Mr. Biden and some of his predecessors in the past. Mr. Biden has made similar missteps on Taiwan at least twice as president, but in making the remark so close to Chinese territory and in the context of the Ukraine war, the impact was amplified.

Although the latest episode is unlikely to fundamentally alter the US-China relationship, it highlights the current tension around Taiwan at a time when Chinese officials have expressed concern about American efforts to box in

their country. And Mr. Biden's remark also opened him to criticism by domestic political opponents who have sought to portray the president, 79, as infirm and unfit for the job.

SEEKING 'CLARITY'

Senator Tom Cotton, an Arkansas Republican, said that Mr. Biden's comments represented a shift toward "strategic clarity" on Taiwan and that the president should outline a clear US commitment to defend the island "in clear, deliberate remarks from a prepared text."

"Otherwise, the continued ambiguity and uncertainty will likely provoke the Chinese communists without deterring them — the worst of both worlds," he said.

Indeed, one Chinese official suggested that Mr. Biden's comment may have been deliberate, aimed at testing Beijing's response to a policy change. The official, who asked not to be identified describing internal Chinese government discussions, portrayed such a potential US approach as dangerous.

China's leaders have closely watched the Ukraine crisis unfold, taking note of Russia's political and economic isolation as well as the massive international support for Kyiv as they consider their posture toward Taiwan.

And Mr. Biden spoke in Tokyo, the capital of a major Chinese rival, on a trip to strengthen the US alliance with new, Washington-friendly leaders of Japan and South Korea, two countries already unfriendly toward Beijing.

Mr. Biden's previous comments about US support for Taiwan happened during domestic television interviews.

"The level of concern in Beijing about US policy toward Taiwan is already very high, and this episode will further heighten that concern, especially since it was said in Tokyo," said Bonnie Glaser, Asia program director at the German Marshall Fund of the US.

While Mr. Biden's intent may have been to deter a Chinese attack on Taiwan, "his messaging is confusing and may undermine deterrence," Ms. Glaser added. The

US's policy of "strategic ambiguity" on Taiwan, which Mr. Biden has repeatedly backed during his five-decade Washington career, is intended to minimize the risk of a direct military confrontation with China.

White House officials said after Mr. Biden's news conference that the president stands behind the "One China" policy and its commitment under the Taiwan Relations Act to provide the island with the military means to defend itself. Officials said that by answering "yes" when asked if the US would defend Taiwan, the president meant the US would supply military equipment to the island, not send troops.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin nonetheless denounced Mr. Biden's comments on Monday and said the US should refrain from sending the wrong message on Taiwan, "to avoid causing grave damage to bilateral relations."

Although Mr. Biden may have sought to evoke a Ukraine-like effort to keep Taipei supplied in the event of an invasion, the island would present an entirely different strategic challenge. It doesn't share a land border with American allies, as does Ukraine, meaning China could more easily blockade its ports and airports to prevent resupply.

Mr. Biden's comments set off a now-familiar cycle for White House aides, who have become accustomed to cleaning up the president's remarks on world hot spots. After Mr. Biden declared in Poland that Russian President Vladimir Putin "cannot remain in power," his advisers insisted the president wasn't advocating regime change.

And Mr. Biden told reporters that lawyers at the State Department might feel differently after he labeled Russia's invasion of Ukraine a "genocide."

Mr. Biden previously said the US would come to Taiwan's defense during an ABC News interview in August and in a CNN town hall in October. The US abandoned its post-Chinese civil war position that it would defend Taiwan in the late 1970s when it normalized relations with Beijing.

Climate action on CO2 emissions alone won't prevent extreme warming

TO CONTROL climate change, the world must go beyond cutting carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions and curb lesser-known pollutants such as nitrous oxide playing a key role in warming the planet, new research suggests.

Decades of global climate discussions have focused on CO2 emissions, which are most abundant in the atmosphere. The common goal of reaching "net-zero" emissions refers most often to CO2 emissions alone.

Over the last year, more than 100 countries have pledged a 30% cut by 2030 to emissions from methane, another carbon-based greenhouse gas that is far more powerful at trapping heat than CO2. Most of those countries have yet to say how they will meet that deadline.

Meanwhile, scant attention has been paid to other warming pollutants, including black carbon, also called soot, which absorbs radiative heat, as well as hydrofluorocarbons found in refrigerants, and nitrous oxides. But together with methane, these pollutants are responsible for about half of the warming seen today, according to the study published on Monday in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

"When we're worried about the near-term ... we need to look at the other non-CO2 climate forcers," said study co-author Durwood Zaelke, president of the Institute for Governance & Sustainable Development in Washington DC.

This is especially important as countries pursue CO2 reductions through cutting back on their use of fossil fuels, still considered the main contributor to global warming. Using fewer fossil fuels will result in less air pollution, including airborne sulphates that actually counteract some climate change by reflecting solar radiation away from Earth.

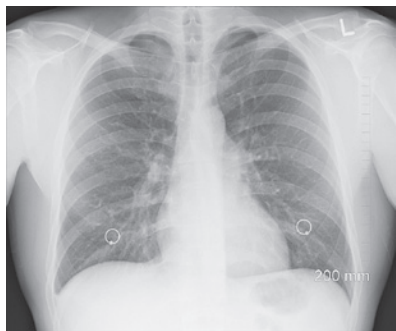
Scientists say these sulphates are masking about 0.5 degree Celsius of warming that would be seen without them, meaning aggressive climate action could see temperatures temporarily jump higher — unless the lesser pollutants are tackled as well.

A path of decarbonization alone would see the planet breach 2 degrees Celsius of warming beyond pre-industrial temperatures by 2045, the study finds.

Conversely, reining in all climate pollutants together could see the world begin to avoid some warming as early as 2030 and halve the rate of warming between 2030 and 2050, the findings suggest. — Reuters

AI SmartScan analyzes X-rays in minutes

By Bronte H. Lacsamana
Reporter



A PLATFORM that uses artificial intelligence (AI) can analyze X-ray and CT (computerized tomography) scans within minutes, allowing patients to consult a doctor immediately.

Unveiled on Monday by technology solutions provider Advanced Abilities and healthcare maintenance organization Maxicare, AI SmartScan taps a database of around six million images to detect up to 25 chest pathologies, including tuberculosis, pneumonia, COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019), smoker's disease, enlarged heart, and lung cancer.

"We are able to eliminate so many factors that can add to a patient's distress. In that sense, we are able to

democratize patient care through an innovative solution that will invariably reduce hospitalization and rescue the already overburdened healthcare infrastructure in the country," said Christy P. Cruz, chief technology officer of Advanced Abilities, at the launch.

The system, which allows healthcare professionals to give faster medical advice backed up by data, is the first of its kind in the Philippines, the startup said.

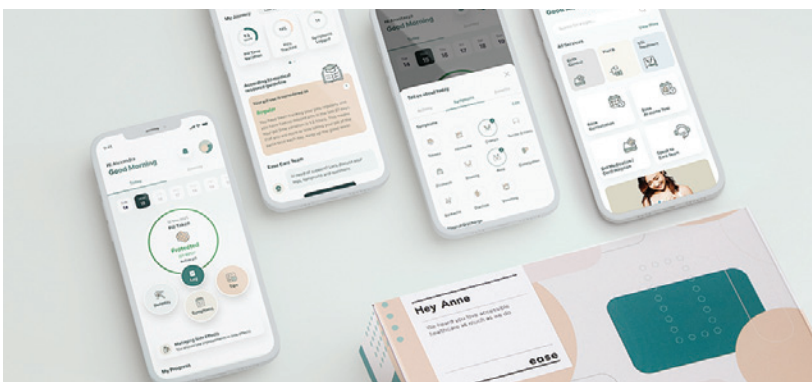
"We figured that one of the keys in limiting the contagion is rapid diagnosis. Through the quick end-to-end health screening solution provided by the AI SmartScan, we are able to complete the process even before health risks become aggravated," said Christian S. Argos, chief executive officer of HMO Maxicare.

AI SmartScan is available to Maxicare members at clinics in Eton Centris in Quezon City, Ayala North Exchange in Makati City, and in Cebu.

"Through our partnership, we aim to boost healthcare infrastructure in the country for the benefit of the people. Technological advances, after all, particularly artificial intelligence, hold an enormous position in saving the lives of millions of people around the world," said Advanced Abilities chief executive officer Angelo Antonio Buendia in a statement.

Women's health app partners with TikTok docs

By Patricia B. Mirasol
Reporter



EASE Healthcare, a women's health platform, has partnered with doctor influencers on TikTok to raise awareness on contraception in the Philippines.

"A challenge we faced at the start was debunking misconceptions about women's health," said Guadalupe Lazaro, co-founder of the Singapore-headquartered Ease, in an e-mail. "We ran into comments from users on social media asking whether the pill would make them infertile (it doesn't!) — that made us quickly realize we needed to ... bust these myths."

Launched locally this March, the Ease app offers teleconsultation on women's health issues and the discreet delivery of birth control pills, condoms, and pregnancy tests. Most of its 12,000 Filipino users are 18–35 years old. Ease tapped doctors on TikTok, including Dr. Michael Christian A. Virata, Dr. Lyien Patricia L. Pascual, and Dr. Riccia Angela Cruz-Tan to fill in education gaps beginning this May.

"We want to create a safe space for women and men alike to talk about their reproductive and health issues comfortably — with no hesitation or judgment," said Dr. Pascual.

These issues include irregular or delayed menstruation, which warrants a checkup; sexually transmitted infections (STIs); and common gynecological diseases.

Modes of contraception and surrounding misconceptions will also be tackled. There's a notion, for example, that the pill is 100% effective in preventing pregnancy, it isn't: it's only about 91% effective in real life.

Aside from combating misinformation, Ease aims to address inconvenience, high costs, and stigma.

Recent partnerships include "It's Okay to Delay," a social media campaign on family planning developed by the United States Agency for International Development and the Commission on Population and Development (PopCom);

and an Instagram giveaway from personal care brands Nala Women, Mink Intimate, and lana.ph.

According to PopCom, family planning use among Filipino women was sustained, with 8 million users in 2020 from 7.6 million users in 2019, based on data from the Department of Health's Field Health Services Information System.

Teenage pregnancy and STIs are areas of concern. One in every 10 Filipinas of child-bearing age is a teenager, based on data from the Certificates of Live Births submitted by the Local Civil Registry Offices from 2011 to 2014. Meanwhile, there is little available data on the number of STI cases in the Philippines except for HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), in part because of the stigma associated with STIs.

OPINION

Stemming the HIV epidemic

May 15 marked the start of the country's week-long observance of the International AIDS Candlelight Memorial. This annual event is an opportune time to remember the many lives lost to AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) and honor those who dedicated their lives to helping people living with and affected by HIV (human immunodeficiency virus).

The Philippines had the fastest growing HIV epidemic in the Asia-Pacific region with the highest percent increase (174%) of new HIV infections between 2010 and 2017, according to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

Unfortunately, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has worsened the HIV epidemic in the country. In "The Philippine HIV crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic: a worsening crisis" published in November 2021 in *Public Health*, Dr. Rowalt Alibudbud cited Department of Health (DoH) data showing that HIV testing decreased by 61% and treatment initiation dipped by 28% in 2020. Moreover, only 70% of the estimated 111,400 Filipinos living with HIV in 2020 are aware of their status, while only 61% are on life-saving antiretroviral therapy (ART).

Dr. Alibudbud identified lower accessibility, delivery, and financing of HIV-related health services and programs in the community as factors during the pandemic that contributed to the country's state of HIV.

Accessibility to a testing center and delivery of HIV-related health services were hindered by travel restrictions and limited mass transportation; and financing of HIV-related programs were limited by the re-appropriation and re-alignment of the government's budget to pandemic control measures.

Decreased HIV testing and treatment could result in an increase of full-blown AIDS cases in the country, warned Dr. Alibudbud. He also pointed out the HIV/AIDS & ART Registry report that 105 pregnant women were diagnosed with HIV in 2020, the first time in the past decade that this statistic reached more than a hundred. If left unchecked, the country's HIV crisis may shift from its concentration in MSM (men who have sex with men) into the general population, he said.

In "HIV crisis in the Philippines: urgent actions needed" published in February 2019 in *The Lancet*, HIV researcher Dr. Louie Mar Gangcuangco outlined six interventions to curb the country's HIV epidemic.

First, reduce the stigma by integrating sexual health and gender-sensitivity education in school curriculums. Second, increase HIV awareness among healthcare professionals by emphasizing the importance of early HIV detection and enhancing knowledge in HIV management in medical and nursing curriculums.

Third, distribute pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) on a national scale as part of comprehensive HIV prevention programs. Fourth, use integrase inhibitors. Fifth, empower primary care physicians to provide HIV care. Lastly, with injecting drug users accounting for 4% of HIV cases in the country, address substance abuse and promote mental health.

Two decades after the country's first HIV/AIDS legislation was passed, Republic Act 11166 or the Philippine HIV and AIDS Policy Act, was enacted in 2018. It lowers the age of a person to avail of free HIV testing without parents' consent to 15 from 18 years old; provides free and accessible anti-retroviral treatment and medication for opportunistic infections to

all people living with HIV (PLHIVs) enrolled in the program; mandates the development of a benefit package for PLHIVs that includes coverage for in-patient and out-patient medical and diagnostic services,

including medication and treatment; development of a benefit package for the unborn and the newborn child from infected mothers; sets a reference price for HIV services in government hospitals; and mandates the development of a mechanism for orphans living with HIV to access the HIV benefit package.

The research-based biopharmaceutical industry is actively engaged in a number of initiatives to improve screening, timely diagnosis and access to treatment for HIV, awareness raising and education to halt transmission and reduce stigma, and research and development (R&D) of new medicines and vaccines to combat this disease.

Our industry is developing 44 medicines and vaccines for HIV infection, focusing on improved treatment regimens, more effective therapies, and preventative vaccines. These include a first-in-class medicine intended to prevent HIV from breaking through the cell membrane, and a cell therapy that modifies a patient's own cells in an attempt to make them resistant to HIV.

Over the past 35 years, HIV/AIDS has gone from being a death sentence to a chronic, manageable disease thanks in large part to advances in biopharmaceutical research that has developed more than 20 antiretroviral therapies. R&D for new treatments and vaccines will provide long-term benefits to help halt the global AIDS epidemic.

TEODORO B. PADILLA is the executive director of Pharmaceutical and Healthcare Association of the Philippines (PHAP), which represents the biopharmaceutical medicines and vaccines industry in the country. Its members are at the forefront of research and development efforts for COVID-19 and other diseases that affect Filipinos.

