

# 1945

## Why Should America Go To War Over Taiwan, Ukraine Or With Iran?

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Christmas 2021 approaches and the season looks like anything other than peace and goodwill to all men. Indeed, the US could end up at war with at least three major powers in three regions. And lose one or two of those contests.

Washington is being driven by other nations which believe Americans owe them a defense. Indeed, some countries go to great lengths to lobby Washington to put their interests first. Hiring lobbyists, offering contracts, mobilizing investors, and underwriting think tanks are some of the tactics used. So is hiring a Beatles tribute band.

The latter was the unique approach used by United Kingdom Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss. Reported *The Times* of London: “The Foreign Office hired a tribute act to the Fab Four called the Cheatles in an effort to woo Antony Blinken, the US secretary of state, and stiffen the resolve of Britain’s partners against aggression from Moscow at the G7 summit of foreign ministers in Liverpool this weekend. Truss and Blinken discovered a shared love of Lennon and McCartney when they dined together at the Cop26 climate summit in Glasgow last month. Truss would like America to take as tough a line as possible to deter Putin from ordering more than 90,000 troops into Ukraine.”

Hopefully, that didn’t influence Blinken, but who knows? Washington is overflowing with foreign governments seeking defense favors. The UK is merely one of the usual suspects, along with Japan, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Greece, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Taiwan, numerous other European states, and more.

Usually, it is for their own direct benefit. As Robert Gates once observed, the Saudis want to “fight the Iranians to the last American.” Most of America’s Mideast “allies” have the same objective. And they are hardly alone. Although London, in contrast to most of its European brethren, has a serious military, it also is ever ready to generously suggest additional military duties *for Washington*.

For instance, UK Secretary of State for Defense Ben Wallace criticized America’s withdrawal from Afghanistan: “I think it was strategically wrong because the world is more interconnected

than it has ever been.” Not that he indicated any interest in having his nation take over for the US: “America does need to be the world policeman, for us, for our values, for our way of life. I worry what happens if America were to become isolationist in this global world.”

Note the use of “isolationist.” If that means anything, it should be someone who supported “isolating” the country. Wallace apparently defines it as someone who doesn’t believe in spending a 21<sup>st</sup> year attempting to bring democracy to a Central Asian nation of no intrinsic security interest to America. Many in Washington use the same meaning. Indeed, isolationist is a favored term of opprobrium informally defined as unwilling to promiscuously bomb, invade, and occupy nations around the globe, year after year, killing thousands, tens of thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of people.

Americans should reconsider who they protect and from whom. Almost the entire national security establishment is convinced that the US should go to war with China over Taiwan. Some prominent members of the Blob, as the foreign policy elite also is known, would do the same for Ukraine against Russia. As the nuclear talks with the US and Europe risk foundering, the Biden administration is threatening military action, while America’s usual Mideast “friends” prepare to dance the Maori Haka in support.

The Koreans also remain a military standby. No one seems to expect imminent war there, but CNN recently reported that “The US and South Korea will develop a new operational war plan to address the threat from North Korea, senior defense officials said Tuesday, as the Pentagon shifts its focus to the Indo-Pacific region following its recently completed global force posture review.” And hawkish House members predicted doom and gloom if the US agreed to an essentially meaningless peace declaration: “*We are gravely concerned that this declaration, instead of promoting peace, would seriously undermine and destabilize the security of the Korean peninsula.*”

Worse, North Korea refuses to negotiate even as it expands and improves its missile and nuclear arsenals. Truly scary is the Rand Corporation and Asan Institute estimate that “by 2027, North Korea could have 200 nuclear weapons and several dozen intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and hundreds of theater missiles for delivering the nuclear weapons.” Even a conflict that starts as a conventional war against North Korea could end with a devastating nuclear strike on America’s homeland.

Surely war, especially large-scale combat with such serious powers, should require a vital interest at stake for America. The national government’s most fundamental responsibility is to safeguard Americans’ lives, liberties, territory, wealth, and futures, not to sacrifice those same lives and wealth for others.

Consequently, when the US Constitution authorizes the federal government to “provide for the common defense,” the document means defense of America, not other nations, however worthy and likeable they might be. The US military is not a charity, created to aid the global disadvantaged. It is raised to secure, first and foremost, the interests of the American political community. Officials have no authority to spend other people’s lives and livelihoods launching crusades around the world.

A frank, admittedly cold-hearted, look at costs and risks concludes that these are not wars America should fight. The Neoconservative/liberal interventionist disasters of Afghanistan, Iraq,

and Libya were self-evidently myopic, counterproductive, and tragic. Thousands of dead Americans and allied personnel, thousands more dead contractors, tens of thousands of injured Americans, allied personnel, and contractors, and hundreds of thousands—almost certainly more than a million—dead civilians. Plus, ravaged societies, wrecked governments, decimated religious minorities, and sectarian demons unleashed. Heckuva' job, Uncle Sam!

Yet the costs of these conflicts pale compared to what battles with China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea would involve. Iran would at least be of a similar magnitude but with a larger, more populous nation deploying more sophisticated defense capabilities, a civilization as well as country. The other three would be true horrors, at least taking us back to the Korean War, and perhaps closer to World War II.

Russia and China come in at numbers two and three in global power rankings. Moscow is a nuclear peer with an improving conventional force. The People's Republic of China is the world's second biggest spender, with a rapidly improving navy and expanding nuclear force. North Korea only ranks number 28, but its steady missile and nuclear improvements give it the ability to ravage its neighbors and America even if US retaliation would be devastating.

Yet the US has no good reason to fight any of the proffered wars. Taiwan deserves to be independent and free. However, the island is separate because it was ripped away from China after military defeat by Japan, then torn away a second time as the refuge of the Republic of China's Nationalist government after the Chinese Communist Party's conquest of the mainland. Recovering Taiwan is matter of raw nationalism, ending what Chinese call the Century of Humiliation during which Imperial China lost Hong Kong and multiple concessions around the country. Bringing the island under Beijing's control also is a matter of security. Imagine how the US would react if Cuba was allied with a powerful foe an ocean away—or, better yet, read about the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Taiwan's situation is tragic, but it is not a vital American interest. An independent Taiwan would interfere with Chinese control of surrounding waters, certainly an advantage for America, but that hardly makes it a security interest worth war. Although the US remains far more powerful militarily—no one imagines the PRC operating a hundred miles off America's coast—it is far more expensive to deploy forces nearly 8000 miles away from America than to deter America from deploying forces nearly 8000 miles away. Overcoming Chinese anti-access and area denial technologies and operations would be difficult and expensive; the US has a poor record in war games. Washington cannot justify the cost and risk of war over the island.

Also notable is the fact that Taiwan does surprisingly little to defend itself. As a share of GDP Taipei spends only 2.1 percent despite claiming to fear attack. And the government does not spend well. Daniel Davis of Defense Priorities noted that “So few Taiwanese are willing to sign up for military service, in fact, that earlier this year frontline combat units in the Taiwan military were assessed as being manned at a shockingly low 60%.” The Taiwanese apparently assume the US will intervene in any trouble so they need do little themselves.

Northeast Asia contains more than Taiwan, of course. Japan enjoys greater distance from China and is not coveted by the Chinese leadership, though Tokyo does claim the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, a cluster of five islands and three reefs that offer control of hydrocarbon deposits and fishing grounds. Only this year did Tokyo note its concern over Taiwan and plan to break above the historic one percent of GDP standard for military spending. But this should be merely the

start. The Japanese government should spend more, much more, on its people's defense rather than to expect the American USN cavalry to arrive to fight off any Chinese assault. Tokyo should do to Beijing what the PRC is doing to Washington: using anti-access/area denial strategy to keep the adversary away.

Vladimir Putin's Russia is a bad actor but has shown no interest in a war with America and is best understood as a pre-1914 great power demanding international respect and secure borders. An attack on a NATO member is equally unlikely since there would be little gain and much loss. However, after the alliance expanded to Russia's borders and US backed regime change against friendly regimes, Moscow struck Ukraine, securing the former's Black Sea Sevastopol naval base and creating a frozen conflict, deterring NATO membership. Russia acted brutally and unlawfully, but not surprisingly—imagine how Washington would have responded to Moscow inviting Mexico to join the Warsaw Pact. Hint: not well!

None of these actions threaten America, however. Ukraine is irrelevant to US security—both as part of Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union and when independent after December 1991. Russia should not intervene in Ukraine, but Washington has no cause to fight for Ukraine. And especially no cause to go to war against a nuclear-armed power with local military superiority and far greater interest in the controversy. The proper response would be attempting to find a diplomatic resolution based on foreclosing the possibility of Kyiv joining NATO, backed by planning and communicating potential diplomatic and economic retaliation.

Moreover, when facing Russia none of America's allies can be bothered to do much, even as the Ukraine crisis hits its eighth year. Today nineteen NATO members (including Canada) devote less than two percent of GDP to their armed forces. Most notably, Germany, Italy, and Spain prefer to leave the spending and fighting to others. Germany's lackadaisical attitude has been a special outrage for years, and little is likely to change under the new government.

Wallace's UK comes in a bit above two percent, though more for historical reasons in dealing with the vestiges of a colonial empire than containing Moscow. If he believes that being global policeman is so important, he should propose that the UK spend more on its military and join America in the fun. France comes in around the same level, also pushed by historic colonial obligations.

The Baltic states and Poland treat breaching the two percent level as a badge of honor. Yet if they really face an imminent threat from the barbaric Slavic hordes—which doesn't seem nearly as serious as they suggest—two percent is a pitiful level of spending. They should spend more, much more to establish a territorial defense so that any attack would result in unacceptably high losses.

Even worse is the Europeans' reluctance to fight on each other's behalf. They frankly expect Americans to defend them and whine mightily if Washington's attention shifts anywhere else on earth for even a moment. However, polls indicate that majorities in several European nations oppose fighting on behalf of each other. Yet the US always expected Europeans, not Americans, to be Europe's first line of defense. Dwight D. Eisenhower opposed a permanent US garrison in Europe. He believed the US should help "these people regain their confidence and get on their own military feet," not act as "a modern Rome guarding the far frontiers with our legions."

There is no persuasive case for war against Iran or North Korea. Their regimes are terrible and their peoples deserve to be free. However, neither system threatens America. The US is vastly more powerful than both and neither would consider challenging the US if it did not send its armed forces up to their borders and over their heads.

Through its aggressions—1953 coup, support for the Iraqi invasion—Washington helped turn Iran viciously hostile. Tehran should be contained by a combination of Israel, a regional superpower with nuclear weapons, and Sunni states, with the latter seeking a modus vivendi with Iran to end the quasi-Sunni-Shia conflict. The West should engage the Islamic Republic, seeking to draw young Iranians, many well-disposed toward America, into the larger global cultural, economic, and social orders, to help transform their nation over the longer term.

North Korea is more dangerous, but South Korea has vastly outstripped its adversary, with more than 50 times the economic strength and twice the population. The ROK is able to develop whatever military it needs to defend itself. That could include nuclear weapons.

Independent nuclear deterrents might be second-best, but they increasingly look better than a permanent American “nuclear umbrella,” especially since a South Korean (and a Japanese and possibly even Taiwanese nuclear capacity) would also help deter China. Spending 2.7 percent of its GDP on the military, the ROK does better than most of America’s other allies but could do much more. And should do so if it really fears annihilation by the North. The ROK, like everyone else, cheap rides on Washington because it can.

It’s time for Uncle Sam to say no more. The US can’t afford to put its rich friends on a permanent defense dole. The last two annual federal deficits ran roughly \$3 trillion. This year the red ink is expected to run about \$1.3 trillion, but that could change dramatically if the Biden administration is able to cobble together a congressional majority for at least some of its big-spending proposals.

Presumably, the COVID-19 economic crisis will soon end, reducing that source of increased deficits. Even then, the Congressional Budget Office predicts more than \$12 trillion worth of red ink over the coming decade, and that number will soon explode due to America’s aging population. Publicly held federal debt is already over 100 percent. CBO says it could break 200 percent by 2050. Uncle Sam is effectively broke.

War is sometimes necessary. But far less often than claimed. Especially for a superpower that is interested in almost everything but critically affected by almost nothing. With the recent crescendo of concern over threatened conflicts around the world, Washington should respond by scaling back its responsibilities. Engage the world Americans should, but make the world’s conflicts their own they should not. Only by stepping back will Washington’s prosperous, populous friends ever take on their military responsibilities for themselves and the world around them.

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