

Opinion **US-China relations**

## America must consider the risk a war over Taiwan could go nuclear

The debate on confrontation with China ignores a crucial conversation about atomic weapons

**MICHAEL AUSLIN**



A photo released by China's Xinhua News Agency shows a People's Liberation Army long-range live-fire drill. Any major clash with the US would be the first ballistic missile war between great powers © Lai Qiaoquan/Xinhua/AP

**Michael Auslin** YESTERDAY

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The single most important question about a potential war over Taiwan between the United States and China is whether such a conflict could remain non-nuclear. Yet when President Joe Biden stated again in May that America would defend the island in the event of a Chinese attack, no one asked if that meant he was willing to risk a nuclear exchange with Beijing. If the fast-gelling opinion of Washington's foreign policy elite is correct — that such a war is no longer simply possible but likely — then assessing such a risk needs to be at the forefront of every discussion.

Since the first use of atomic weapons nearly eight decades ago, no nuclear-armed power has ever fought another in a major conflict. During the cold war, America and the Soviet Union fought both direct and indirect proxy wars but avoided direct conventional conflict that could have escalated out of control. The reliability of America's nuclear umbrella and promises of "extended deterrence" are regularly questioned by non-nuclear allies. It is also the reason that Nato was so circumspect in responding to Russia's invasion of Ukraine earlier this year.

Once the cold war ended, many in the US assumed that the era of the Cuban Missile crisis and "duck and cover" was over, emphasised by the shutting of the fearsome

Strategic Air Command in 1992. Nuclear weapons never went away of course, and SAC eventually morphed into US Strategic Command. Yet the fears that civilisation could end in billowing mushroom clouds rapidly abated as the country turned to another generation of wars in the Middle East and against global terrorism.

But [policymakers](#) and the US public can no longer ignore the fact that a new nuclear age has dawned. Vladimir Putin's sabre-rattling in the early days of the Ukraine war revealed that nuclear-armed authoritarian aggressors may not be restrained. As Beijing considers Taiwan its sovereign territory, there can be no assurance that a conflict would remain conventional. Make no mistake about it, this would be no small clash. Control over [Taiwan](#) has been the primary foreign policy and strategic concern of the CCP since Mao Zedong took power in 1949.

Much would depend on how such a war broke out, whether it was intentional or accidental, and how committed Washington actually would be to defending the island. But all the old cold war questions about nuclear escalation control, signalling and off-ramps would immediately come into play.

War games are one thing but in the real world, as soon as one US missile hits Chinese territory, the question of escalation becomes critical. Retaliatory strikes by People's Liberation Army rocket forces against US territory almost inevitably would follow, sparking an escalatory spiral. It is possible the Chinese would not wait to find out if incoming US missiles were indeed conventional but would strike at America's land-based nuclear missile silos to prevent a full attack.

Any major clash would, in fact, be the first ballistic missile war between great powers. Americans long ago ceased any civil defence preparation and the public is entirely unprepared to come under missile attack. Such an escalation would put enormous pressure on US leaders to strike back even harder at Chinese targets, thus risking an all-out confrontation, with the urge to go nuclear growing with each new setback.

The implications of a Taiwan war are enormous, but no US leader should blithely commit to defending the island without understanding that a conflict with China could be like no other fought in history. How far the US is willing to go must be openly debated and the risks of action as well as inaction equally assessed. We must think the unthinkable or we might wind up paying a tragic price.

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