

Australia in a no-win situation if Taiwan crisis escalates

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Tensions are escalating between the US and China and the recent provocation over Taiwan on the part of both powers could well be a tipping point. Joe Biden will face an agonising choice if Beijing does poke the bear and call America's bluff.

With US-China relations darkening into a new Cold War, it is increasingly likely that Taiwan may prove a flashpoint in the crisis. And if that happens, that conflict has a real chance of becoming a nuclear war. This is especially so because neither China nor the US will be able to inflict a decisive victory over the other using conventional means.

Indeed, the risk of nuclear war today is probably higher than at any time since the darkest days of the last Cold War.

For 50 years, both powers have accepted a fragile peace towards Taiwan but recent events have strained that relationship almost to breaking point.

Last weekend, US carrier forces showed the flag in the South China Sea; at the same time Beijing launched provocative air manoeuvres around Taiwan.

While neither side wants a war, neither wants to be the first to back down. But the danger is that they will miscalculate one another's resolve.

Beijing has long claimed Taiwan as its rightful territory and provoking a military confrontation with the US is one way to call America's bluff.

Beijing could provoke a crisis by, for example, conducting an air and sea blockade of Taiwan. Beijing certainly has the military power for that to succeed. But China would be taking a huge gamble by causing such a provocation.

America could either decide to fight back or not. But when war looms two hard questions force themselves forward: who wins, and at what cost?

America could not easily win or even win at all a full-scale war against China. The US Navy is no longer unchallengeable in the Western Pacific. China's forces now have the ability to find and destroy the ships and aircraft that America employs to project power into the Western Pacific. America's iconic aircraft carriers would be especially at risk in such a confrontation.

So if war comes, America would probably face massive losses in ships and aircraft, and achieve at best a grim and perilous stalemate.

However, if it were to use nuclear weapons then the game changes. America still declares that it is willing to cross the nuclear threshold if its conventional forces cannot win. Threatening to do this might seem the only way America could prevail in a fight over Taiwan.

However, China has nuclear weapons too, and it would meet US nuclear threats with counter-threats against America, sparking a nightmare crisis with huge scope for miscalculation.

China's nuclear arsenal might be small, but it could kill a million Americans, and only a fool would bet that China would blink first.

The other scenario is that America does not come to Taiwan's defence. However, this would fatally undermine US leadership in East Asia. China would take over as the leading regional power.

Everything depends on how China's leaders assess Joe Biden. Would he fight for Taiwan or not? We hear a lot from Washington about standing by Taiwan and defending democracy, and it is easy to assume that Biden would fight when America's whole position in Asia is at stake.

But it is not nearly that simple. With the stakes so high and forces so vast, any conflict would swiftly escalate into the biggest war by far since 1945. That would clearly be devastating for both countries.

Unlike his predecessor, Joe Biden can recognize these risks and weigh them responsibly. But if a crisis looms he would face a truly agonizing choice. If he failed to defend Taiwan he would be abandoning US leadership in East Asia and opening the door to Chinese regional hegemony. If he tried to defend Taiwan he would most likely plunge America into a catastrophe that would destroy its regional leadership anyway.

Faced with this choice, there is a real chance that Joe Biden would let East Asia go, in order to spare America. This is exactly what Xi Jinping hopes – and perhaps expects – Biden would do. But who can say that Biden would be wrong in making this choice for his country, as the lesser of two great evils?

And where would Australia stand? We want America to keep leading in Asia, so it seems obvious that we should encourage it to fight for Taiwan. But again, it is not that simple. We gain nothing by urging America to fight a war it will not win with or without our support. While we might feel we would have to join the fight to preserve the ANZUS alliance, such a war would be fatal to America's position in Asia, and hence to the alliance itself anyway.

If the Taiwan issue escalates to the point that Joe Biden faces his terrible choice, then Australia stands to lose its ally whether we urge him to fight and chose to fight ourselves, or not. That being so, our best interests would be served by urging him to be cautious, and by being cautious ourselves.

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