**War in the Pacific**

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While the world has been distracted, even amused, by the diplomatic tussle around China’s recent high-altitude balloon flights across North America, there are signs that Beijing and Washington are preparing for something so much more serious: armed conflict over Taiwan. Reviewing recent developments in the Asia-Pacific region raises a tried-and-true historical lesson that bears repeating at this dangerous moment in history: when nations prepare for war, they are far more likely to go to war.

In The Guns of August, her magisterial account of another conflict nobody wanted, Barbara Tuchman attributed the start of World War I in 1914 to French and German plans already in place. “Appalled upon the brink,” she wrote, “the chiefs of state who would be ultimately responsible for their country’s fate attempted to back away, but the pull of military schedules dragged them forward.” In a similar fashion, Beijing and Washington have been making military, diplomatic, and semi-secretive moves that could drag us into a calamitous conflict that, once again, nobody wants.

At the apex of power, national leaders in Beijing and Washington have staked out starkly contrasting positions on Taiwan’s future. For nearly a year now, President Joe Biden has been trying to resolve the underlying ambiguity in previous US policy toward that island by stating repeatedly that he would indeed defend it from any mainland attack. In May of last year, in response to a reporter’s question about a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan, he said, “Yes,” the US would intervene militarily. He then added: “We agree with the One China policy. We signed on to it and all the attendant agreements made from there, but the idea that it can be taken by force, just taken by force, is [just not] appropriate.”

As Biden acknowledged, by extending diplomatic recognition to Beijing in 1979, Washington had indeed accepted China’s future sovereignty over Taiwan. For the next 40 years, presidents from both parties made public statements opposing Taiwan’s independence. In effect, they conceded that the island was a Chinese province and its fate a domestic matter (even if they opposed the People’s Republic doing anything about it in the immediate future).

Nonetheless, Biden has persisted in his aggressive rhetoric. He told CBS News last September, for instance, that he would indeed send US troops to defend Taiwan “if, in fact, there was an unprecedented attack.” Then, in a significant break with longstanding US policy, he added: “Taiwan makes their own judgments about their independence… That’s their decision.”

Within weeks, at a Communist Party Congress, Chinese President Xi Jinping responded with a strong personal commitment to the unification of Taiwan – by force if necessary. “We insist on striving for the prospect of peaceful reunification,” he said, “but we will never promise to give up the use of force and reserve the option to take all necessary measures.”

After a long burst of applause from the 2,000 party officials massed in Beijing’s Great Hall of the People, he then invoked the inevitability of Marxian dialectical forces that would insure the victory he was promising. “The historical wheels of national reunification and national rejuvenation are rolling forward,” he said, “and the complete reunification of the motherland must be achieved.”

As the political philosopher Hannah Arendt once reminded us, a sense of historical inevitability is a dangerous ideological trigger that can plunge authoritarian states like China into otherwise unthinkable wars or unimaginable mass slaughter.

Not surprisingly, the forceful statements of Biden and Xi have been working their way down the chain of command in both countries. In January, a four-star US Air Force general, Mike Minihan, sent a formal memo to his massive Air Mobility Command of 500 aircraft and 50,000 troops, ordering them to ramp up their training for war with China. “My gut tells me,” he concluded, that “we will fight in 2025.” Instead of repudiating the general’s statement, a Pentagon spokesman simply added, “The National Defense Strategy makes clear that China is the pacing challenge for the Department of Defense.”

Nor is General Minihan even the first senior officer to have made such foreboding statements. As early as March 2021, the head of the Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Philip Davidson, warned Congress that China was planning to invade the island by 2027: “Taiwan is clearly one of their ambitions… And I think the threat is manifest during this decade, in fact, in the next six years.”

Unlike their American opposites, China’s service chiefs have been publicly silent on the subject, but their aircraft have been eloquent indeed. After President Biden signed a defense appropriation bill last December with $10 billion in military aid for Taiwan, an unprecedented armada of 71 Chinese aircraft and many more military drones swarmed that island’s air defenses in a single 24-hour period.

As such tit-for-tat escalation only increases, Washington has matched China’s aggression with major diplomatic and military initiatives. Indeed, the assistant defense secretary for the Indo-Pacific, Ely Ratner, has promised, ominously enough, that “2023 is likely to stand as the most transformative year in US force posture in the region in a generation.”

During a recent tour of Asian allies, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin claimed some significant strategic gains. On a stopover in Seoul, he and his South Korean counterpart announced that the US would deploy aircraft carriers and additional jets for expanded live-fire exercises – a distinctly escalatory move after the curtailment of such joint operations during the Trump years.

Moving on to Manila, Austin revealed that the Philippines had just granted US troops access to four more military bases, several facing Taiwan across a narrow strait. These were needed, he said, because “the People’s Republic of China continues to advance its illegitimate claims” in the South China Sea.

China’s Foreign Ministry seemed stung by the news. After a successful diplomatic courtship of the previous Philippine president, Rodrigo Duterte, that had checked US influence while accepting the Chinese occupation of islands in Philippine waters, Beijing could now do little more than condemn Washington’s access to those bases for “endangering regional peace and stability.” Although some Filipino nationalists objected that an American presence might invite a nuclear attack, according to reliable polling, 84% of Filipinos felt that their country should cooperate with the United States to defend their territorial waters from China.

Both of those announcements were dividends from months of diplomacy and down payments on major military deployments to come. The annual US “defense” bill for 2023 is funding the construction of military installations across the Pacific. And even as Japan is doubling its defense budget, in part to protect its southern Islands from China, US Marines in Okinawa plan to trade their tanks and heavy artillery for agile drones and shoulder-fired missiles as they form “littoral regiments” capable of rapid deployment to the smallest of islands in the region.

In contrast to those public statements, semi-secret strategies on both sides of the Pacific have generally escaped much notice. If the US military commitment to Taiwan remains at least somewhat ambiguous, this country’s economic dependence on that island’s computer-chip production is almost absolute.

Excerpted: ‘The Horror of All-Out War in the Pacific’.

Courtesy: Commondreams.org