

A war over Taiwan would be nothing like Afghanistan

by **Hugh White**

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War is not an end in itself. It can only ever be justified as a means to achieve some specific objective, and the wisdom of a decision to go to war must be judged accordingly. What is the objective? Can it be achieved? At what cost, and is the objective worth that cost? National leaders have a duty to weigh these questions carefully before deciding for war.

Scott Morrison should be thinking deeply about all this, because if war breaks out between America and China, [which is a real possibility](#), he would face the gravest decisions that any Australian leader has had to make since 1939. He acknowledged this himself last year when he aptly compared today's strategic risk with the late 1930s.

And just last week, as tensions continue to mount, it was reported that his government is [now escalating preparations for conflict in the Taiwan Strait](#). So one hopes that Morrison is thinking seriously about the circumstances under which it would be worth going to war with China. And one hopes that he is trying to learn what he can from past mistakes.

That makes it worrying and disappointing that last week, when announcing the end of Australia's war in Afghanistan, he gave such a slick answer when asked, "Was it worth going into Afghanistan?"

"Freedom is always worth it," was his dismissive and dishonest response. His words misrepresented the war's rationale and trivialised the purposes for which Australian soldiers served, which dishonours them. And he evaded the responsibility to learn from the experience.

We first sent forces to Afghanistan in 2001 to help destroy al-Qaeda and unseat the Taliban, which was a partial and temporary success.

John Howard then pulled our forces out quickly, dismissing any idea of trying to fix Afghanistan's many ills. Then in 2005 he sent them back to do exactly that. His Labor successors doubled down on the commitment, increasing its size, scope and risks, which is when the casualties began to mount.

This war would be different. It would be more like the world wars of the 20th century – and perhaps worse, if it goes nuclear.

But the mission was always doomed to fail. It was crystal clear at the start that there was no chance foreign military forces and aid agencies could pacify the country, let alone transform its politics and society, no matter how desirable that might be.

This was not the soldiers' fault. It was the fault of political leaders and their military and civilian advisers who, carried along by the stream of events, let wishful thinking swamp strategic judgment at huge cost to others. Those mistakes must be acknowledged, analysed and learned from, not smothered in slick sentimentality.

Meanwhile, the hardheads in Canberra tell a different story. They say that the real reason our soldiers went to Afghanistan was to support our alliance with America, and that succeeded. But did it?

The habit of going to war whenever America does is deeply ingrained in the strategic mindset of our political leaders and their advisers. Often in the past that has made good sense, but not always. America sometimes makes terrible mistakes, as it has done in Iraq and Afghanistan, which is bad for America, bad for Australia, and bad for the alliance.

Now America seems headed for another, far bigger, mistake. As tensions rise with China, America is ramping up its support for Taiwan, deliberately raising expectations that America will fight to defend it.

Some see that is prudent, hoping China will be deterred. But credibility is vital for effective deterrence, and America's threat is not credible, because it has no way of winning a war with China over Taiwan.

US conventional forces can no longer overwhelm China's formidable navy and air force. And America shows no willingness to fight a nuclear war over Taiwan, whereas China probably would.

Between such equally matched adversaries, the side that cares more wins. China has the advantage here over Taiwan – and both the Americans and Chinese know it.

So Biden is bluffing, and if the Chinese call his bluff he will face an appalling choice. Backing down would destroy America's strategic leadership in Asia, but launching into a war which he cannot win – and which would very likely go nuclear – would be even worse. Alas, the more Biden talks up his bluff, the more likely he is to choose war anyway. That is how the worst wars start.

Then Scott Morrison will get a call. If he thinks no further than "Freedom is always worth it" he will say yes, and send us to war again. But this war would be different. It would be nothing like Afghanistan, a small war in a distant place that has touched very few of us. It would be more like the world wars of the 20th century – and perhaps worse, if it goes nuclear.

This means Scott Morrison really must think harder. The costs of not going to war over Taiwan would be real and serious, but those costs cannot be avoided by fighting a war that cannot be won. And what of the costs of the war itself? Reflecting more deeply on our failure in Afghanistan might help our Prime Minister make the right decision if or when that call comes.

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