

Deterring the Big One: Who Must the U.S. Fight in the Pacific?

Doug Bandow

January 11, 2023

The war drums are beating in the U.S.. Washington is fighting a full-on proxy war against Russia through Ukraine, risking escalation to the Real Thing. With Iran reluctant to revive the nuclear deal—which President Donald Trump abandoned—the Biden administration is hyping its military options and conducting air exercises with Israel.

Then there is Asia. Washington has ramped up assurances to the Republic of Korea as North Korea tests missiles and prepares for its 7th nuclear test. There is much talk about extended deterrence and America's promise to use nuclear weapons if necessary.

Finally, last month Adm. Charles A. Richard, who heads United States Strategic Command called Ukraine but “a warm-up for a longer conflict with China that threatens the U.S.A.” He explained: “The big one is coming. And it isn’t going to be very long before we’re going to get tested in ways that we haven’t been tested in a long time.”

How can this be? “As I assess our level of deterrence against China, the ship is slowly sinking. It is sinking slowly, but it is sinking, as fundamentally they are putting capability in the field faster than we are. As those curves keep going, it isn’t going to matter how good our [operating plan] is or how good our commanders are, or how good our horses are—we’re not going to have enough of them. And that is a very near-term problem.”

The ever-hawkish Wall Street Journal picked up on Richard’s comments, making yet another demand for a military build-up. Observed the Journal: “Educating the public about U.S. military weaknesses runs the risk of encouraging adversaries to exploit them. But the greater risk today is slouching ahead in blind complacency until China invades Taiwan or takes some other action that damages U.S. interests or allies because Beijing thinks the U.S. can do nothing about it.”

As if that wasn’t blunt enough, the Journal later lauded the ceremony unveiling the B-21 bomber, which would be directed against the People’s Republic of China: “speeding up the program even six or 12 months could be significant in deterring China’s plans for taking Taiwan. The only military assets that change Beijing’s calculus today are the ones that are ready to drop weapons tonight.”

Although the U.S. government disclaims any effort at containment, the recently released Pentagon assessment of China’s military treats the People’s Liberation Army as a serious

threat. The document warned that the PRC posed “the most consequential and systemic challenge to our national security and to a free and open international system.” The Biden administration insisted that conflict was not inevitable, but it certainly looks like defense planners believe that it is substantially more likely than before.

Obviously, what the Constitution calls the “common defense” is the most important duty of the U.S. government. And that includes Russia, Iran, North Korea, and China if they are endangering America. Yet most striking about Washington’s talk of war involving these nations is that none of them directly threatens the U.S.

All realize that devastating retaliation awaits any attack on America. Indeed, it is evident that all fear the U.S. Moscow’s Vladimir Putin is rattling nuclear sabers to keep America from joining the Ukraine fight. Iran and North Korea have been constantly threatened with U.S. military action and long ago learned from the defeat of weak nations such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Serbia that the only sure deterrent to U.S. intervention is nukes. Also worried is the PRC, which has begun a major nuclear buildup. That reflects “a change in its assessment of the threat posed by the U.S., people with knowledge of the Chinese leadership’s thinking say.”

In short, American deterrence—for America—remains unimpeded. The PRC is not going to invade the U.S., attempt nuclear coercion, or conquer outlying American territory. For China to do so would be suicidal. Nor is there any existential *casus belli*. The two have no territorial disputes, being separated by the world’s largest ocean. They are sparring over global leadership but can coexist however that competition turns out. Serious economic and geopolitical issues divide them, but the toughest bilateral challenges are not military and do not warrant war.

So where does the potential for a military clash come in? American forces are being deployed to protect other states. Most important are formal U.S. allies Japan and Philippines, which are contesting Chinese claims to rocks and waters, and long-time ally, now partner, Taiwan, which the PRC seeks to retake. Although Washington has important interests in the welfare of its friends, they do not obviously warrant a serious conventional conflict, let alone a nuclear standoff.

For instance, America’s interest in its allies is primarily in preserving their independence. Who controls the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, not so much. Similarly for Mischief Reef and Scarborough Shoal, claimed by the Philippines but occupied by China. No doubt, it is better for Washington if its allies rather than the PRC dominate Asia-Pacific waters. But is it better enough to engage in a shooting war with a nuclear-armed power?

The same must be said about Taiwan. It has a long, close relationship with the U.S. And Americans feel a strong kinship with a people who have created a vibrant democratic community that would disappear if taken over by the PRC. Moreover, an independent Taiwan friendly, if not allied with the U.S., would pose security problems for China. However, it isn’t clear that Washington can win a war over Taiwan. And any victory would come at an exceedingly high price. To repeat an infamous Chinese general, is it worth risking Los Angeles to defend Taipei?

Of course, it isn’t just Americans who have tough choices to make. Beijing, too, has to consider the cost of its territorial ambitions. Knowing that Washington is inclined to intervene, China must decide whether eschewing strategies of cooperation and compromise is worth the price that

will have to be paid. So, too, with Taiwan: the people there do not want to live under Beijing and a hostile takeover would generate long-enduring costs to the invading party.

Washington policymakers appear to be inexorably moving toward a military confrontation with China. That would be a disaster for all. Both sides need to take a deep breath and contemplate the consequences of conflict. The terrible irony is that the highest price would not be paid by those currently beating the drums of war, but by the rest of us.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.