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When Legislators Risk War with China

Congressmen roll the dice when they pretend to be secretaries of state.

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Capitol Hill long has had about 530 out of 535 legislators who believe they should be president. Perhaps worse: At least as many legislators are determined to play secretary of state. That makes for a thoughtless, often reckless, foreign policy.

Such is the case with Nebraska's Rep. Don Bacon, who recently discussed at [a webinar](#) how he wanted America to go to war over—excuse me, deal with—China's threat to Taiwan. The congressman seems earnest and serious-minded, but holds the standard assumption that the U.S. is the only country on earth that matters. If only Washington acts to restore deterrence, Bacon repeatedly emphasized, then Xi Jinping and the rest of the Chinese leadership are sure to abandon Beijing's nearly 130-year quest to reclaim the island state.

War is far more likely than Chinese acquiescence on the Taiwan question—and Bacon's course would increase the risk of conflict.

Despite the assumption that “deterrence” is a magic bullet, deterrence routinely fails. Countries assess their interests and potential outcomes differently. In World War I, two multinational alliances failed to deter conflict. Knowledge that the U.S. would enter the war didn't deter Germany from restarting its U-boat campaign in the Atlantic. In World War II, British and French security guarantees failed to deter Germany's attack on Poland. Knowledge that attacking Pearl Harbor would bring America into the conflict failed to deter Japan.

The People's Republic of China is fixated on Taiwan for two important reasons. The first is why Lincoln and his Secretary of State, William Seward, were not willing to let the South go: nationalism. They believed in one America. Seward was at his truculent worst responding to threats of foreign interference. “A contest between Great Britain and the United States would wrap the world in fire,” he warned. And the Europeans stayed out of the conflict.

Likewise, the Chinese believe in one China. Japan defeated Imperial China in 1895 and seized the island then known as Formosa. Ever since, the Chinese people have wanted it back. It was returned after Tokyo's defeat in 1945, but in 1949 the defeated Nationalist government (known as the Republic of China) fled to Taiwan. The mainland Chinese still want it back.

The second is why President John F. Kennedy refused to allow the Soviet Union to station nuclear-tipped missiles in Cuba, about a hundred miles off America's coast. The USSR's Nikita Khrushchev sought to create “deterrence,” but Washington was not willing to play along. Taiwan is a similar distance from the PRC. No Chinese government would willingly accept a foreign military base so close. Yet that is what Bacon envisions: “If you have US boots on the ground in

Taiwan, that's deterrence. If you also have Japanese boots on the ground and Australian boots on the ground, I think that does create deterrence."

Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that the U.S. would defeat China if conflict erupted. The U.S. has the bigger military, is wealthier, and has more military allies, but none of these is determinative. With Washington's "Blob" determined to defend most of the known world, from Europe to South Korea, American forces are spread thinly around the globe.

Geography would give China a huge advantage, including air superiority through use of mainland bases. China tends to win war games; victory for the U.S. comes at a very high cost. The results, reported NBC News, indicate that Washington "should prepare for a prolonged, deadly conflict."

Richer America is, but the American people are heavily in debt, face a tsunami of red ink as the population ages and interest rates continue their inevitable rise, and are unlikely to forever mortgage their future for dubious foreign misadventures.

Finally, America cannot count on allies that may prove fair weather friends when missiles start flying: backing Taiwan, which none of them recognize, would turn them into current targets and future enemies of China, any China, which will always be near them. Happy talk today is no guarantee of military aid tomorrow.

One of Bacon's more clueless expostulations was: "China will be mad; they'll throw a fit. They did when Pelosi visited. That's all right. They can throw a fit."

That isn't all the PRC can do. First, Beijing can change its assessment of U.S. and Taiwanese policy. China wants neither war nor Taiwanese independence. Rather, it hopes to intimidate Taipei into a negotiated surrender—the "one country, two systems" formula that was murdered and buried at Hong Kong.

As long as Taiwan operates as a largely unofficial state, China can put off any effort at coercion. However, if Taipei either pushes for or is pushed into a formal declaration of independence, the Chinese Communist Party must act or surrender its nationalist mantle. And determination to reclaim Taiwan is not limited to the CCP. It is held by the vast majority of Chinese, including the young.

The Pelosi visit—a vain political affair that did nothing to strengthen Taiwan's geopolitical position—reinforced a growing belief among Chinese officialdom that both Taipei and Washington had changed their position, and were moving toward a policy of Taiwanese separatism/independence. Bacon proposes to confirm that fear by calling Taipei's representative "ambassador," modifying Washington's diplomatic agreement with Taiwan, and elevating its status in the World Health Organization.

What should worry Bacon and the rest of the U.S. government is not the Chinese throwing a fit. Rather, it is changes to their own behavior in response. For instance, the PRC already has intensified its military activities around Taiwan, erasing the unofficial line once drawn between the mainland and Taiwan. This "new normal" will make life more difficult for Taipei and multiply the possibility of a military incident between China and Taiwan, the U.S., or both.

The belief that Washington is renegeing on its commitment to one China is likely to cause Beijing to increase planning for contingencies involving a Taiwanese independence bid and accelerate

military preparation for a kinetic response. The U.S. would have to decide whether it would be prepared for war—certain to be a massive conventional contest with potential nuclear strikes.

This provides the answer to Bacon's query: "I don't know why [China] can tell us who we can recognize and who we can't." Of course, the PRC can tell us *what they want us to do*, just as we do the same to the rest of the world. That still doesn't mean we have to comply; but, since the recognition of Beijing on January 1, 1979, Washington has chosen to do so.

In response to a U.S. reversal, the PRC would probably at least roll back relations, perhaps even close embassies, halt cooperation elsewhere, and further accelerate military harassment of Taiwan. Or it could demonstrate its seriousness with a formal break, leaving the world's two most important nations without diplomatic contact. The last time that happened, they ended up at war with each other in Korea. In practice, it is far more important to talk with your adversaries than your friends. Conflict with the PRC over Taiwan would be a throwback to the Korean War or even World War II rather than Afghanistan or Iraq redux. Never before have two major powers armed with nuclear weapons fought a full-scale war.

Taiwan is a worthy friend, but does not present a vital national interest warranting the risk of such a conflict. American security does not rest on the island—just look at a map. Taiwan's main value to America is complicating Chinese activity off the latter's own coast, but that is no justification for war. Nor is reassuring America's allies of Washington's defense guarantees. (In fact, it is only because they do not feel reassured that they finally are doing more on their own behalf.) Likewise, preserving Taiwan's trade and semiconductor chip production is not a *casus belli*. War would disable both, which is why the U.S. and other nations are moving to diversify supplies.

That doesn't mean there is nothing America should do for Taiwan. Selling it arms and organizing friendly states to impose concerted economic sanctions should the PRC attack Taiwan would create incentives against war. Despite Beijing's evident unhappiness at such measures, they would strengthen Taipei without provoking a U.S.–China clash.

Historically, the nation's heartland has been skeptical of war. It was always intellectual and commercial elites who were enthusiastic about drafting the rest of the population to fight needless foreign wars. After decades of stupid military misadventures, the American people desperately need lawmakers willing to represent them rather than Washington's permanent war lobby.

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