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US plays unnecessary hand, pledging to ‘go nuclear’ to defend allies

Beltway policymakers are routinely threatening war with Beijing without seriously considering the possibility of losing.

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May 3, 2021

President Joe Biden recently welcomed Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga to Washington. The two governments issued a statement filled with the usual boilerplate, but included one sentence that caught Beijing’s eye: “The United States stated its unwavering support for Japan’s defense under the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, using its full range of capabilities, including nuclear.”

Was the U.S. really prepared to go to nuclear war with the People’s Republic of China over a Sino-Japanese territorial spat, asked the Chinese?

In fact, it is a question that the PRC might be asking frequently. The Biden administration has been freely spreading security guarantees over territorial detritus scattered throughout the Asia-Pacific.

For instance, at the recent Suga-Biden summit, the two governments: “reaffirmed the fact that Article V of the Treaty [which holds both parties to “act to meet the common danger”] applies to the Senkaku Islands.” That is, Washington is prepared for war, in which it might use nuclear weapons, to defend five islands and three reefs with no inhabitants and of no value other than the sovereignty they confer over surrounding resources. Territory, in other words, to which the PRC has a defensible claim but which Japan refuses to even discuss.

The Philippines claimed various rocks, islets, shoals, and reefs, which China saw, surrounded, and seized. None of which matters much to Manila, let alone the United States, yet Pentagon spokesman Ned Price announced: “an armed attack against the Philippines armed forces, public vessels or aircraft in the Pacific, including the South China Sea, will trigger our obligations under the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty.” This war promise applies to a nation governed by someone who makes Donald Trump look sane and stable, possessing a military that *just might* be capable of defeating Fiji or Samoa, and forced to send a significant number of its citizens abroad to work to remain afloat economically.

Then there is Taiwan, barely 100 miles from China (about the same distance as Cuba is from America). Taipei-controlled Kinmen Island is just six miles from the Chinese coast, with the city of Xiamen in easy view. Washington ended its defense treaty with Taiwan after shifting diplomatic recognition to the PRC. However, ever since, administrations followed a policy of

“strategic ambiguity.” That is, leaving everyone to guess whether America would defend Taipei if the latter was attacked by the PRC.

The Trump administration pushed even closer military ties with Taipei while outside policy analysts increasingly insisted that Washington defend Taiwan, irrespective of cost. The Biden administration has said little about Taiwan but otherwise generally picked up where its predecessor left off in confronting China. Any conflict over the island almost certainly would involve the mainland, making escalation inevitable and the use of nuclear weapons more likely.

In short, Washington policymakers are routinely threatening war with Beijing without seriously considering the possibility of losing, debating whether the costs are worth the benefits, or consulting the public whether it is willing to risk Los Angeles for Taipei, as one Chinese general once asked an American diplomat. (The point was not that Beijing would act offensively, but that it would stand firm despite the risk of escalation.) Perhaps even more frightening: the widespread assumption in Washington appears to be that all Americans must do is say the word, and the hapless PRC will abandon any aggressive designs and rush for the exits, supinely accepting its well-deserved humiliation.

For instance, Leon Panetta, a former defense secretary and CIA director, opined in a recent webinar that it was time for Washington to draw some lines. For instance, “We’re not going to allow China to invade Taiwan, and to undermine their independence.” Moreover, “you cannot militarize these islands in the South China Sea, you cannot violate international laws with regards to freedom of the seas, we’re not going to allow you to do that.”

To stop the PRC, Uncle Sam merely need raise his pinkie finger: “I think frankly if China understands that we’re serious about that, China’s not going to do that. They may be a lot of things, they’re not dumb. They’ve got to get that signal that the United States is a player in the Pacific, that we are a power in the Pacific.”

What, however, if this is delusion compounded by fantasy?

First, the Chinese are serious about Taiwan and nearby sea lanes, which matter far more to the PRC than to America, which is nearly 8000 miles away. Imagine Panetta’s reaction if PRC ships were patrolling just outside America’s 12-mile territorial limit on the East Coast and in the Caribbean, and PRC leaders were insisting that Washington abandon its aggressive behavior toward Cuba and debating preparing for war against the U.S.

Second, American allies aren’t likely to back Washington against China in a war that doesn’t directly involve them. The assumption of U.S. policymakers that Uncle Sam would lead a new and glorious international coalition to crush the revived Red Menace is a plot for a posthumous Tom Clancy thriller, not reality. There was much excitement in Washington, for example, when Japan agreed to a summit statement mentioning Taiwan, until Suga explained that Tokyo would send no troops to defend the island: the communique, he stated, “does not presuppose military involvement at all.” Alliance or no alliance, he doesn’t want to invite Chinese missile attacks on U.S. bases and perhaps much more.

The Republic of Korea won’t even criticize the PRC over human rights. Seoul has no interest in opening its territory to attack and becoming a permanent enemy of the colossus next door. In private, South Korean diplomats shudder at the possibility Washington might request armed assistance. The Philippines’ armed forces are a nullity, and few Filipinos believe that the

“mutual” defense treaty ever was anything other than a charitable American offer to protect Manila — and enjoy access to bases that long ago lapsed.

Australia would be the most likely Asian ally to join Washington, but that would be no certainty, especially if Canberra was the only state offering to do so. Nor should Washington expect legions of aircraft and ships to pour forth from Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and other regional players if war erupted.

Third, Washington might lose. Fighting a war thousands of miles away would be a logistical nightmare. It would be easier for the People’s Liberation Army to deter attack than the U.S. military to project power; hence the anti-access/area denial challenge with which the Pentagon has been grappling. War games are not destiny, but they have not been kind to American ambitions.

Wrote Richard Bernstein of RealClear Investigations: the U.S. Blue Team in such games has “‘had its ass handed to it for years,’ David A. Ochmanek, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense for force development and now a defense analyst at Rand, told RealClearInvestigations. ‘For years the Blue Team has been in shock because they didn’t realize how badly off they were in a confrontation with China.’”

Perhaps the most serious problem with “strategic ambiguity” is that it hides Washington’s intentions and possible consequences from the American people as well as Chinese government. Are the Senkakus/Diaoyus, Scarborough Shoal, and Taiwan worth war? Are they worth nuclear war? Are they worth a losing war?

These are important questions which should, indeed must, be debated if policymakers are serious about going to war with China over stakes that are modest at most. For the resulting conflict could become an existential fight, with catastrophe all around.

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