

Media hype of war with China forgets the impact on Australian society

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Fixation on conflict tends to exclude debate around costs, tradeoffs and social cohesion

Much ink has been spilled in Australia on war scenarios with [China](#). Some experts claim that unless Australia takes action now, a war with China will be inevitable in three years.

This type of commentary and analysis inflates the role Australia plays in deterring China while underselling the roles other countries in the region play. In addition, only military aspects of war are usually considered while the economic and social consequences are ignored.

In much of the [media reporting in Australia](#), the world comprises only three countries – China, Australia and the US – fighting over Taiwan. In a possible conflict scenario in east Asia, the considerations and actions of Japan and South Korea, both US allies, would be much more important than Australia's. Yet, most often their considerations are missing, or they are assumed to be fully on board with the US, ignoring the domestic debates occurring in these countries.

And of course, other countries in the region, such as Singapore or Indonesia, don't even get a mention as concerned stakeholders. This is odd seeing that we like to emphasise our geographical location in the Indo-Pacific as the reason that we must do something about China. Yet, the considerations of other countries in the region are absent. This is out of step with the current government's priorities.

As for Australia, our participation is assumed to be automatic – there is no choice but to join the US. Despite all the rhetoric around sovereignty recently,

the analyses tend to treat Australia almost as a vassal state of the US. The interests of the US are taken to be exactly the same as the interests of Australia. Whenever the US goes to war, so must we, no matter the circumstances or the costs. Going to war alongside the US is almost an autonomic reflex for Australia.

A lot of reports are also devoid of concrete analyses on China's intention and capability. China has an opaque system, but that does not mean we cannot look for signs that China might be preparing for an invasion.

We can find clues from President Xi's speeches. But more important than quoting him directly are analyses on how the rhetoric has changed over time with regard to Taiwan. For example, the much quoted "we will never promise to renounce the use of force" has been used by [Chinese leaders since Mao Zedong](#). So repeating it does not represent a change in intention or timeline.

And even if we distrust Xi and suspect that China may carry out a surprise attack on Taiwan in the next three years, there would still be clues that China is preparing for an invasion. China fully understands that an invasion of Taiwan is a difficult and risky task. It would not attack light-heartedly. Instead, extensive preparation would have to be made. [John Culver notes](#) such preparations would include cancelling all leave of military personnel and repatriation of Chinese assets abroad.

After all, why would China try to invest in Australia if it was preparing for a military conflict? It knows full well that Australia would take over these assets as soon as a war starts.

Ultimately, the media hype on a war scenario has real domestic consequences. It forces Australians to take a binary position even in the absence of war. Australians are expected to treat any links to China with suspicion, as they are assumed to be detrimental to Australia's interests. This can easily lead to racism, as shown by recent reporting of "Chinese men" taking photos at Avalon airshow or the accusations against Sally Sitou.

While analysts have finally started to talk about the implications for Chinese Australians, they remain an afterthought. Compared with detailed discussions of hypothetical war scenarios, how civil rights can be protected is never addressed, except at most an exhortation that they must be. Among all talks about preparation for a war, preparing the population for a potentially divisive society is not part of it, even though, unlike war, this is already happening.

Public discussion about a potential conflict is worthwhile. I'm all for more public debate about our nation's future and priorities. However, it must be conducted comprehensively and responsibly. A genuine debate would involve discussions around costs, tradeoffs and other consequences. In particular, the impact on social cohesion should be at the forefront of responsible reporting.

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