

Stakes over Taiwan couldn't be higher

by **Hugh White**

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What will America do if China decides to use force against Taiwan? And how would Australia respond? These are perhaps the gravest questions now confronting leaders in Washington and Canberra, and they are far from hypothetical.

The fragile fudge that has kept the peace over Taiwan for the past 50 years has been strained almost to breaking point as US-China relations have darkened into a new cold war.

Now both sides seem to be stressing it further. Last weekend, as US carrier forces showed the flag in the South China Sea, [Beijing launched provocative air manoeuvres around Taiwan](#). Neither side wants a war, but both sides hope to win their point without fighting by making the other back down.

The danger is that they will miscalculate one another's resolve, especially in Beijing, where they must be sorely tempted to provoke a crisis with, for example, an air and sea blockade of Taiwan that is both militarily feasible and strategically effective in forcing Taiwan to yield.

Success in that may now seem the only way for Beijing to reclaim what China sees as its rightful territory, but that is not all. If Washington failed to defend Taiwan, it would fatally undermine US leadership in east Asia and allow China to take over as the leading regional power. The stakes could hardly be higher.

But it would be a huge gamble, because if America did decide to fight for Taiwan, China would face a catastrophic war against a formidable adversary. So everything depends on how China's leaders assess Joe Biden. Will 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 must fight when America's whole position in Asia is at stake.

But it is not nearly that simple, because when war looms two hard questions force themselves forward: who wins, and at what cost?

We gain nothing by urging America to fight a war it will not win, with or without our support.

With the stakes so high and forces so vast, any conflict would swiftly escalate into the biggest war by far since 1945. That would be devastating for the US as well as China, because this is not a war that America could easily win, or win at all.

The US Navy is no longer unchallengeable in the western Pacific. Today, Chinese forces can find and destroy the ships and aircraft that America must use to project power into the western Pacific. Its iconic aircraft carriers would be especially at risk.

And more fundamentally, it is not clear how a full-scale war against China can be won at all. Not even America could invade and occupy that vast country. Nor, when the stakes so high, can it inflict enough damage to force the Communist Party to capitulate.

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

Unless it uses nuclear weapons. America still declares its willingness to cross the nuclear threshold if its conventional forces cannot win, and threatening to do this might seem the only way America could prevail.

But 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.

Nuclear risk

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

So any conflict over Taiwan has a real chance of becoming a nuclear war. Indeed, the risk of nuclear war today is probably higher than at any time since the darkest days of the last Cold War.

Unlike his predecessor, Biden can recognise these risks and weight them responsibly. But if a crisis looms, he would face a truly agonising 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 Biden would let east Asia go in order to spare America. This is exactly what China's President Xi Jinping hopes – and perhaps expects – he 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. It seems equally obvious that if America fights for Taiwan we would have to fight too, [or risk destroying our ANZUS alliance.](#)

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, and it makes no sense to join a war to preserve the alliance when the 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 Biden faces his terrible choice, then Australia stands to lose its ally whether we urge him to fight, and choose to fight ourselves, or not.

And that being so, our best interests would be served by urging him to be cautious, and by being cautious ourselves.

Hugh White is the emeritus professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University. He is also a member of the China Matters Advisory Council.