

China now likely to call America's bluff over Taiwan

by **Hugh White**

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The question no longer seems hypothetical. Last year the Prime Minister compared the dangers today to those of the late 1930s. This year Defence Minister Peter Dutton has repeatedly warned of the risk of war with China over Taiwan. Whether war breaks out is now, he has said, "a question for the Chinese". If China attacks Taiwan, there seems little doubt – at least in Joe Biden's mind – that America will go to war. If America goes to war, Dutton says he thinks it "inconceivable" that Australia would not follow. So it seems the decision is already made: if China attacks Taiwan, we will follow America to war with China.

One hopes our political leaders are taking this as seriously as they should. We are in an acute strategic crisis. They acknowledge that the risk of war between America and China over Taiwan is quite high, and they seem to understand that the implications for Australia are exceptionally grave. Why aren't they doing more to try to reduce the risk?

The answer lies in a deeper understanding of the source of the current crisis, which lies much deeper than the Taiwan issue itself. The future of Taiwan, important though that is in itself, has become the focus of something much bigger – the strategic contest between America and China over which of them will be the primary strategic power in East Asia over the decades ahead. Last week's virtual summit between presidents Xi Jinping and Biden did nothing to resolve this contest. Beijing wants to take control of Taiwan to assert its position as the leading power in East Asia, and America wants to assert its claims to that position by preventing Beijing from doing so. The one that backs down or loses over Taiwan will concede the contest for regional leadership.

China has ceased to accept America's longstanding position as the primary power in Asia. It wants to push America out of the region and take its place. China is doing precisely what rising powers throughout history have done.

China's ambitions raise big, and in some ways unprecedented, questions for Australia about the international setting in which we operate, and about what we can do to shape it. Since 1788 our place in the region has always been framed by the predominant power of our Anglo-Saxon allies – first Britain then America. For the first time now we face a future in which the region's, and indeed the world's, most powerful state is not Anglo-Saxon, and is not our ally. It is the biggest shift in Australia's international setting since British settlement, and it makes new demands on our foreign and strategic policy making.

For as long as Australia has had a foreign policy, our first priority and primary focus has been to do whatever we can, in peace and war, to support the regional preponderance of our "great and powerful friends". That has been, overall, rather successful for us in the past, and so today our political leaders – on both sides of politics – are seeking to take the same approach. Behind the talk of "the rules-based order" and "a free and open Indo-Pacific" is a simple, almost primal objective – to resist China's growing power and ambition by encouraging and supporting Washington to defend and perpetuate its regional primacy. If necessary, it seems, by going to war with China.

Of course, no one in Canberra or Washington wants a war, or expects one. They hope and expect that the mere threat of war will make China back off. But China is playing the same game, hoping that its threats of war will make America back off. Both sides assume the other is bluffing. That is a dangerous assumption. Probably neither side is quite sure whether they themselves are bluffing or not, but in an escalating crisis countries often find it harder to admit that they have been bluffing than they expected, and decide that going to war is the less-bad option. Usually this turns out to be very wrong. This is how wars between great powers have often started in the past, when neither side wanted to fight.

So we in Australia would be unwise to join this game unless we are clear in our own minds whether we are bluffing or not. We need to ask ourselves whether going to war with China to defend the US-led order in Asia would be the right and prudent thing to do. And just to be clear, the question is not whether we prefer to live in a US-led order or a Chinese-led order. I think it is perfectly clear that we would and should prefer US leadership. But should we be willing to go to war with China for it?

There are different ways to approach this issue, but let's start with the quintessential policymaker's question: will it work? Can Australia secure a stable regional order conducive to our interests and values by going to war with China

at America's side? And the first step to answering that question is to ask what kind of war would it be and will we win it?

If it goes beyond a mere skirmish, a war between America and China over Taiwan would be the first between major powers since 1945, and the first between nuclear-armed states. It would be primarily a maritime war and, until quite recently, America would have been sure of a swift, cheap victory because maritime war is America's forte. But in the past 25 years China has developed formidable air and naval capabilities specifically to counter US forces in the Western Pacific, so now the most likely outcome is a costly and inconclusive stalemate.

The scale of forces on both sides means it would swiftly become the biggest war since 1945. After a few days or weeks both sides would have lost a lot of ships and aircraft and suffered a lot of casualties, but neither side would have inflicted enough damage on the other to force it to concede. Both sides would then consider threatening to use nuclear weapons to break the stalemate, and no one could be sure whether or when those threats might be fulfilled. On balance one would have to say that the chances of the war going nuclear are quite high. The chances of America winning such a war are very low – and whether Australia, or even Japan, joins the fight makes very little difference.

That has two implications. First, going to war with China will not work to preserve US leadership in Asia; indeed, it will more likely destroy it. That means we in Australia cannot expect to preserve the regional order we'd prefer by going to war for it. Once war starts that order would probably be utterly destroyed.

Second, America's dwindling chances of winning make its threats to fight less credible in Beijing, which makes it more likely that the Chinese will provoke a crisis to call America's bluff. All this means that threatening war is not a prudent policy, and actually going to war would be a very big policy mistake. The cost of such a war, in both blood and treasure, would be almost unthinkable large. The costs of war would probably be far higher than the costs of living under a new Chinese-led regional order.

But what of our values? A Chinese-led order in Asia would put at risk fundamental moral precepts which many would argue should never be compromised at any cost. It is credible, for example, to argue that Taiwan's robust democracy should not be subjugated to Beijing's increasingly authoritarian rule under any circumstances. But those who see the question this

way should be clear about the scale of the costs involved in acting on that basis. There is a mortal imperative to avoid war, and perhaps especially to avoid nuclear war, which must be balanced against the imperative to support democracy against authoritarianism. We have not yet begun seriously to debate the competing claims of these seemingly incompatible imperatives.

Australia today needs to start debating these questions, which are perhaps comparable to the challenge of climate change in their importance for our future, and may prove to be even more urgent. Things are moving fast, as the recent AUKUS decision shows, and events could force a once-and-for-all decision on our governments literally at any time.

This is an edited extract from a paper Hugh White will present to the Australian Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia's annual symposium on Monday. It will be a free virtual presentation, socialsciences.org.au

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