



How Many Wars Does Washington Want? And for What?

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America always has had political leaders who appeared to fear, even hate, peace. Teddy Roosevelt was one. However, at least Roosevelt got his hands dirty. Today the most fervent warmongers, unlike Roosevelt, typically never go near a battlefield.

However, they remain busy. The bipartisan War Party is pushing for confrontation and possible war with Iran, Russia, and China. Budgets are being adjusted, allies are being consulted, military plans are being drafted, threats are flying, and faux warriors are posturing. The Biden administration claims that it wants peace but is fueling the flames of all three potential conflicts.

Why should America go to war in any of these cases, let alone all three? Frenzied US policymakers seemingly have gone mad, talking about war in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East simultaneously!

The latest crisis du jour is Iran. Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, CENTCOM commander, perhaps feeling left out by frenzied press coverage of Russian pressure on Ukraine and Chinese threats against Taiwan, spent Thanksgiving week making his case for war.

The Iranians are "very close" to a nuclear weapon he contended, conflating acquiring enough nuclear materials for a bomb with being a nuclear weapons state. He noted that "Our president said they're not going to have a nuclear weapon" – just as his predecessors insisted that North Korea wouldn't get one.

More ominously, declared McKenzie: "The diplomats are in the lead on this, but Central Command always has a variety of plans that we could execute, if directed." The usual anonymous but highly placed sources indicated that options include sabotage operations against Iranian nuclear sites and direct military strikes.

McKenzie built upon Secretary of State Antony Blinken's more diplomatic threats. Last month the latter indicated that if the talks beginning today failed, the administration was "prepared to turn to other options," widely considered to be a euphemism for military action. An unnamed

official told NBC that "There are a cascading set of consequences for all of this coming undone. I just don't see how this comes to a happy conclusion."

What could possibly justify war under such circumstances?

First, the current nuclear deadlock is courtesy Washington. President Barack Obama negotiated the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to limit Iranian nuclear activities, but never provided the expected economic relief for Tehran. Remaining US restrictions continued to deter cautious financial institutions and businesses from returning to the Iran market.

Then President Donald Trump largely subcontracted US Mideast policy to Saudi Arabia and Israel, which always are prepared to fight Iran to the last American. Trump killed the JCPOA and reimposed sanctions, apparently expecting Tehran's leaders to fly to Washington and surrender. Instead of negotiating, Iran disrupted Gulf oil traffic, destroyed Saudi oil facilities, expanded regional proxy activities, launched missiles against US bases in Iraq, and encouraged militia attacks on American forces and the US embassy in Iraq. So disastrous was the administration's failure that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was reduced to whining that he would have to close America's embassy if the Iraqi government was unable to protect it. So much for intimidating Iran.

Although President Joe Biden genuinely wants a diplomatic outcome, he dithered on restarting negotiations, waiting until a new, hardline Iranian government had taken power. And Washington had no answer for Iran, which wanted compensation for Trump's walkout as well as assurances that there wouldn't be a repeat walkout. Tehran's demands made eminent sense but would require congressional assent, an impossible ask.

Second, Iran does not threaten America. The former cannot even reach the US, with roughly 6300 miles between Washington, D.C. and Tehran. Moreover, America's military power is overwhelming. The International Institute for Strategic Studies figures that the US spent *56 times as much* as Iran on the military last year. As for threats, it is Washington which has ringed Iran with bases and forces, not the reverse. The country that constantly threatens military action against the other is America.

Tehran is a disruptive force in the Middle East, but so are Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, the latter is the region's most aggressive power, intervening in Yemen, Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Libya, usually on behalf of the most authoritarian, brutal, and/or extreme forces involved. Nor does Mideast instability much matter to America: the region is a declining source of energy and Israel is a regional superpower with nuclear weapons. Indeed, the emerging Israeli concordat with the Gulf States can counterbalance Tehran, with which even Riyadh has begun to talk.

Third, though a nuclear Iran would not be in America's interest, production of nuclear weapons would be no *casus belli*. The US already faces an "Islamic Bomb" in the hands of Pakistan, a state less stable and threatened by more extremist forces than Iran. Moreover, North Korea already has an arsenal which, warn the Rand Corporation and Asan Institute, could rise to 200 weapons by 2027. Attacking Iran would likely prove much costlier than the war against Iraq,

unleashing dangerous forces well beyond the Mideast. Both Washington and Tehran have good reason to reach a modus vivendi and lower the region's military temperature.

The US also may be heading toward a confrontation with Russia over Ukraine. Moscow's military buildup, albeit in its own territory, appears more threatening to its neighbor than a similar exercise earlier this year. And Moscow can back down only so often without losing credibility in a future crisis. On Thanksgiving *The Hill* reported: "Washington is on edge as Russia's military buildup threatens a confrontation, with fears escalating following reports that U.S. intelligence shows Russian forces preparing to push into Ukraine."

Although Kyiv is not in NATO, Washington, which has been pushing since 2008 to include Ukraine, is treating the latter almost like a member. Blinken politely expressed the frantic attitude at State: "And as we've made clear, any escalatory or aggressive actions would be of great concern to the United States."

The administration reportedly is hoping to develop a new sanctions package in conjunction with Europe and is considering sending anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles as well as helicopters to Kyiv. Reported a State Department spokesman, the administration had "demonstrated that the United States is willing to use a number of tools to address harmful Russian actions and we will not hesitate from making use of those and other tools in the future." Additional weapons transfers would further entangle the US in the struggle, especially if the arms were used to kill Russians. Doing so would encourage Moscow to retaliate: remember the truculent commentary in America before the claim that Russians were paying for the killing of US personnel in Afghanistan was debunked.

Of even greater concern are proposals for Washington to send additional military advisers, which would turn America's passive role into an active one. Depending on their duties and location, their presence would increase the risk of American casualties, which would enormously complicate the conflict. Even worse, however, House Armed Services Committee members Mike Rogers and Mike Turner want Biden to "take immediate and swift action to provide support to Ukraine in the form of intelligence and weapons." They also lobbied the "administration to deploy a US military presence in the Black Sea to deter a Russian invasion."

Which means being willing to go to war.

That is a terrible idea. Ukraine is not a formal ally and has no treaty guarantee, for good reason. After three decades of independence, Kyiv is still only rated "partly free" by Freedom House. Explained the group: "Ukraine has enacted a number of positive reforms since the protest-driven ouster of President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014. However, corruption remains endemic, and the government's initiatives to combat it have met resistance and experienced setbacks. Attacks against journalists, civil society activists, and members of minority groups are frequent, and police responses are often inadequate." Washington and the other NATO members already must deal with increasingly authoritarian Turkey, which holds tens of thousands of political prisoners.

More important, Ukraine is not and never has been a significant American security interest. Washington managed just fine when Ukraine was part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union.

Ukrainians should be able to determine their future, but America has few practical interests at stake in Kyiv's status. A war between Russia and Ukraine would be a humanitarian tragedy and unsettling for Europe. However, nothing about it would provide a casus belli for Washington, especially against nuclear-armed Russia.

The most fervent case for war is being made on behalf of Taiwan against the People's Republic of China. Indeed, this standoff, 72 years old and counting, probably is the most dangerous flashpoint in Asia and perhaps in the world, given the potential antagonists. Yet, Washington's foreign policy establishment appears to be almost unanimous in its conviction that the US should, indeed, must, go to war to protect the island state. The main disagreement is over whether America should make its commitment unambiguous.

Some observers, such as Leon Panetta, a former defense secretary and CIA director, believe that Uncle Sam needs only wave his pinky finger and members of the Chinese leadership would race to Zhongnanhai in disgrace. In his view, all the US must do is make clear its position on Taiwan and other territorial issues, and "if China understands that we're serious about that, China's not going to do that."

More realistic policymakers want the US to prepare for war. For instance, last week former CIA official David Sauer was refreshingly honest in acknowledging what would be required: "China's massive investment in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) may show China is preparing to fundamentally change the status quo and preparing for possible war with the United States over Taiwan. To deter China, the United States must rapidly build up its forces in the Pacific, continue to strengthen military alliances in the region to ensure access to bases in time of conflict, and accelerate deliveries of purchased military equipment to Taiwan."

Although Sauer hopes to deter the PRC, it is easier for the latter to deter America. Beijing could use mainland bases and its forces would operate barely 100 miles away. Washington would have to deploy overwhelming force 7600 miles from home. And without access to allied bases, which would turn the allies' homelands into targets for Chinese missiles, the US would be at an enormous disadvantage – demonstrated by America's poor record in Pentagon war games. Although Japanese officials are talking about backing Washington in a conflict with China, that bravura might fade in a developing crisis.

The Taiwanese deserve to choose their own future, but the island was historically Chinese before it was seized by Japan in 1895. Taiwan thereby became a major historical grievance, forever part of "the century of humiliation," in which the declining Chinese Empire suffered from endless territorial seizures and other debilitating foreign restrictions. Beijing's aggressive policy is strongly supported by the Chinese people, while Americans are unlikely to back committing national suicide over Taiwan. As a result, the PRC is willing to spend and risk much more than is the US. And even an initial American victory would settle little, since, like Germany after World War I, the Chinese likely would immediately begin preparing for round two.

Taiwan has moral right on its side, but that cannot justify America taking on Beijing, a nuclear power with far more at stake in the issue. While the island is vital to China, for the US *machts nichts*. Taiwan is as close to China as Cuba is to America, and no one would imagine the PRC

claiming that Cuba was vital for China's security. Control over Taiwan would expand Beijing's naval reach – one reason the PRC is serious about the island – which is unfortunate, but falls far short as a justification for war halfway around the world.

War is serious business. Except in Washington. Over the last two decades US policymakers have blundered through Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Yemen, frivolously sacrificing thousands of lives, wasting trillions of dollars, diverting essential resources, misusing patriotic personnel, and damaging national credibility – as well as killing hundreds of thousands and displacing millions of people in foreign lands. Yet no one in Washington has been held accountable. It is as if American policymakers thought they were playing life-size videogames.

Conflict with Iran, Russia, or China, and especially more than one at once, would be no cakewalk. Indeed, any of them would be vastly worse than America's most recent military disasters. War is sometimes necessary, but certainly not in these cases and for these causes. Washington should say no to the modern Sirens' destructive call. Durable peace, not endless war, should be America's objective.

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