A dangerous confrontation between the United States and China is building in the South China Sea. The cause of this confrontation is the island of Taiwan. The Americans have recently sold several hundred million dollars’ worth of military equipment to Taiwan. The sale, while significant, is unlikely to be sufficient to deter the Chinese should they opt for military action against the island. This is looking increasingly likely.

The Americans would be well advised to pay heed to the results of their own recently completed war games in which China was the designated opponent. The result was a complete rout of the United States forces.

One of the reasons for the US loss was the obsolete nature of their military fighting. Both the Russians and the Chinese have studied United States military tactics over the past several decades. What they concluded was that those tactics have remained unchanged, essentially since the end of the Second World War.

Those tactics are essentially risk averse, and that makes them entirely predictable. Among the many disadvantages such tactics share is a complete absence of surprise. United States tactics also rely heavily on sophisticated communications. Both the Russians and the Chinese have developed advance techniques for combating that technology.

And illustration of the use of that technology was recently on show during the United States inspired war games recently held in the Black Sea. The United States, in a typically thoughtless and provocative action, decided to play their war games in the Black Sea. In doing so they ignored the fact that the Black Sea is effectively a Russian lake. The Russians do not take kindly to the running of foreign military exercises in what is effectively their backyard.
One victim of Russian displeasure was a Dutch warship. The frigate was targeted by Russian defence capabilities. Their electronic equipment was effectively disabled, removing the ship from properly participating in the military exercises.

The United States is aware of the problem, but it has effectively no solution. It is heavily reliant on its communication strategy and is therefore vulnerable to the interception of the superior Russian technology.

The United States faces the same problem any confrontation with the Chinese in waters close to the Chinese mainland. The United States strategy is to rely on missiles for which the Chinese have developed an effective counter strategy. The Chinese also have the advantage of a formidably large number of missiles that can be used in a counter strategy, against both United States naval vessels and also bases where the United States ships might be.

It is a major reason why nearly all the countries in the region are reluctant to play host to the basing of United States warships in their territorial waters. The exception is the Japanese, although it is an open question as to the reality of Japanese freedom of action. Seventy six years after the end of World War II the degree of Japanese military subservience to the United States is astonishing.

It is not only the fear of being the target of Chinese retaliation in the event of United States missiles being based on their territory. All of the Asian nations in proximity to China have established strong economic ties with China, benefiting not only from trade, but also significant Chinese investment in their nations. They are naturally reluctant to jeopardise those links by playing host to United States military weapons.

Hence the United States pressure on Taiwan and the recent increase in the United States military contact with the island. The result has been a marked increase in recent weeks of belligerent Chinese rhetoric aimed at Taiwan. The rhetoric has been matched with an increased level of Chinese naval activity in Taiwan’s waters.

It's just becoming increasingly clear that Chinese patience with Taiwan is becoming exhausted. For a long time the Chinese held the hope that a peaceful reconciliation between the two could be achieved. That now appears to be rapidly diminishing. Any further moves by the United States to encourage Taiwan, both militarily and politically, looks like being a tipping point, with an end to China’s patience in the hope of a peaceful reunification.

If the relationship does deteriorate to the point where the Chinese take military action against Taiwan, the question will be whether the United States feels able to intervene. That would make a war between China and the United States inevitable. If the war remained conventional there is little doubt that China would prevail.

If the United States were stupid enough to resort to the use of nuclear weapons, then the outcome is less certain. The Chinese could rely on the support of Russia in the event of a full-scale war with the Americans. There is no doubt that Russian nuclear technology is significantly more advanced than the United States versions. The uncertain question is whether the nuclear inferiority would be sufficient to deter United States from the nuclear option.

The rational answer is that of course it should be enough. The great fear with the Americans however is that they are not reliably rational. There are strong elements within the United States administration whose belligerence toward both Russia and China is such that it may outweigh rational deliberation of the risks.

An illustration of recent United States detachment from reality was seen in the visit of United States under secretary of state Wendy Sherman to China. It is clear from United States reporting on the visit that they have not grasped how much the world has changed in the past 20 years. The United States is no longer able to throw its weight around in the world, and that is particularly true in the United States relationship with China that has disintegrated to open economic warfare. There are multiple examples of United States actions against China that betray a real fear that the United States has lost its once dominant economic position and that a new economic world order is emerging despite the best United States efforts to sabotage it.

The great challenge will be to prevent that economic warfare from deteriorating into a real war. Recent United States military game playing shows the United States losing that war as well. The big question will be whether they will recognise that reality or cast us into a catastrophic war in a vain attempt to regain a long-lost hegemony.

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